



The Perch Pod Episode 41

US Foreign Policy with Emma Ashford

Jacob Shapiro:

You're listening to the Perch Pod from Perch Perspectives. Hello listeners, welcome to another episode of the Perch Pod. As usual, I'm your host, I'm Jacob Shapiro. I'm also the founder and chief strategist of Perch Perspectives, which is a human-centric business and political consulting firm. Rumors of my demise during Hurricane Ida which hit us here in New Orleans are much exaggerated. We're doing okay. We lost a tree in the yard and had to escape to Starkville, Mississippi, aka Stark Vegas for a while. It was a lovely trip, but I'm back. We have electricity, we have air conditioning, and we have joining us Emma Ashford who's the resident senior fellow with the New American Engagement Initiative and the Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security. She is also a non-resident fellow at the Modern War Institute at West Point.

Jacob Shapiro:

Emma's work focuses on questions of grand strategy, international security, and the future of U.S. foreign policy. And she was kind enough to let me pepper her with a number of different questions that were on my mind, and even allowed me asked two off-the-wall questions at the end of the interview about Scotland and about U.S. military interventions. Emma and I recorded on Friday, September 24th in the afternoon. This will come out in about a week, a week and a half so I think it will be fairly present, but some things could happen particularly around the France, U.S., Australia sub-issues. So just keep in mind we're only responsible for things up to September 24th.

Jacob Shapiro:

Otherwise, all the usual stuff applies. Check us out at perchperspectives.com. There's the free newsletter, there's the LatamPolitik newsletter. Leave a review if you are so inclined. Write to us at info@perchperspectives.com if you have any comments, questions about this podcast itself. Take good care. Hope you're all enjoying turn to fall weather here in the United States, and I will see you out there. Cheers. Great. Emma, thank you so much for making some time to come on the podcast, it's a real pleasure to host you.

Emma Ashford:

It's always nice to meet someone that you know online and actually in person at least virtually.

Jacob Shapiro:

COVID has had the effect that ... In the past, I would've been afraid to reach out to you or anybody else who's been on the podcast online. And COVID is just ... I threw it out the window. I just ... I send people



messages if I like their work and sometimes they say yes, like you and sometimes they ignore me and I'm no worse for the wear. So there it is.

Emma Ashford:

It's certainly been a good time but from that point view.

Jacob Shapiro:

Well, silver lining. But the reason I wanted to reach out to you most specifically was because you just had a piece come out in Foreign Affairs, Strategies of Restraint, and we'll have it linked in the podcast for our listeners. And there are a number of different ways I'd love to tackle the piece that you wrote and your views on American foreign policy right now, especially the transition from Trump to Biden.

Jacob Shapiro:

But I think the first place I wanted to start was just ... You sort of build this idea of restraint as an alternative foreign policy approach in U.S. foreign policy. And I wanted to ask you, how is what we're going through today in the United States different than say what was happening in the 1970s? Because there seem to be some very clear similarities to me in the sense that a major war was lost, there's a huge lack of trust between the electorate and a presidency. And yet, I don't think anybody would've described Nixon and Kissinger and the things that they did as restraint. They were realist or pragmatic or some other thing. So I was struggling with that and I just wanted to start there and ask, where is it similar and where is it different do you think?

Emma Ashford:

So that's a really good question. And I think one of the things that it's getting at is the fact that this really isn't a new debate. It is a debate that has resurfaced in U.S. foreign policy about sort of what the U.S. should prioritize in terms of interests or values, how far the U.S. should critique that in trying to sort of how far the U.S. should use military means to do that, other means to do it. And so it's a conversation that has surfaced in the last few years thanks to the rise of China, failures of the war on terror. Just all the stuff that we've seen in the last decade or so back to the financial crisis. But this is a debate in American foreign policy that runs at least as far back as the founding.

Jacob Shapiro:

Right.

Emma Ashford:

If you go back and you look at George Washington's farewell address, you'll see him cautioning against entangling alliances and getting overinvolved in sort of European colonial struggles. Jefferson said similar things later on. And so I'm not one of those people that thinks that we have to do absolutely everything the founders said, but it's a good way of emphasizing that this isn't a new debate. It's just



that during the post-Cold War period, that pendulum swung really out of whack in the direction of sort of American primacy, liberal internationalism overreach, and now it's starting to come back a little.

Emma Ashford:

And I think that's why the 1970s part of this is really interesting because I think in the 1970s we did see this reequilibration, right. We see the overreach from the war in Vietnam. We see Nixon and Kissinger try to not just wind that in but also adapt to the realities of a changing world. So the '70s are where we see those first big rewriting of that post-war system, right. The collapse of some of the Bretton Woods institutions. We see Kissinger and then Nixon going to China and trying to break up that Soviet China block. And you're right that those are realist moves and they were realist at the time, but they were the same thing, right. They were bringing U.S. foreign policy a little back into balance after some years of overreach. And so that's ... I see that restrainers today, which include realists, as trying to do broadly the same thing.

Jacob Shapiro:

I was also interested in your article, and I wanted to ask where exactly neocons fall on the spectrum because to me, you conspicuously left them out because you talked about liberal internationalists, and America first, and restraint, and realist, and the neocons just got ... They got left out. And in some ways there ... I don't want to blame it all on them because it's a structural problem and we can't blame individuals for structural problems, but in some ways, they're the ones that took it off the rails because they decided that U.S. foreign policy, and values, and unilateralism should all go together in a cocktail that gave us a rock and the never-ending war in Afghanistan. Is it a subset of liberal internationalism or is it somewhere else on the spectrum?

