A Conversation With Nikki Haley

March 29, 2017

Council on Foreign Relations

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HAASS: Well, good morning, and welcome to the Council on Foreign Relations. I’m Richard Haass. And it’s an important morning. But before I introduce Ambassador Haley, I just want to say one or two things.

There’s a lot going on every day these days, and today there’s particularly a lot going on. Several hours ago the prime minister of Britain gave notice to the European Union, through triggering Article 50 of the basic agreement, of Britain’s intents to exit the European Union.

We are just weeks away between the meeting in Mar-a-Lago of the Chinese president and President Trump. We have the elections coming up in April, and then most likely early May, in France, which are arguably the most consequential in Europe in a generation. The question of Russia’s role in the American election continues to churn in Washington.

In the Middle East, there’s any number of conflicts—failed states, you name it; also conflicts in Africa, the continuing question and fighting in eastern Ukraine, as well as the Russian occupation of Crimea. You’ve got the uncertainty about Venezuela. And also just yesterday the administration announced its new positions and policies vis-à-vis climate issues. So, like I said, there is no shortage of context.

That then makes it even more timely that we have today Ambassador Haley, Nikki Haley, who, if the research here is right, is the 29th permanent representative of the United States. I’ve asked the question about a hundred times: Why are American ambassadors to the United Nations known as permanent representatives rather than ambassadors, not just American ambassadors but others? No one’s ever given me a persuasive answer, but I’m sure there’s a good one.

And Ambassador Haley is also a member of the Cabinet for President Trump. And as I expect everybody knows, she is not new to public life, but she served as the governor of the very proud state of South Carolina, which is particularly proud—and I want to get the governor’s prediction on this—given its participation in the other critical event of our time—(laughter)—which is the Final Four of the NCAA tournament. So we’re going to get that on the record. I want to hear a confident prediction here.

What we’re going to do this morning is Ambassador Haley is going to speak first for a few minutes. Then she and I are going to have a private conversation in front of all of you in the world, and then we will open up to you, our members. So thank you all for coming here and being with us this morning.

Ambassador Haley, the stage is yours. (Applause.)

HALEY: Well, good morning. This is an intimidating crowd, I’ve got to tell you. It really is. No, I am so thrilled to be here. I will tell you that being at the Council on Foreign Relations is something that’s very special. And I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today and let you know a little bit about what we’re doing.

We found our move in New York to be a pleasant one. There have been a few adjustments, mainly the weather. It’s cold here. In South Carolina we consider, you know, 58, 60 freezing. And here that’s definitely different. But we are getting used to it.

My son Nalin, we’ve determined, is now a city boy, which makes this mom very nervous. I do take care of my elderly parents, and they are learning how to use Uber, which has been really interesting. So we’ve had to pick them up a couple of times. (Laughter.) But other than that, they are doing very well. My daughter is a freshman at Clemson, and she is going to come to New York at Easter. We’re going to convince her that she’s going to love it.

So those are all the things that we’re doing. And I’ll tell you that Michael and I, what we love is everyone has been so incredibly kind and welcoming to us. We’ve decided you can’t run out of restaurants and you can’t run out of things to do in this city. And so we very, very much appreciate it.

I’m excited that I’m going to be taking over the presidency of the U.N. Security Council in April. And I’d like to spend a few moments just talking to you about our agenda and what we want to try and accomplish.

Being at the U.N. has reminded me, in powerful ways, of my early days in state government in South Carolina. The U.N. Security Council, just like the South Carolina legislature, is basically a club. And the thing about clubs is that they have rules and they have a culture. There is a constant pressure to comply with this culture. And soon enough, members are doing things a certain way because that’s the way they’ve always done them. And then the club becomes stale. Its members forget that being responsive and changing with the times are needed to show value to the people that they serve.

I’ve approached my job at the U.N. in the same way I did in South Carolina. I’m working to change the culture. Institutions always benefit from an outsider’s perspective. In South Carolina, I was the first minority governor and—a real shock to the state—the first girl governor as well. And I was definitely an outsider.

But my perspective allowed me to see the ways the legislature had become complacent. Challenging the rules of the club didn’t make me popular at the statehouse, but it was necessary then. And it’s necessary now.

At the U.S. Mission, we’re all about changing the culture and bringing positive energy to the United Nations. We’ve put accountability front and center. People who’ve worked with me know that I have no tolerance for unmet promises and inaction. My team is about action, reliability, and results. We demand that of ourselves and we expect it of others. We’re also having the backs of our allies, and we’re not afraid to call out the governments that don’t have our backs. We will deal fairly with the people who are fair with us. If not, all bets are off.

Don’t get me wrong. I don’t have illusions about how easily an institution the size and complexity of the United Nations can be changed. Still, with the support of the new secretary general and many of my colleagues on the Security Council, we’ve already started to make some progress.

A couple of weeks ago, when a U.N. agency put out yet another ridiculously biased report attacking Israel, we were able to work with the secretary general to have it withdrawn. The head of the U.N. agency then resigned.

I think this incident really goes to the heart of what needs to be changed at the United Nations. So many dollars and man hours were spent to produce a false and defamatory report. So much energy and emotion is spent on the same old things. Meanwhile, the U.N. is missing the growing discontent and growing distrust among the people it’s supposed to represent. The fact is a wave is building throughout the world. It’s a wave of populism that is challenging institutions like the United Nations and shaking them to their foundations.

So many people are desperate. So many face injustice, genocide, starvation, and corruption. And they feel powerless. So many people yearn just to be heard. Mohamed Bouazizi was one of the first to show the world the frustration that’s out there. Mohamed was a simple street vendor in Tunisia. He was repeatedly abused by a corrupt system for the crime of wanting to sell his oranges and apples. He became so desperate to be heard that he set himself on fire in front of the offices of the police—the very police who had humiliated and stolen from him. Mohamed’s act of desperation was heard by the people. It set off the Arab Spring.