Emma Ashford:

So maybe I should have included a line in the article explaining why I didn't bother to mention neoconservatives, but it's basically because they have been effectively jettisoned from the conversation over foreign policy. Now, elements of things that the neoconservative coalition supported are still there, but it's not altogether in one big package anymore. And so some of those, sort of the liberal hawks, that allied with neoconservatives even as late as the intervention in Libya, they've mostly backed away from the idea of sort of humanitarian intervention now. And the America first U.S. military primacy folks who again, would've probably been neoconservatives back in the day, they backed away from the democracy promotion, it's all about universal values part of it. And so there is still a small cadre of people that you might call neoconservatives, but my impression is they are not as influential on the debate as they used to be. And, in fact, that there's really no political faction that they align with at this point.

Jacob Shapiro:

I hope you're right about that because I got sick and tired of seeing John Bolton being trotted out by the previous administration. Because for all of Trump's restraint or things that make him seem like a restrained president, I mean, Bolton was right there. He was in the room, he's writing the book afterwards, he still goes on TV it feels like every other week trotting out the same nonsense.



Emma Ashford:

But Bolton's not a neoconservative.

Jacob Shapiro:

Oh, no.

Emma Ashford:

And he never really was. No. This is one of those like tiny little minuscule debates that people that really care have, but it's-

Jacob Shapiro:

So that's what I'm here for. Let's do it.

Emma Ashford:

Bolton is a nationalist, a unilateralist, nationalist, conservative. Whatever you want to call it. There's a lot of different names for it. But Bolton was never all in on the sort of freedom project of the neoconservatives. Instead, he was more in it ... If you look at what he actually did during the Bush era, it was things like trying to get the U.S. out of international institutions. It was trying to push back on the United Nations because he doesn't believe in multilateral organizations, and because he believes U.S. sovereignty should override them. I mean, as much as I dislike John Bolton and I dislike his ideas, I think he is sometimes portrayed a little unfairly by people who say he was one of the neoconservatives when really I think Bolton is actually a lot closer to Trump in the worldview that he espoused. And perhaps more worrying, I feel like the worldview that the Republican party is increasingly speeding towards looks pretty close to John Bolton's worldview and that's terrifying.

Jacob Shapiro:

That's a depressing thought. But I have to-

Emma Ashford:

Sorry.

Jacob Shapiro:

No, no, that's fine, that's fine. We'll find the silver lining in there somewhere. And I normally don't let myself speak so off the cuff about politicians like that, but I just feel like Bolton has been on the wrong side of basically every foreign policy decision he's had anything to do with for 20 years so I don't feel bad ragging on him a bit. But maybe a really good example of this, and maybe you can situate how the Trump administration was dealing with this and how the Biden administration is dealing with this, is the situation in Venezuela because that's one instance where I would argue the Trump administration was not restrained at all. It was cavalierly aggressive in a sense and it was very much ... It almost felt like *deja vu*. It felt like it was two decades ago and we were hearing about democracy, and the Venezuelan



people are going to overthrow the dictator, and all they need is the hand-picked U.S. guy with the U.S. money who's going to come in and give them peace and democracy.

Jacob Shapiro:

And I feel like Bolton was one of the one's really pushing that behind the scenes, and that, in general, the Trump administration ... I mean, and this was the other thing about Trump. They would go right up to the edge and then Trump would wake up the next morning and be like, "Nah, I don't really want to do that." So we're going to go right to the edge of war with North Korea and then "Nah, I don't want to do it." We're going to go right to the edge of intervening in Venezuela, "I'm not going to do it." So where does the Venezuela thing fall on that spectrum and how do you see that the Biden administration has changed its approach? And what does that tell you about the direction they're trying to take things?

Emma Ashford:

I mean, I will say, I think Venezuela is one of the clearest examples in the Trump administration of that sort of holdover of neoconservative tendencies that ended on. And you could see, particularly on Iran ... You could see how Trump's own instincts ... He really disliked Iran. He wanted to hurt them, he wanted to put sanctions on them. But I think if Iran had offered to come to the negotiating table I think Trump would probably have done it just like he did with North Korea, and that's not what the people inside his administration wanted. And I think that was the same dynamic that we saw in Venezuela. People in his administration and John Bolton, but also Elliott Abrams, right, pushing this agenda that was partly human rights and democracy. But as much about the fact that they really disliked the Bolivarian regime in Carracas , that there's this tortuous history with it and that they would be happy to see it out of power.

Emma Ashford:

And so as you say, they took a very active role there. Aggressive sanctions trying to build up international I guess bad will against Venezuela, and then potentially some other stuff that happened in the shadows that we don't really know about yet. I mean, I haven't been following the Venezuela situation particularly closely under the Biden administration. I do think it's interesting more broadly that the Biden team are doing this sanctions review. And I suspect that Venezuela may be one of the places where we see ... If the Biden team does change course a little on sanctions, Venezuela is one of those places where I suspect we might see the sanctions ratcheting down a little because they have had these really bad humanitarian effects and that's one of the things that the Biden review is meant to actually be looking at in the context of sanctions policy, but I haven't been following the situation closely I'll admit.

Jacob Shapiro:

No, but that's a great segue into sort of the next major question I wanted to pose to you, which is ... I mean, let's stop talking about people like John Bolton. Where is Joe Biden on the spectrum? Because Joe Biden going in, I admit I was a bit nervous because in the same pages of foreign affairs, if you read some of his past articles, felt a little neoconey, especially the way he would talk about Russia and calling Putin



a gangster who's threatening liberal democracy all around the world. The United States has to be the beacon and the shining hill. All that language.

Jacob Shapiro:

I think he actually has been more restrained than I expected coming in, but he seems to have that same sort of impulse. He would've been one of those liberal hawks in the late '90s and the early 2000s. And I don't really have a good sense of whether he knows what he is, whether as you say, he's just trying to review all the damage that was done in the previous years and is trying to then figure out where he wants to step from there. What do you think his impulse is? And where would you put him on that spectrum of liberal internationalists, and America first, and restraint that you diagrammed?

Emma Ashford:

Well, I mean, Biden was one of those liberal hawks. It's not just that he would've been, he actually was right. He voted in favor of those wars. Even if you go back into the '90s, voted in favor of the Balkans Wars, was pretty active on those. I was reading some stuff a couple of weeks ago, NATO enlargement, and I just so happen to run across Senator Biden in a hearing that I was reading and he's referring to people that posed NATO expansion as isolationists, right, so he was very much with the zeitgeist during that period. But that is how I think Joe Biden considers foreign policy more generally, which is that he follows the sentiment at the times. That's my impression. And that's why we're seeing this slightly more restrained ... I would hesitate to say he's a restrainer or even maybe a B-list, but we're seeing a more restrained policy from him because that's where public opinion is, that's where even some of the elite opinion is going. And so I think that's why we've seen these moves from him like dialing down in Afghanistan, like conducting these reviews, sanctions, forced posture.

Emma Ashford:

And in terms of where his administration is going ... So I think he's a liberal internationalist but with realist tendencies. He's aware of the mistakes that have been made and doesn't want to just double down on those mistakes. And honestly being a pragmatist like that, I think there could be many worse ways to approach this. And so I've been relatively ... I've been somewhat impressed with his foreign policy. I thought it would be a lot worse than it has been.

Jacob Shapiro:

My line has been that he's surpassed my low expectations so far. But one of the things that I've been thinking about a lot, and going back to the first question I asked you. It's interesting you said the thing about him going along with the sentiment of the times because it seems to me one of the major differences between say what Nixon was trying to do when he was resetting the deck and what Biden is doing. When Biden is resetting the deck is that ... I wouldn't say that there was a groundswell of American opinion that wanted to open up relations with China. I'm not even sure that was on Americans' radar. Certainly, Americans wanted peace in Vietnam, and Nixon knew that he needed to deliver peace in Vietnam. But I would argue that what he did with China was very independent-minded



was very separate. And in the end, he sort of pulled the nation along with him rather than letting sentiments draw him to his policy.

Jacob Shapiro:

Biden, as you said, it seems to be the sentiment of the times, and the sentiment of the times, especially in the United States. I mean, one of the only things Americans seem to be able to agree on right now, disturbingly to me, is that China is bad, and China is a threat, and we're all going to unite to fight the next war against China. I mean, that's really how it feels when you're listening to both sides of the aisle talk about these things. And I haven't seen Biden really dial that down. I mean, there's now dialogue at the highest levels between the U.S. and China that's better than before, but other than that I mean, they're hammering on all the issues, they're opening up trade negotiations with Taiwan. It feels in that sense that Biden's being pulled along rather than driving. Do you think that's fair or do you think that I should walk that back a little bit?

Emma Ashford:

No, I think that actually sounds pretty fair to me. I mean, I think one of the reasons why there was this groundswell of support ... So there was the public opinion side of it on Afghanistan and the war on terror, but there was also an elite groundswell toward getting out of the war on terror so that we could pivot to China. And so I think that all together is what gave you that big support for it that let Biden withdraw from Afghanistan. And from some of the moves his administration has taken, it's clear that Biden personally ... I'm not 100% sure he's made up his mind on the China question, but in the administration, there are definitely people who are fairly determined to sort of pivot the U.S. to Asia properly this time, unlike in the Obama administration, and who regard China as this major threat that has to be dealt with.

Emma Ashford:

And so I think ... I mean, there are also more ... Again, I don't want to say restrained voices but there are more cautious voices inside the administration, but it's not clear right now which faction's going to come out on top. And so from ... I think Biden, in terms of getting swayed by what's popular, by what everybody around him thinks, I do think that he might well take a harsher line on China if that's how the administration process shakes out.

Jacob Shapiro:

And to follow on that thread. I thought one of the most complex things that you tackled in your piece was trying to define how a restraint-based foreign policy would deal with a challenge like China. And it's not clear to me how that happens. And it's also one of the differences with the '70s because the U.S. then was not pivoting towards another competition with another power, it was about resetting the deck in a more multi-polar world and becoming more globally competitive. And in the way you just said it, pivoting from Middle East war to East Asia war or China war, I mean, that doesn't feel very restrained that just feels like you're arming up for the next battle.



Jacob Shapiro:

And it almost feels like if you're really going to be restrained you almost have to ... You have to counteract that aggressiveness towards China and try and build some structure where you're not going to have to go defend Taiwan, or you're going to figure out really clearly what that means, and how far you're willing to go, and all those other sorts of things. So I'm rambling a little bit, but talk to me a little bit about how somebody in that restraint-based camp has to think through sort of all these complicated issues when it comes to China.

Emma Ashford:

So one of the things that I talk about in this article is what is the definition of restraint, right, because it's just thrown around in Washington and it can mean a bunch of different things? And one of them is this ... One of them is a grand strategy, right, which has very specific prescriptions. Barry Posen was the guy that wrote a book on it, and it would call for a much less confrontational approach to China. But the broader restraint coalition includes basically everybody from anti-war left-leaning groups through academic realists, and they differ. These groups all differ on how they think about China. For the most part, I would say there is some concern generally about China's rise, but a lot of differences even internally on how you handle that.