Then there was Neda. She was 26 years old, talking on her cellphone, when she was shot by government forces in Iran in 2009. A video of her bleeding to death on the street in Tehran went viral. Once again, the people reacted. Neda’s death powered the Green Revolution, but the international elite had other priorities for Iran. In the end, Neda’s death—and the dreams of the Iranian people—were overlooked and unfulfilled.

Like all governing bodies, the United Nations has to contend with this growing wave of discontent. I came to the U.N. with the goal of showing the American people value for our investment in this institution. And when I say value, I’m not primarily talking about budgets. I’m talking about making the U.N. an effective tool on behalf of our values.

The United States is the moral conscience of the world. We will not walk away from this role, but we will insist that our participation in the U.N. honor and reflect this role. If we can’t speak on behalf of people like Mohamed and Neda, then we have no business being here.

For me, human rights are at the heart of the mission of the United Nations. That’s why I’ll be devoting a portion of my presidency to putting the issue of human rights on the agenda—on the agenda at the Security Council.

It might surprise many Americans to learn that human rights violations have not been considered an appropriate subject for discussion in the Security Council. This is the rule the club has created. The Security Council has never had a session focused exclusively on human rights. There have been meetings focused on singular situations in particular countries, but never—

AUDIENCE MEMBER: (Coughs.)

HALEY: —bless you—has a meeting been dedicated to the broader question of how human rights abuses can lead to a breakdown in national peace and security. The thinking is that peace and security are the Security Council’s business; human rights are left separate, to others.

The need for this is to change not just a question of morality—although morality should compel all of us to protect basic human dignity—it’s a question of the very peace and security that the Security Council is charged to promote. The fact is, peace and security cannot be achieved in isolation from human rights. In case after case, human rights abuses are not the byproduct of conflict; they are the cause of conflict, or they are the fuel that feeds the conflict. Desperate people subject to humiliation and abuse will inevitably resort to violence. People who are robbed of their humanity and dignity will inevitably want revenge. They are also vulnerable to manipulation or coercion by extremist groups.

In some cases, human rights abuses literally provide the financing for aggression. The North Korean regime forces political prisoners to work themselves to death in coal mines to finance its nuclear program.

In other cases, human rights abuses are a weapon of war. Syrian intelligence uses torture, including the deliberate systemic torture of children, to identify and silence opponents. And, as you know, pro-government forces in Syria have systematically targeted civilian infrastructure, including hospitals.

Recently, CCTV cameras captured what happens when hospitals are targeted by government bombs. A horrifying YouTube showed the final seconds of the life of the last pediatrician in east Aleppo. Dr. Muhammad, who was there—the video is simply shot down a hallway of a children’s hospital. Dr. Maaz starts in and out, hurrying from room to room, seeing patients. Then, just after he walks out of the frame, you see the walls, the ceiling, the floor, the air of the hospital explode. And then the screen goes blank.

The video is horrible, but the reality behind it is even worse. Together with Russia and Iran, the Assad regime has destroyed each and every hospital in east Aleppo—every one. A quarter-million people have left to suffer. These are war crimes.

And Assad’s crimes, of course, have not been confined to Syria. Syrian human—Syrian human rights violations have led to the greatest refugee crisis since World War II. What was once a brutal crackdown on peaceful protesters is now a six-sided conflict and a great-power proxy war.

I believe strongly that the time has come for the Security Council to explicitly consider the connection between human rights and security. This debate is one that’s worth having. It would greatly strengthen the work of the Security Council, and it’s the right thing to do.

We intend to challenge members—states to start walking the walk and not just talking the talk of human rights. We will see which countries rise to the challenge and which resort to the same old tired excuses. It will be very telling if any country tries to block this debate. It’s past time that the Security Council acknowledge the importance of human rights abuses and demand that its member nations do the same.

A second issue I intend to focus on in the coming weeks is the U.N. peacekeeping operations. This is an area of great potential for reform. One of the ways the U.N. does its best work and shows its greatest value is through peacekeeping operations. But here, again, the rules of the club intervene.

The goal of any U.N. peacekeeping mission should be—should be to ensure political solutions to conflicts are actually realized. But too often, the focus of our peacekeeping efforts is on the troop-contributing countries—that is, those who are paid to send troops into an area—or the funding countries, or the bureaucracy of the U.N. itself, not on protecting civilians and achieving a political solution.

In the past, when we’ve discussed our peacekeeping operations, we’ve kept the focus on management-related issues. We’ve rightly spent time on peacekeeper troop conduct. But too often, we’ve gotten bogged down in parochial questions. We’ve spent a lot of time worrying about which country or bureaucracy benefits from the mission. We’ve worried about the donor countries. We’ve worried about troop-supplying countries. We’ve missed the forest for the trees in peacekeeping operations altogether.

During the U.S. presidency, I intend to do something different. We will lay out a comprehensive vision for how peacekeeping missions should be reviewed moving forward. We will go back to first principles and ask hard questions: What was the original intent of the mission? Is the mission achieving its objective? Are we lifting up the people in the region towards independence? What are the mission countries doing to help themselves? Do we have an exit plan? And is there accountability? As it stands, the lack of this kind of basic evaluation in the U.N. missions is shocking.

For example, the U.N. has a political mission in Afghanistan—not a peacekeeping mission, but the accountability concept is the same. This mission has been in place for more than 15 years, and it has never once been reviewed. No one has ever thought to check and see if we’re actually achieving any goals. This is unacceptable. We are in the process of proposing a strategic review of this and other missions to get the facts on the ground. Peacekeeping is the largest item in the U.N. budget. Our review will identify those missions that are in need of structural reform. We will determine where we need to augment, where we need to restructure, and where we need to cut back.