Emma Ashford:

And so for myself, I'm a realist, right, and so I put myself in the camp of people that I want us to get out of pointless wars in the Middle East because I do think China's a threat and I think we need to think about that. Now, that doesn't mean I want us to go defend Taiwan, right, there's lots of that are gradations here, right. But I am partly talking about restraining foreign policy elsewhere because I'm concerned about the rise of China. And then there are a group of people that think that ... Many of whom are my colleagues who think that China's rise really isn't that big a deal and that we don't need to worry about it that much. We certainly don't need to do anything on a military footing about it. So I think the ... Really the important thing is just that there's a debate inside the restraint camp. There's a debate inside foreign policy more generally. And right now the U.S. doesn't have a coherent approach towards China, it's all still in the debate stage.

Jacob Shapiro:

That sounds about right to me. Where do you personally think about Taiwan in the grand scheme of U.S. foreign policy strategy? So you sort of alluded to, you don't want to be going to defending it so ... But where would you put that priority and how should the U.S., in your opinion, be thinking about the Taiwan issue? Because I think that really is where the rubber is eventually going to meet the road if we continue on this current trajectory.

Emma Ashford:

I mean, I'll caveat this by saying I'm not an Asia expert. I'm trying to get smarter on it but I am not an Asia expert. But where I come down on the Taiwan thing is that Taiwan is qualitatively and quantitatively, but mostly qualitatively different from some of the other countries in East Asia than we



might be talking about. So I would commit to defend Japan or South Korea, absolutely. They're treaty allies, they're important, we can't afford to let China dominate the whole region, but Taiwan is different. Taiwan for historical reasons is very important to China. It is far more of a core interest for them that is likely to lead to a war than Japan or South Korea are. We know China has intentions on Taiwan, we do not know that they have intentions on anything outside that.

Emma Ashford:

And then there's also the question just of defense and possibility. It is much harder to defend Taiwan than it is to defend those other countries. So for all of that, I basically am sort of in the camp of, I would not militarily intervene to defend Taiwan. I would happily arm them to be able to mount their own fight. I don't ... I would act diplomatically, I would put sanctions on China, but I would not intervene militarily. I would when we get out to that second layer of Japan, and South Korea, and other major Asian countries.

Jacob Shapiro:

So you wouldn't send the Taiwanese nuclear-powered submarines, for example?

Emma Ashford:

I think sending any country that has a history of illicit proliferation working nuclear reactors with highly enriched fuel is probably a bad idea.

Jacob Shapiro:

Probably. I'm glad you brought up allies though especially South Korea and Japan because there's a lot going on there and that's really the flip side of what we're talking about. A lot of time and a lot of ink is spent on Russia and China. But another part of what you were talking ... And you alluded to this at the beginning of the conversation with Washington's Address, and Jefferson, and avoiding foreign entanglements, and the U.S. really ... I mean, we've run headlong into foreign entanglements since World War II. It started with World War I, we ran away from it for a while, then the whole world collapsed and we had to do it again. And really since 45, we've been up in the world's business and the world has been up in our business in that sense and the U.S. has profited from it greatly.

Jacob Shapiro:

And it seemed to me that you were making a clear distinction between the America Firsters who likely don't care about alliances at all, and then the restraint folks who that's a much harder conversation. And I bring all this up because this episode with the nuclear subs in Australia, and France, and the UK, and the U.S. raises really interesting questions about who are U.S. allies and how is the U.S. going to interact with its allies? So that's an open-ended question but how do you respond to that?

Emma Ashford:

I find the question of allies and alliances to be quite difficult. And if you want more of a pure restraint perspective you should ask somebody else because I'm a bit of a squish on this issue. I tend to fall in ...



Again, I would say that I am a realist. I think in 1990 I would've been basically aligned with Brent Scowcroft and the George H.W. Bush administration. So this used to be fairly mainstream thinking, which is that alliances help to bolster U.S. security in places where we have concrete interests and can be a useful tool for helping to build common cause against a common threat like the Soviet Union. Where I think alliances have got really out of whack in the last 30 years is NATO expansion, in particular, but in various other places where we have expanded those alliances, expanded those commitments to places where America has no concrete interests. Where we don't benefit from them. Where, in fact, they're a liability. And so that is what I find very problematic about modern alliances.

Emma Ashford:

And then, in addition, the fact that we increasingly conflate allies and partners, right. So one is a tricky commitment to defend like the United Kingdom. And then the other is well, we're partners with Malaysia, right, what does that really mean in practice? And so I think that blurring of the line has also been really problematic. And if you look at a lot of what's happened in recent years with sort of Ukraine, and Georgia, and Russian reactions, that very ambiguity is a big part of the problem. So I'm not sure that's really a good answer to your question, but my general take on alliances is that they can be useful but they have to be matched to where the U.S. actually has concrete interests. And so that probably means burden-sharing within NATO to try and shift some of those costs and risks away. It probably means building on the Asian alliances that are actually helpful for what we want to do. And then again, stopping that blurring of the lines whenever we can.

Jacob Shapiro:

That makes me want to ask about NATO though. So is NATO aligned with U.S. interests? I mean, NATO in some ways is the poster child for expanding things too far. Maybe, I don't know. I mean, is ... Do you think that NATO is going to be aligned with U.S. interests 10 years from now? I mean, even if you could do more burden-sharing, just the idea of Turkey and the United States in the same military alliance, judging on where we've gone in the last five years with the U.S. Turkish relation seems strange to me. So what is the future of NATO five, 10 years from now from that point?

Emma Ashford:

I'm a little pessimistic about the future of NATO in that I think that either it needs substantial reform or it's going to collapse under its own contradictions potentially at the start of a conflict. And that is ... A couple years back I got really interested in how do alliances end? Turns out if you go back in history they almost all end because of war starts and the ... And various parties decide not to support their allies. That's how alliances end. And so that is one thing that I think is one potential path for NATO, is that just the contradictions of, as you say, Turkey, and the U.S., and Germany, and we're all in the same alliance causes it to collapse. I think reform could mitigate those problems. And I think a couple of big reforms. One, the U.S. basically shifting the burden for European defense back to Europe in all but the most direst of cases, right, so we become the act of last resort not of first resort and I think that could help a lot.

Emma Ashford:

Another one is we need a mechanism to expel problematic members. We need to be able to expel Turkey, we need to be able to expel Hungary, right, and other states if that becomes a problem. And again, if we can't do that then the alliance sort of slowly weakens from within and I think becomes defunct over time. But I think without those reforms, and perhaps in even reforms that sort of reduce NATO down to subregional areas where there's more commonalities and interests, I do think that the alliance is probably not destined to survive or at least to survive as anything useful in the long run.

Jacob Shapiro:

Which, obviously, raises the question. I mean, this is going to ... This podcast will publish in about two weeks, but I'm sure that Emmanuel Macron will still be indignant in two weeks time so it'll still be relevant. But let me ask about France. Is France a U.S. ally going forward? A U.S. partner going forward? Where do you see that relationship going? I mean, it's been one that's been fraught with tension over the years, but fundamentally has always been an allied one. But France is also asserting itself in ways around the world and was before the sub snafu. So do you feel like that relationship has staying power or do you see some drift there?

Emma Ashford:

I mean, it's the French, right. And again, I should say here my own biases that I'm British, right so I have some views of the French. I'm kidding here. But the relationship, the alliance between the United States and France, particularly as part of NATO, has never been uncomplicated, right. They withdrew from the NATO Joint Command back in the '60s because they didn't like U.S. decisions. And so France is the most independent-minded of large NATO members. And I think the real question there is going to be whether France can get other countries to go along with it. The French have been talking for quite some time about building an independent European military capability and I think this is something that is in American interests. We want them to be capable, we want them to deal with Russia so we don't have to.

Emma Ashford:

But ideally, in an ideal world, we'd like it to happen in a way where it's not an abrupt break with the United States, right. Where it's not that we piss them off so much that they go off and do their own thing. We would ideally like to stay aligned. And I think we probably will because we have a lot of interests in common, but we want to avoid foolishly or stupidly alienating them over things that aren't that important. And I think the subs issue last week was one of those cases where it's a very justifiable decision on foreign policy grounds, it was handled just really, really badly. They didn't tell the French until the morning of the announcement, which is ... I mean, it's just bad form. So if we can avoid doing that kind of thing, I think the way that the French are pushing for autonomous capabilities, I think that could be good for us in the long run.

Jacob Shapiro:

Do you have a sense of why they managed that so incompetently? Because I think ... I felt like one of the things Biden was campaigning on was that he was going to return sanity to the foreign policy



establishment. And I mean, a basic briefer should have known weeks ago that just springing this on the French without any warning was going to be a really bad idea. It's shocking to me that nobody raised their hand and said, "This is going to get really bad," but that's what happened. And that feels like a really ... It feels like an indictment of dysfunction in the U.S. foreign policy establishment more than anything else.

Emma Ashford:

It's certainly not a vote of confidence, right. I mean ... So as I understand it, the concern was that because it was Australia that was breaking the contract with France, that the U.S. left notification up to the Australians, then it turns out the Australians didn't do it and so that was sort of a last-minute scramble. That's hardly an excuse though. I think again ... I think the U.S. really shouldn't be that naive as saying, "Well, the French aren't going to like it so we just won't tell them." That is not good diplomacy.

Emma Ashford:

I do wonder the extent to which some of this has been driven by the fact that we still don't have a lot of our defense-informed policy appointees in key positions actually through the nomination and confirmation process yet. So the Senate, in particular Ted Cruz but several senators, are holding up appointments and so a lot of the people that are doing the work in the Biden administration are either sort of non-confirmable appointees or they're people at lower levels in the State Department, in DOD. So I think that's a concern, right. And I feel like a fully staffed out administration might have done a little better on those issues.

Jacob Shapiro:

Did you ... What significance, if any, did you ascribe to New Zealand and Canada not being part of the agreement? I feel like the French melodrama has obscured the fact that it was only three eyes not five eyes that were participating in that deal. Does that tell you anything or do you think it's just ... Is it insignificant? How important should we benchmark their absence from the deal?

Emma Ashford:

The New Zealanders, the Kiwis were never going to participate. They have a nuclear-weapons-free zone. It actually caused the collapse of a previous alliance treaty between the U.S., and Australia, and New Zealand, the question of nuclear subs, and most people don't remember that these days unless they specifically work on that issue. So the New Zealanders were never going to do that. They may even not allow the Australian subs to transit Kiwi waters, that's how strongly they feel about nuclear power in all its forms. The Canadians that are a trickier one. And I'm not really an expert in Canadian politics, but as I understand it they've been very hesitant to engage with the pivot to Asia part of Biden's foreign policy and Trump's foreign policy before that and so that is probably some of what's going on here. But as you say, it's an interesting combo, right. It seems like it was a bilateral U.S., Australia contract into which the British were brought partly because of the interconnections between the U.S., the UK defense establishments and partly because they had some of the technology that was needed to make the deal work.