Again, I’m not just interested in cheaper peacekeeping operations; I’m interested in better and smarter peacekeeping operations. This is an area where Secretary Gutierrez and I very much are in agreement. We have developed a set of principles to guide our review and our operations going forward. They start with the fundamentals: effectiveness and accountability. In South Sudan, the civil war continues, and there is no political solution in sight. It’s time to rethink that mandate and find a political solution with partners in the region. Other principles seem basic, but what is basic at the U.N. and what is basic in the real world can be two different things. The agreement of the host country to an operation is essential to its success. Again, in South Sudan, the government openly opposes the mission, and the mission has suffered. Therefore, the people continue to suffer.

We have to do a better job to—at avoiding mission creep and ensure that the objectives of peacekeeping missions are achievable. We must have an exit strategy. And if things don’t improve, we have to have the political will to adjust the mission, even if some countries and bureaucracies are going to lose funding in the process. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, the government is corrupt and preys on its citizens. At the same time, the U.N. peacekeeping mission is mandated to partner with the government to consolidate peace and security. In other words, the U.N. is aiding a government that is inflicting predatory behavior against its own people. We should have the decency and common sense to end this. We also need to have the political will to adjust the mission when things aren’t improving on the ground. After a very difficult period, the democratically-elected leaders of the Central African Republic are seeking help in training their own troops to take over the—take over from U.N. peacekeepers. The president has told me his country is eager to stand on its own two feet. This is exactly what we want to see. Our goal should be to end these missions, not continue them with no end in sight creating a more dependent and helpless environment.

This is a moment of great responsibility for those who believe in peace and security through international cooperation. Countries all over the world are turning inward. People are questioning the value of interactions with other nations and with international institutions. Some of those questions are good ones and are long overdue, but there’s also a danger. Hanging in the balance is the very relevance of the United Nations. This is a time, in short, to show the people reasons to support the U.N. Even in these cynical times, I believe we all carry in our hearts a bit of idealism that inspired the creation of the United Nations. I know we all want those ideals to succeed in the world—I know I do. I have promised the American people the United States’ indispensable role as the moral conscience of the world. Today, I pledge to my colleagues on the Security Council that I will work with them to make the U.N. an effective instrument of peace, security and human rights of all people. I hope they will join me in doing what’s right, both for the United Nations and for the people we are pledged to protect.

Thank you. (Applause.)

HAASS: Well, thank you. I thought I would do an uncharacteristic thing as a moderator; I will actually pick up on some of the things you said.

So, let’s start with human rights at the U.N., if I might, and I think I got your quote right. You said that human rights need to be at the heart of the United Nations. OK, so you’re going to be president of the Security Council for a month. Russia is one of the permanent members. Here’s a country that, as you meet, is crushing peaceful protests in the street. It seems to be killing regime opponents. It commits war crimes in places like Syria, and it has violated the most basic norm of international relations in Ukraine.

So, what do you talk about with Russia? And other than having the conversation, what could conceivably come of it?

HALEY: I think that’s the whole point of the presidency of the Security Council that I want to have—is what you’re looking at is we have to talk about human rights. We are seeing more and more conflicts in the world. And if you look at it, if there is a government that’s abusing its own people, that is not allowing them the freedoms and the democracy that they need to be successful, they’re going to push back, they’re going to fight their government, and then, they’re going to start getting desperate and then they’re going to do more, and then you’re going to see things break out. So, Russia doesn’t have to agree with me on human rights, but Russia needs to hear it just like every other country needs to hear it. And what we need to talk about is, you can’t say that human rights shouldn’t be discussed in the Security Council, not when you’re looking at chemical weapons being used in Syria, not when you’re looking at abuses in North Korea, not when you’re turning around and seeing these types of things more and more. And so, what we’re going to do is say, this is what we want to talk about. If Russia doesn’t agree, that’s fine, but I still think it needs to be an issue we talk about in the Security Council.

HAASS: OK. One other place where human rights are discussed at the U.N. is the Human Rights Council, and Secretary Tillerson has said—I think his phrase was, we have put on the table the possibility of American withdrawal. So, my question is, what would trigger that? And in general, even if we don’t like what goes on in places like the Human Rights Council—and I can understand why we might not—isn’t it better to essentially stay and argue and fight then to walk away?

HALEY: I mean, the Human Rights Council is so corrupt. I mean, if you look what countries do is they get on it to protect themselves, to make sure that the fingers never pointed at them instead of actually looking at what we need to be doing for human rights for people around the world, and that’s part of it. When you’ve got bad actors that actually sit on the Human Rights Council, it makes you call into question what it is we’re trying to do. And so, what we’ve said is, what is the role of the Human Rights Council? Are they meeting it? And does the United States find value in it? We want to make sure where we can find the most value and success and actual energy put to place that changes, we want to be involved in. I don’t think the Human Rights Council has been effective. I think that we need to look at it. We need to tell them what we want to see to make it effective. But that’s the whole reason why it has to be a Security Council issue as well, because if you look at Syria, had we gotten in there sooner, had we stopped the abuses of their people sooner from Assad, we could’ve actually maybe prevented all of that’s happened. But that wasn’t discussed. That wasn’t talked about. That wasn’t brought up to the surface. And those are the kinds of things we need to have brought up earlier rather than later.

I’m trying to find value in the Human Rights Council. If I find it, I’ll let you know.

HAASS: And if you don’t, are you prepared to recommend that we—that we leave?