Jacob Shapiro:

And it's also just such an interesting question because as we're talking about U.S. allies and alliances, I feel like one of the key points that is always made is that China, for instance, really doesn't have alliances. They have a treaty relationship with North Korea. Maybe they would stick up for Pakistan, although even that I think would be probably a pretty large stretch for the Chinese, but they seem to be listening to George Washington's advice. They don't want these permanent relationships anywhere else or maybe they can't get them I'm not sure. But I'm sure also decision-makers in Beijing are more than happy to see these frays in the U.S. alliance network whether it's in the Philippines or with Canada or in Europe itself. I imagine that is probably something that the Chinese and the Russians are ... Well, discretely supporting behind the scenes at least hoping for. Is that fair?

Emma Ashford:

I mean, certainly, we know the Russians do that. It's a big part of what they've been doing for the last 10 or 15 years. And particularly on the Russian point of view, it's because they benefit from a disunited front against them. So the things that they've been doing sort of meddling in elections in the west, engaging in sort of disinformation campaigns, and then working with governments like Hungary that might be a bit more predisposed to sort of be friendly towards Russia, those sort of do help them to drive a wedge between countries. But I do sometimes think that influences is overstated. Many of the things that Russia does it's able to do because the divisions are already there, right.

Emma Ashford:

So, Nord Stream 2. Russia was able to get that project completed because the Germans really wanted it and the German business community was very keen on finishing this pipeline. They had good, strong reasons for trying to complete that project with Russia despite everything else. Russia was able to engage in election meddling here because we had a mess at home. And so I think that the role that other countries play in trying to drive a wedge between the U.S. and its allies is often overstated. And I think the [inaudible 00:36:11] is in Washington, we dramatically underestimate the actual differences of opinion that we have even with countries that we aligned with.

Jacob Shapiro:

That makes sense. Well, let's pull back a little bit and look a little bit towards the future. I mean, you mentioned that you've been impressed a little bit or Biden's ... Your expectations for Biden's foreign policy so far have been exceeded, but he's also done relatively little. He's basically just been trying to keep things as they were. I wouldn't say he's taken any particularly strong stances. He, for instance, hasn't withdrawn sanctions from Cuba, he hasn't withdrawn sanctions from Venezuela. They're trying to get the Iran nuclear deal going I guess but there's no progress there in part because of issues with Iran. Koreans on both sides of the peninsula are now testing missiles so he's going to have to deal with that fairly soon, you can't just keep that simmering on the same pot for the entire time. So where do you think we go from here for the rest of the ... Of this first term of the Biden administration?

Emma Ashford:



Okay. I mean, so there's good bits of the Biden administration and we talked about those already, right. The withdrawal from Afghanistan. The apparent intention to dial down the war on terror more broadly though it's not really been done yet. I think a realization that the U.S. sort of can't always do everything, which seems to have been absorbed in the Biden administration, and that's all good. I think even the sort of downplaying of ... So they initially announced the Summit for Democracy, the democracies versus autocracies framing, and you still see that in the rhetoric but the ... On the practical side, they have leaned into that far less than they might have so that's all good.

Emma Ashford:

But I think on the negative side you're right. I think particularly progressives that were pushing the sort of Biden on foreign policy in the campaign have been quite disappointed in his unwillingness to burn political capital to achieve some of their priorities. And so that's things like maybe taking sanctions off of some of these countries and then particularly follow through with Iran. So it's possible we still get back into the JCPOA, but the Biden team has almost certainly missed the window at this point. At least missed the window for an uncomplicated return to the deal. And domestic politics on both sides are sort of complicating that further. I mean, I ... There are definitely some downsides and definitely some bad parts of Biden's foreign policy so far.

Emma Ashford:

But the reason I say why overall I'm encouraged and why I'm still relatively hopeful for the rest of his term is I think Biden's big sort of contribution realization is that the U.S. doesn't have to solve every problem around the world, and that's mostly because he wants to focus on domestic politics, right. But I actually think it's a good thing because I think that's a big part of the reason why we have so much overstretch in recent years. And so to the extent that Biden is not I think jumping into absolutely every trouble spot to try and provide a U.S. solution, I think that's a good step for the U.S. towards becoming a slightly more hands-off superpower, right. One that can live in a world where it's no longer head and shoulders above every other country, but is instead sort of first among equals among a lot of countries that have some stake or interest in the international system. And he may prove me wrong. He may pivot to China really aggressively and this could all go the way of New Cold War, but right now I'm fairly encouraged by what I see.

Jacob Shapiro:

Do you think that that trajectory is sort of how the U.S. will behave over the course of the next decade no matter who is in the White House? Is it just the structure of the world is making it so that you can't have a U.S. president who's coming in to say do whatever they want to do? And in that sense, Biden is a precursor of what to come. Or do you think that we could hypothetically have an election ... Let's say Biden is a one-term president for the sake of argument, could we have an America first or come right back in and blow everything up again and the U.S. is just going to be on this pendulum until it resolves some way down the line?

Emma Ashford:



This is a really good question and it's actually something I'm sort of wrestling with right now because I'm trying to write a book draft in U.S. foreign policy. And one of the problems actually is that domestic politics is really important right now in determining what the U.S. does in a number of ways, right. Foreign policy is becoming increasingly partisan and polarized and so there is this pendulum swing from administration to administration you didn't use to see. And then there's this risk of domestic democratic backsliding, right. And I think even if we ignore that latter risk, which is not insignificant at this point, right, after what we've seen in the last year.

Emma Ashford:

But even if we ignore that as sort of outside the scope here and we just talk about that partisan swing between administrations, you could see a scenario in which Biden has four years in which he pursues a relatively modest version of liberal internationalism, right. Dials down some of the more ambitious war on terror stuff. Pivots towards China a bit but doesn't let it get too out of hand. Tries to rebuild some treaties. Get back into multilateral institutions. Work with other countries on climate, stuff like that.