HALEY: I am—I will be going in June to speak at the Human Rights Council in Geneva and having a conversation about what I think they’ve done well, what I think they haven’t done well, what I think needs to be done and essentially put them on notice.

HAASS: OK. Let me—might want to raise a couple of other issues that you also referred to.

Several times you talked about the idea of exit strategy. And I’ll be honest with you: I don’t quite understand why. We don’t have an exit for U.S. forces in Korea. We don’t have an exit strategy for U.S. forces in Europe because we made the decision that keeping U.S. forces there is an enduring value. The U.N. has forces in some place for a long time. It’s had them in Cyprus for a long time. It’s had them in the Middle East in certain places for a long time, in Lebanon, in the Sinai. What is wrong with having open-missions in—with peacekeeping if it’s basically doing a good job at a reasonable cost?

HALEY: Because there should never be a time we don’t want to lift up countries. There should never be a time we don’t want to make them more independent. If we’re there all the time, all you’re doing is creating dependence.

So what we’re looking at is you’re going to see us wind down. We’ve already negotiated with the secretary-general. We’re going to wind down the peacekeeping mission in Haiti. It’s not needed anymore. We’re going to wind it down in the Ivory Coast. We’re going to wind it down in Liberia.

But guess what? We’re going to work harder on those areas that truly don’t have peace, those areas that are trying to get stability and can’t get there.

We should never just stay somewhere just because we got there. It’s not fair to the American taxpayer. It’s not fair to the government who deserves to know what independence feels like. And it’s not fair to the troops that have to be there on the ground when they realize there is nothing left for them to do.

HAASS: Again, though, there is time when the U.N. is there in open-ended ways, not inside a single country to prop it up but to maintain the peace between factions in countries or between countries.

HALEY: You know, when I just met with the president of the Central African Republic, one of the things he said was he wants his own troops to keep the peace. And that’s what we should want for them. Why should the U.S. just embolden themselves to go sit in countries for the sake of peace when the country can do it themselves?

HAASS: Well, let’s take a country where they can’t—as you said, South Sudan. And one of the things that you said was we should only be there where we’re welcome. Well, South Sudan is clearly a place we’re not welcome. The two leading politicians can’t get along. They are destroying their country in the process. Traditional peacekeeping won’t work. What about taking something out of the U.N. playbook which hasn’t been used for decades and re-establishing a U.N. international trusteeship in South Sudan? This is clearly a government that can’t run itself. Why doesn't the U.N. step in?

HALEY: Well, first of all, I didn’t say that U.N. shouldn’t be in places where we’re not welcome. That’s not the case. Our focus is always on the people and making sure that we bring peace and stability to the people in an area.

What I will say is if we are going into an area like South Sudan, there is a serious problem when we can’t get food and medical equipment to those people who need it. That’s a serious issue. And the reason we can’t get it to them is not just because of extremists. It’s because of their own government. When you’ve got that issue, we actually have to punish the government for not allowing us to bring in aid to those. So it’s not about exit strategy. It’s about, one, are you actually helping the people on the ground? Are we actually looking at the human rights on the ground, doing something about it and saying, OK, if the government is not taking care of their own people, we need to have strong actions that condemn them.

HAASS: So you would potentially be open to an expanded international role in South Sudan? Because that’s clearly a place where the political leaders are unwilling to take care of their own people.

HALEY: It’s the reason every single mission we’re looking at, we’re looking at independently. You can’t teach—or you can’t handle all missions the same. Every one has its own characteristics, its own political problems, its own sacrifices. And so our goal is to make sure we look at each one and say what do we need to do to get the best efforts down to the people that need it? And then when we finally get stability, how do we lift them up so they can take care of themselves?

HAASS: Want to touch on a couple of other issues before we open it up. One is the Security Council itself. Security Council has gone through one major reform in its history when it went from I think six to 10 nonpermanent members. So now it’s 15, five and 10. At various times some of the previous administrations have raised the issue of expanding the number of permanent members. Germany’s come up. India’s come up. Japan has come up. Does this administration or do you have a view on the desirability of expanding the U.N. Security Council to better match the realities of the world of 2017?

HALEY: Well, I think that—first of all, I’m in learning mode. And as I look at that, I know there is conversations of reform of Security Council. I’m open to hearing anyone on what they have to say and looking at it and going further.

HAASS: One of the doctrines that was approved by the General Assembly in 2005 was the responsibility to protect and the idea that governments have the responsibility to protect their own people, and if and when they failed on a grand scale, the international community had the responsibility to step in. Syria has got to be the tragic case of the world’s failure to do—to do just that. Do you think right now, if there were a vote in the U.N. on responsibility to protect, it would pass? Do you think essentially that after Syria and after Libya, where in particular the Russians and Chinese felt they were misled about the nature of the intervention, do you think there is any more a consensus that the world has a responsibility to protect?

HALEY: I think it’s too soon for me to tell because I really haven’t had enough experience within the actual General Assembly to see what they think. What I can tell you is Syria is one of the most devastating situations that I’ve ever actually seen on the ground because what you’re looking at is a government that doesn’t want to get out of the way. Iran won’t get out of there, and we desperately need them to get out of there. They’ve used chemical weapons on their own people, which is just disgusting. And then you’re looking at the fact that their government’s not willing to work with anyone. You’ve got the extremists coming in. I mean, we have to look at it, but if you ask anyone, no matter which expert, no one knows what the solution is going to be in Syria. What I can tell you, though, is Russia is very involved. And as long as Russia and Iran are as involved as they are, we’re going to continue to have problems.

HAASS: Let me just touch on one or two other things. You talked about the relevance of the U.N. If the U.N. didn’t exist, would we want to invent it? I mean, we’ve got the G-7. We’ve got the G-20. You have any number of small or multilateral agreements to deal with particularly problems—North Korea, Iran, what have you. You’ve got the international financial institutions to deal with that. I mean, are you persuaded—I realize you’ve only been there for a few months—that the U.N. still really is a place where the United States can advance its interest? I mean, is there a strong case for it?

HALEY: Absolutely. But I think that there is reform needed at the U.N. I think what we’re looking at first is, you know, we’re looking at an institution that the merit of why it was started is actually very touching. If you look at it, it was a place where all countries should be able to come together and talk peacefully about how to improve the safety and security of the world. And I think that when you look at that, you look at what the intent was.

What we found now is that it’s just gotten very stale in the way that it does that. And we’ve got to change the culture of the U.N. We have to remind them what the value needs to be to the people they represent, not to the institution itself. The U.N. has gotten very focused on itself. And what we’ve got to do is say, what are we doing to change the culture so that it actually has meaning again and it actually has value again?

And I think it absolutely can get things done. We’ve gotten things done in just the two months that we’ve been there. You know, if we kept moving in that direction, which I’m getting a lot of support on the Security Council for these reforms as well as the secretary-general, I think we’re really going to be able to make a difference.

HAASS: Let me ask one last question, then I’ll open up to our members. You work for an administration that has in several areas staked out a position that’s quite hostile to multilateralism. It’s pulled the United States out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership. It has raised as recently as yesterday fundamental questions about American participation in global climate change efforts. It’s raised certain questions about American alliances. It has supported Brexit, the president has done that. So do you feel in a sense that you’re out there on a limb here? I mean, what is the relationship do you feel of this administration with the—with the United Nations?

HALEY: It’s like you want me to answer it a certain way. That was too funny in the way you worded that. You go, this is—(laughter).

This is what I will tell you is, look, you have an administration that very much wants to see what opportunities are out there. So they for the first time are going out there with fresh eyes saying, let’s take a step back. What can we fix? What is broken? What can we do differently? And the beauty of this administration is all bets are off. We’re not going to look at how things were done in the past. We’re going to look at things in the future. So the president’s going to make the decisions he’s going to make. And he is our president. Whether, you know, people agree or disagree, he’s going to make those. My job is to make sure that at the United Nations I’m making the negotiations I need to make, I’m making sure that everyone understands where the U.S. stands.

The one thing when I came here that has stuck with me was when I went and met one of the ambassadors on the Security Council, which I did a meeting with all of them. I was talking about different issues. And he said: We just need the United States to lead again. I mean, how gut-wrenching is that? And so you know what it means to lead again? It’s for people to know where you’re coming from. That means they need to know what we’re for, they need to know what we’re against, they need to know that we’re going to have the backs of our allies, that we need to be strong, and if the fact that if we see something wrong we call it out. That’s leadership. And so I think what you’re seeing from this administration is they’re stepping back, they’re saying if what we’re doing is working let’s keep doing it, and if not is there a better way to do it? And so I see this as a huge opportunity, when you can suddenly look at everything with fresh eyes and say: Let’s try this again.

HAASS: Do you think, though, that the United States can exert the kind of leadership you want to see with the kind of cuts in the budget that went to the Hill? Do you think that those two are consistent?

HALEY: I think that what you saw with the budget was really trying to figure out what our priorities are. And I think that with all the threats in the world that we’re seeing, the president very much sees the importance of how archaic our military equipment is, of how much we don’t have our troops prepared to actually go out in multiple places. You know, we can—we could go to one area and do it well, but we really don’t have the resources to do multiple areas at the same time. And I think the president’s saying, OK, first, we’ve got to make sure our military is strong, the equipment is good, everything is in place so that we can protect the people of the United States. And then I think he’s saying, OK, where are the rest of the priorities?

And so cuts are never fun. But what I will tell you, as someone who was in business and as an accountant, when you go through tough times you step back, you get smarter, and you start spending wiser. When you go through very fruitful times, you get reckless and you start to just throw it out and not really make sure that it’s going where it needs to go. So times of really looking back and understanding the value of the dollar allows you to do great things with it. And so that’s the way I’m approaching, at least from our standpoint, you know, with the U.S. mission—it’s just my nature to do this—but I went and I looked there.

And what I saw was we had so much we were spending in overtime. You had people who were getting $50,000 a year just in overtime. So, you know, to my team—who’s fantastic and strong and hardworking—I said, OK, this is not about working harder, this is about working smarter. So work within this time and get it done. We don’t need 90-minute meetings. We need 30-minute meetings. We don’t need five different readouts of the same subject. We need one readout of the same subject. So we did that aspect. Then you go and you look. We’ve got 18 open positions right now at the U.S. mission. I don’t need to fill those. So let’s pull it back. We’re getting our job done with the—those are the things that get done only in times of cuts.

And now you’ve got a secretary-general who very much sees what I’m saying, which is: Look, I want the U.N. to be a place that everybody finds value. Help me do that. And so it’s not just the secretary-general. It’s other ambassadors on the Security Council and throughout the General Assembly that are saying: We’re for looking at every single peacekeeping mission. We want to see how we can do it better. That’s why you’re seeing us close down Haiti. That’s why when we’re looking at MONUSCO, the Democratic Republic of Congo, when we’re looking at that we’re looking at the fact that we can reduce the troops tremendously, but we need to focus on what the problem is in Congo. It’s trying to be all things to all people, and you need to go back to the intent of that.

So this is actually going to be a great thing, to be able to go and look at each one and that they are all supportive of, because their countries want value for their dollar as well. So I have not seen any pushback in that. I think what it will do is cause every agency, hopefully, to get smarter and really remember that the people are their customers.