Emma Ashford:

And then four years down the line, Tom Cotton comes into office as president and immediately withdraws from all of those just like Trump did from the JCPOA, and pivots much more strongly towards China, and perhaps sends troops back to Afghanistan or to Libya or Syria. And I think that's not sustainable over 20, 30 years, but it's perfectly sustainable in the short-term with diminishing returns. And the problem is that if we're even worried about that as a possibility, other countries are definitely worrying about it, and it makes it more difficult today to get them to see the U.S. as a credible actor that can make credible commitments because it could change in four years. And so I think that's the biggest problem facing U.S. foreign policy and it's not one that foreign policy specialists can fix. So that's incredibly terrifying and depressing I'm afraid.

Jacob Shapiro:

And I mean, to your point. I mean, this ... I imagine that this probably ... A lot of listeners weren't aware of former Vice President Pence going to Budapest and the comments that he made at the Demographic Summit or whatever it was there. But going to Hungary and praising Hungary and some of these other EU skeptical countries that are ... I mean, we don't need to legislate whether they are democratic backsliding or not, the EU accuses them of democratic backsliding so there is some internal conflict there. You've got a former U.S. vice president going and lending his name and credibility to supporting those voices so I think you're right on. It seems like a very deep and ... Pernicious is too pejorative a word but it's there. It doesn't feel like it's going away and it doesn't feel like Biden has exercised anything. Right now it almost feels just like a very unsteady ... He was able to hit the pause button. There was no sort of systemic change just because Biden came into office.

Emma Ashford:

I mean, I know you do some political risk work and I'm sure some of your listeners do political risk work. And we used to mostly discount political risk on the United States side, but I don't think we can anymore



and that's what makes foreign policy really uncertain going forward because there's this risk of sort of dramatic shifts between parties and there's this risk of the U.S. itself might [inaudible 00:44:07] act in world affairs. And they're fairly small risks but the impact they would have if they happened is such that you really do have to take it quite seriously.

Jacob Shapiro:

I mean, one of the things I tell my clients when I start working with them right away is that the U.S. is the source of the most risk in the world full stop and it's not close right now. There are definitely other risks, but it's the United States. The United States is the most predictable. The United States is the one ... And it's also reflective of some of the good things about the United States. We do have real democracy. We do have real electoral change. People with different positions come in, in four years or eight years from now and that's not true in a lot of countries. Vladimir Putin can do what he does because he gets to be president of Russia for as long as he wants. Xi gets to do what he does because he knows, barring that he has a heart attack or something he will be there in 20 years. That's just not true in the United States and there are pros and cons to both of those things. Two more things I want to-

Emma Ashford:

I mean-

Jacob Shapiro:

Oh, sorry, go ahead, please.

Emma Ashford:

No, sorry. I was just going to say to ... So just to bring it back to that conversation we had at the start about this article, and about restraint, and the future of U.S. foreign policy. I think one of the ways in which that could be mitigated is by pushing for a somewhat more restrained or realist U.S. foreign policy. Because if you dial down some of the toolkit that is available to presidents, you make it a little less likely that we can have these huge swings with really adverse effects for the world. So for myself, that's one reason why I think trying to build a consensus around a less activist foreign policy might be helpful in the long run.

Jacob Shapiro:

Yes. And it would be wonderful if Congress woke up and realized that it has significant power to exert over the American executive and that we don't have to be stuck with the decisions that were made in the '60s and the '70s. We're much wiser than that now. We're not afraid of nuclear war. We know what the Gulf of Tonkin resolution was. It feels like we're stuck in our ways. And in some sense, it feels like Congress is happy to be on soapboxes and dance around political issues and things like that. But I mean, Congress still has the power of the purse, they can restrain the White House anytime they want. And you would think that there would be bipartisan consensus to do that, but there really isn't.

Emma Ashford:



There was a ... Congress typically tries to prevent votes from even coming up. They have in many ways abrogated their responsibility to even weigh in on issues of war and peace. Yesterday or I guess a couple of weeks ago at this point, there was that the NDAA, that the National Defense Authorization Act was going through Congress, and there's this period where they just throw as many amendments as they can at it and see what sticks. And I found it notable that an amendment ... Not throw away amendment, but from Jamaal Bowman up in New York, that would have acquired Congress to take a vote if the president wanted to keep troops in Syria, which is this weird deployment where no one really knows what they're there doing. That amendment failed by quite a large number because Congress just didn't want to weigh in even when it came to the question of a very questionable military deployment. So I mean, that's a problem, and nor should I see how to really improve it in the near term.

Jacob Shapiro:

Certainly not in the near term. I mean, you would have to have enough congressmen who are willing to take the responsibility to do that sort of thing. But I mean, a great point is that the United States has been fighting wars since 45, none of which have actually been declared wars. I mean, it's all presidential privilege and it's both that ... Both parties, politicians on both sides of the aisle have been perpetuating it a long time. Emma, before I let you go, sort of two more off-the-wall questions. The first is, some friends and I were debating this last week and I thought I would throw it to an expert like you. Can you think of a U.S. intervention that went well?

Emma Ashford:

Actually, so I don't have to necessarily do it. I got this example from Alan Cooperman-

Jacob Shapiro:

Okay, good.