HAASS: OK. Let me open things up. Bill Drozdiak. I’ll try to get to as many people—just wait for the microphone, keep it short, and we’ll get as many people in as we can.

Q: Yeah. Bill Drozdiak, McLarty Associates.

Madam Ambassador, I heard no mention in your remarks about the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan. You did emphasize the importance of an exit strategy from getting out of conflicts. Could you elaborate a bit on how you see, from your vantage point, the situation in those conflicts with United States troops? They’ve been involved for about 15 years. And is there potentially a U.N. role in helping the U.S. achieving an exit strategy?

HALEY: So I think there can always be a U.N. role for anything. In terms of conversations, relationships, messaging back and forth—whether it’s from the administration to other administrations—I think there is a way to do that. You know, Iraq and Afghanistan are a bit personal with me, because my brother was deployed to Iraq during the Desert Storm time. He was leading the first and only unit that dealt with chemical weapons back then. My husband just deployed two or three years ago to Afghanistan, in Helmand province. So I know that he was doing was going into the villages and showing the heads of the villages how, instead of relying on poppy, they could actually go and start growing their own food and being able to take care of themselves. So a lot of effort by Americans and by soldiers and by people who really cared have been put into Iraq and Afghanistan. That’s the first thing. So that’s the compass I come from.

Having said that, you have to see, where are we? And that’s why it was so frustrating when I saw the mission in Afghanistan, that we’ve been there 15, 16 years and you haven’t had one strategic review. You haven’t once looked back and said, OK, where are we? And now we need to go back and look, with the troop withdrawals that we’ve had and with the changes that we’re seeing, where are we going to go? What are we going to do?

I have met with the ambassador to Iraq. We’ve talked. I know that the president has had conversations and General Mattis is right now formulating. And that’s the thing that we’re talking about, is formulating a strategy on where we go in Iraq and Afghanistan, and how do we move it forward so that we do finally have a productive outcome. But that one’s going to still be a wait and see.

HAASS: Ms. Hunt, you had your hand up?

Q: Yes. Good morning.

Good morning. How are you?

HALEY: Good.

Q: I’m Kate Hunt, the U.N. representative for CARE International. And very pleased to see that you’re bringing human rights up under your presidency.

And I wanted to point out an opportunity, and wondered what your thought is, on being sure to insert in this discussion the role of women—not only as victims in conflict and in human rights abuses, but also as people who should participate in preventing conflict, responding to it in humanitarian crises, and also in the recovery.

HALEY: Well, I am a big fan of women. I think there’s nothing they can’t do. I think—

HAASS: This is on the record, I should—yeah.

HALEY: This is totally on the record. (Laughter.)

I think there is nothing they can’t do. And I think any democracy that has allowed themselves to really lift up women has benefited from it.

And so I think, you know, this is near and dear to my heart because my mother—you know, when you didn’t have a lot of education in India, my mother actually was able to go to law school. And she was actually put up to be one of the first female judges in India, but because of the situation with women she wasn’t allowed to sit on the bench. But how amazing for her to watch her daughter become governor of South Carolina and U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.

So when you look at that and you see the potential, that’s what every mom wants for their daughter. That’s what I want for my daughter. That’s what every woman in every country wants for their daughters.

So our goal should always be to empower women, to show how they can be fantastic leaders, and to help them get there—and when they are successful, support them on it and encourage them on that. So whatever avenue we need to do that in, I think it’s—I think it’s a great thing.

HAASS: Yes, ma’am.

Q: Lara Setrakian from News Deeply. Thanks so much for your remarks.

HALEY: Good morning.

Q: What does Russia need to do to achieve a political settlement in Syria? And does it include the resignation and a timeline for the resignation of President Assad?

HALEY: (Laughs.)

HAASS: A nice easy question for you.

HALEY: That is the question of the day.

You know, I think that Russia has tried to find a political solution, but they’ve tried to find a political solution with Assad, and that’s a problem. I’m not going to go back into should Assad be in or out. Been there, done that, right, in terms of what the U.S. has done. But I will tell you that he is a big hindrance in trying to move forward. Iran is a big hindrance in trying to move forward.

I think that what we have seen is de Mistura, who has been there, you know, when you look and you talk to him about the status of where we are and what’s happening in Syria, he does desperately want the U.S. to be a part of finding a solution to that. And so I think that it would be—this is one of the situations where the U.S. and Russia could definitely talk and say, OK, how can we get to a better solution here. But the issue of Assad’s going to be there.

And I have to tell you, when you have a leader who will go so far as use chemical weapons on their own people, you have to wonder if that’s somebody you can even work with. And so I think that’s the dilemma everyone has, is how do you deal with a government that we wish wasn’t there and deal with other countries who have all gotten involved—there’s a lot of players there in Syria—and how do you go to try and really lift up those poor people in Syria that aren’t getting any help or assistance, and find a way to build back up a government? It’s a hard answer no matter which way you look at it.

I do hope that the international community realizes let’s not get egos in here, let’s not be about power-hungry. Let’s really look at the fact that if we don’t have a stable Syria, we don’t have a stable region. And it’s only going to get worse. It really is an international threat right now, and we’ve got to find a solution to it.

HAASS: OK, lots of hands. Evelyn, who’s covered the U.N. for many years.

HALEY: Good morning.

Q: Good morning. Just good to see you, to hear you. Evelyn Leopold, journalist at the U.N., contributor to Huffington Post.

Madam Ambassador, there have been reports and comments from people in Congress that the peacekeeping budget would be cut by several million. That could be a slash and burn, depending on which—like in the Congo and so forth. Is there any truth to that? In fact, the whole U.N. budget, just put a number on it. Is that what’s going to happen?

HALEY: So I can say this, because I was a governor. We would put all this time and energy into a budget, and then we’d turn it over to the legislature and they would throw it away, right?

And so what I can tell you is what the president has done is said these are where my priorities are. Please help me build up the military. Please help me make sure that we have these certain aspects working so that we can keep our people safe. That’s his number one goal.

I think what Congress is going to do is now support where his—what his intentions are because they want to be supportive of him. But at the same time, I’ve been talking with the Senate Appropriations members. I’ve also—I’m meeting today with members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. We are talking about how to be smart in what we do.

We don’t want to just cut for the sake of cutting. There are places we can cut. Everybody knows there’s fat at the U.N. Everybody knows there’s fat in the peacekeeping missions. So that’s why we’re taking each one. The idea that we started one at a time and we looked at Haiti and we said let’s close that out; the idea that we’re now looking at UNESCO and we said, OK, we can go and let’s reduce this many number of troops and make sure that we’re actually going back, that’s going to bring a reduction; the idea that we’re going into Afghanistan and saying we’re going to do a strategic review, do we need to be there. Every single one of these, we’re doing that. And I can tell you, I’ve actually—I’m working with the secretary general on this, that he and I have discussed how much we’re going to look at cutting peacekeeping, how we can reduce it, where we can focus on it. And we’re in agreement on that.

Now you talk about the operational budget of the U.N. That’s a little bit of a harder task. So what we’re talking about there is how do you streamline the U.N. How do you make sure it’s not so bureaucratic and you’re not jumping through hurdles? And I think that his focus very much is on management reform. And it’s not just me, but several members that we’re working with are working to help him do that. You’re going to see focusing more on technology so that it’s just more efficient, more effective in the way that it works.

I believe that you will see cuts to the U.N. But I also know that Congress has been unbelievably supportive of me helping them decide where we should cut and how we should cut. And so that’s what I think we’ll see going forward.

HAASS: But just to follow up on that, there are those who would say—I think Senator Portman is one of them—that the idea that the United States spends—provides, rather—28, 29 percent of the peacekeeping budget is just too high—

HALEY: It is.

HAASS: —as a matter of principle; and whether the cap is 25 percent or something else. Is that something that basically—you clearly then agree with that.

HALEY: No, and absolutely. And what I’ve said is, and told the secretary general and told everyone, you need to see that go from 28 to 25. That is exactly where we need to be. So that is something that will happen. That is the one thing that I have told Congress that we need to do is we need to be within the law. And within the law we are supposed to be at a 25 percent cap for peacekeeping.

And so the first thing we’re going to do is start doing things right again. But the way to do things right again is to do things smart again. And so I think that there is absolutely a way to do that.

HAASS: Jim Zirin.

Q: Good morning, Madam Ambassador.

HALEY: Good morning.

Q: I’m Jim Zirin.

First, I applaud your interest in reform at the U.N. And in the area of human rights, I wondered whether you’re not critical of policies of this administration that have the effect of excluding Syrian refugees from the United States and also, as the daughter of immigrants, curtailing immigration from Muslim-majority countries.

HALEY: Thank you for that question, because I think it’s an important one.

I am the proud daughter of Indian immigrants, who reminded my brothers, my sister and me every day how blessed we were to be in this country. I do believe that the fabric of America is legal immigration. That is what makes the United States so fantastic. So, from that standpoint, that is something that’s near and dear to my heart, and I very much support.

As governor of South Carolina, when the refugee situation started, it was one that we had been accepting refugees for years. The United States has, but South Carolina had. And my involvement with that was knowing that we took people in that were persecuted. We took people in that really were in need.

I can tell you, my husband alone focused on the fact that when they left Afghanistan, there were two interpreters that kept our men and women safe. And had it not been for them, they would have been in a very dangerous situation. But when my husband’s troops came back, those interpreters were going to be killed. And so the refugee program allowed for him and his colleagues to help get those two interpreters here. They are now good, hard-working people in the United States, and their families are safe. And they kept our soldiers safe.

So the refugee program itself is a good one. The difference is they were able to vet those interpreters. They were able to look at all of their contacts. They were able to see who they were involved with. They were able to look at their communications. They were able to know anything and everything about those interpreters. And that’s what we’ve always done.

As governor, it was about Syrian refugees that were coming over. And so I called Director Comey and I said, OK, we’ve done this for a long time. When we take refugees from Syria, is this the same thing that we’ve always done? And he said, well, we don’t have the same information. And I said what do you mean? He said we can’t vet them the way we vet the others. And I said why? And he said we don’t have enough information. He said it is not possible to vet these people.

So take that—and so, as a governor, I said we can’t take them, because my job was to protect the people of South Carolina, and we didn’t know who was coming in. And the director just told me that he couldn’t tell me who was coming in.

Now you look at the president. What the president has done has said let’s take a step back. Everybody that you can’t vet, tell me. And these are the areas where they said if we bring people in, we don’t have enough information to properly vet them. So what he has said is, OK, prove to me that you can vet these people properly, and we’ll open it back up.

So, for now, what he’s trying to do is make sure that no danger comes into the country. And then, once the proper policies are in place that you can vet, then you allow those countries to start coming back in.

So this is not about not wanting people in. This is about keeping the terrorists out. And when you look at situations like what just happened in London, that was devastating. You look at those things. This is just the fact that you have not just the president but everyone else trying to just make sure that we’re keeping our people safe.

HAASS: Since you mentioned London, the person in London was not someone who came in. This is someone who was born there. And isn’t the danger of some of the policies being done in the name of vetting people and keeping people out run the risk of alienating, in this case, the 3 million Muslim Americans who are already here? Do you think that we’ve got the balance right between trying to filter potential terrorists from coming in and potentially radicalizing and alienating those individuals who have already—who already live their lives here?