Emma Ashford:

Who is a scholar who studies interventions. Basically, there was an intervention back in ... I think it was Liberia, but in Africa back in the 1990s where we effectively dropped a small number of [inaudible 00:48:17] between some soldiers and some civilians, and we protected the civilians and then we took the [inaudible 00:48:22] back out and it helped to resolve the situation. Another good example would be the Yazidis question under Barack Obama, right. The Yazidis were fleeing. They were this ethnic group in Iraq. They were fleeing from ISIS and we sent helicopters to drop them supplies in the mountains. They dropped them blankets and food so they didn't freeze to death and that helped those people get through the mountains and escape to Turkey, right.

Emma Ashford:

But you'll see that in both of those cases they weren't big showy interventions where we tried to top their regime or anything. They were using the military to achieve very small humanitarian aims in a place where we could achieve the thing we were actually trying to achieve, right. So they weren't about rebuilding states or nations. They weren't about resolving civil wars. It was almost entirely just about



some humanitarian protection where we could manage it. So those are the couple of small examples, but I struggled to find a bigger example than those that was successful.

Jacob Shapiro:

The Yazidi one is difficult because the Yazidis were only in that situation because we intervened in Iraq so I have trouble with that one because-

Emma Ashford:

Also true.

Jacob Shapiro:

It feels like why that's part of that. Serbia was the one that was most ... I had to stop and think about the most, and is the one I guess I could make the best argument for. Do you see a downside to the U.S. NATO-led intervention in Serbia? Are there downsides to that, that I'm not appropriately considering?

Emma Ashford:

Well, I mean, so the ... It was pretty successful in the humanitarian front. It was pretty successful in the political front in terms of the broader geopolitical ramifications. The cost of intervention was pretty bad. We can trace ... So scholars that study Russian and Chinese foreign policy, you can trace back the roots of those states sort of turning on the U.S. and saying, "We really need to be worried about the U.S. to the cost of intervention." In the case of the Russians, we actually almost ... This is such a bizarre story. We almost came to blows with the Russians. Yeltsin sent a bunch of Russian paratroopers to seize the Pristina airport, and the military command actually ordered American and British troops to fire on the Russians. And the only reason they didn't do it is because of James Blunt, the singer, who at the time was in the military who said, "No, don't do it." Otherwise, we would've had a shooting conflict with the Russians in Kosovo.

Emma Ashford:

And then there was with the Chinese, we accidentally bombed their embassy, but most people in Beijing didn't believe it was accidental. So again, those aren't the main point of the intervention. I think you could argue that the central point of the intervention, the central goal of the intervention was achieved, but the tangential stuff, the fallout from it definitely made our lives more difficult in other areas.

Jacob Shapiro:

And your point about that being the moment where both Russia and China really started to think seriously about the threat that the U.S. posed to them and whether that ... I mean, maybe we would've gotten to this situation that we're in now without it, but that's thought-provoking food for thought. Last question. I can't not ask you this with the accent that you have. What's the future of the UK look like? Do you think the UK is still the UK five, 10 years from now? How are you feeling?

Emma Ashford:

Well, I hear there's no petrol, that's gas for the American listeners. That's gas for the American listeners. I hear there's no petrol in the stations so you can't use your car to get anywhere right now. That's on top of a carbon dioxide shortage from about a month ago so you couldn't get fizzy sodas or certain hospital equipment in the UK. And these sort of rolling shortages are all the result of Brexit. And so the UK has not seen major economic impacts from Brexit, but it's seeing lots and lots of small impacts. Shortages, imports, difficulties obtaining things. None of which are sort of making life any better for anyone in the UK. And I am fairly pessimistic about the survival of the UK as a large-scale enterprise.

Emma Ashford:

So if you can't tell from my accent I'm Scottish originally. I came from Glasgow. And sentiment in Scotland has swung back in favor of independence. It's still fairly nadir but it is now a majority of those polls where a decade ago the referendum was ... It was soundly defeated, a referendum, the notion of independence. And so the fact that Scotland voted overwhelmingly not to exit the EU and then the UK did anyway, that's really driving those tensions. And then we see similar issues in Northern Ireland where there's all these debates about the border. And so I am just not ... I'm not optimistic. I think if the UK manages to stick together over the next decade, it's going to do so as a diminished actor in world affairs and that's probably not good for the U.S. either.

Jacob Shapiro:

Would you say it's in Scotland's interest to leave? Or that it's one of these nationalist, emotional, visceral things that it's sort of death by a million cuts and the interest don't matter to a certain point especially if you get into a referendum type situation?

Emma Ashford:

I mean, I was a very strong opponent of independence back when it came up for referendum the last time. I'm still an opponent of referendum. I think Scotland is a part of the United Kingdom and I think we benefit substantially from those trade links. Now, could you make an argument that if Scotland were to leave and join the European Union it might benefit from that more? Perhaps, but I think that's pretty unrealistic for a couple of reasons. One is that the Scottish government bases a lot of its predictions on sort of the current price of oil and of continuing oil extraction, and the fields are declining so that's, obviously, a little misleading.

Emma Ashford:

And then the other one is that there are countries in the European Union that have said that they'll never let Scotland in because they don't want separatist countries getting in. The Spanish with Catalonia is the most obvious. And so again, I think an independent Scotland might find it very difficult to get into the EU and that would leave as isolated from basically everybody. So I really oppose independence because I just don't see ... I think there's maybe more reason now than there was a decade ago. I still don't think it's good enough.



Jacob Shapiro:

Okay. Well, thank you for humoring me on those two last curveball questions, and thank you so much for coming on the podcast. And when your book proposal is done and it's out, I hope you'll come back on and share some more insights with us.

Emma Ashford:

Great. Thanks so much for having me.

Jacob Shapiro:

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Jacob Shapiro:

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