HALEY: Well, we should never ban based on religion, I mean, period. We should never. And I don’t think that’s what this is. If that were the case, there are another dozen, you know, Muslim countries that could have been on the list that are not on the list. What we did do was find out—the president went and asked, what are the countries that we have to be most concerned about? And those are the ones that he used. We will never close our doors in the United States. We won’t. But what we did do was take a pause. What we did do was say, OK, how are we going to make sure that we’re keeping people safe? And, you know, I think that the number-one goal of any administration is to keep the people safe. And that’s what they’re trying to do. And so I hope that the vetting process gets better. I hope that they can start to find out the information they need, like we did with the other program of refugees that worked so well. And when they get to that, I hope they move forward with it.

HAASS: Do you have time for one more?

HALEY: Sure.

HAASS: OK, let’s do—OK, I’m going to alienate 36 people here. I apologize. I see the gentlemen in the one, two, three, four, five from the back, glasses on. (Laughter.)

HALEY: You have to take both of them. You have to take both of them. (Laughter.)

HAASS: It’s tough being me.

HALEY: That is amazing.

HAASS: OK, Elliot, as well as the—we’ll get—we’ll do a twofer.

HALEY: We’ll do both of you. (Laughter.) That was—

HAASS: Both of you. Elliot, first you, and then—

Q: Elliot Cosgrove, rabbi of Park Avenue Synagogue.

I just want to publicly thank you, from South Carolina all the way to your recent remarks and actions, letting the world know that you have—that American has its friends’ backs. And yet, I’m also struck by the question of friends don’t let friends drive drunk. And so to the degree that the settlements are an impediment to a two-state solution, how can the U.N., how can you signal to Israel that we are Israel’s friend and ally but also when we see something that might not be in the best interests of a two-state solution, communicate that?

HAASS: Do we want to get both questions? Let’s get the other question. Then we’ll give you a chance to balance your answers out.

Q: Hi. I’m not Elliot. (Laughter.) I’m Daniel Arbess, Ambassador.

HALEY: Good morning.

Q: Thank you so much for being here. The other question, Richard, is a whole nother can of worms is to go back to the Middle East, Russia, Syria—

HAASS: Let’s not go back there.

Q: Basically—really? No going back? I just want to raise the question for the ambassador to think about. Two schools of thoughts on Russia’s role. One school of thought says Russia wants to expand its influence in the Middle East. Another school of thought says Russia is legitimately concerned about the risk of the spread of Islamist terrorist in its southern flank. That second school of thought opens up a much broader field for collaboration with Russia. I was just wondering what your initial impressions were.

HALEY: OK. So we’ll start with Israel first. Really, all I’ve done with Israel is tell the truth. So when I saw something wrong, I called it out. It was amazing to me that we had a briefing on the Middle East and literally all it was an Israel-bashing session. And so I was confused because there were so many other issues that needed to be talked about that were in the Middle East and that was just all they talked about. And they do it every single month. And so it was really just saying, with all the issues in the world this is what we’re going to talk about? So that was the logic with that.

I will tell you, there is such a huge want of so many people to see Israel and the Palestinian Authority come together. And I think that’s why you have seen President Trump, who’s just adamant that this is going to happen, do that. I met with the head of—with the representative from the Palestinian Authority, and we talked about the situation here at the United Nations. And what I said to him was: Look, we just want balance. We just want it to be fair. And in doing that, what I, you know, had asked of him was, don’t put any more resolutions on the table bashing Israel. But at the same time, we’re not going to be able to really support you going forward in moving up if you don’t come to the table and negotiate.

So we’ve actually been pretty tough on both in terms of Israel having to come to the table and the Palestinian Authority coming to the table. I think that they will. The two need to decide what that solution looks like, and the two need to come together. They both claim they are. We’ll see what happens.

And I know the settlements issue is going to be an area of contention, but they’ve got to work it out. They’ve got to figure out exactly where they’re going to be so that we can finally have peace in that area. And that’s my hope and prayer, is that that happens.

In terms of Russia, there have been some issues where I have beaten up on Russia, you know, whether it was their involvement with Crimea, you know, other issues that I’ve seen that they’ve done. And so I am critical. But I have also said there are places where we should work with Russia. And absolutely dealing with ISIS and extreme terrorism is a place where we need to be working with Russia.

I have already met with the ambassador to try and talk about what we can do. Those are things that I think we need to go forward with. We are better together when it comes to fighting terrorism than we are doing it separately.

So I think you will see us work together with Russia on that aspect. But when we see something that we’re not comfortable with Russia, we’re going to call them out on it.

HAASS: So you’re feeling comfortable about this weekend?

HALEY: Ah. (Laughter.) Yes. (Laughter.)

You know, I think it’s so important—this weekend is so important. I’m assuming you’re talking about President Xi?

HAASS: No. (Laughter.)

HALEY: Oh. What are you talking about?

HAASS: The Gamecocks. (Laughter.)

HALEY: Oh. (Laughter.) Oh, no, that I’m very confident about. (Laughter.)

So I got to tell you, I mean, loving South Carolina, first of all I’m a Clemson girl. Graduated from Clemson; national championships, so excited. Then you turn around, you look at Coastal Carolina, we basically won the World Series. And now we got basketball. But we don’t just have basketball; we are in the Final Four for the men and Final Four for the women. So, you know, it’s going to be interesting. UConn is tough.

HAASS: So is that North Carolina team. They’re pretty tough, too. (Laughter.)

HALEY: Yeah. It’d be fun to see Carolina and Carolina come together.

HAASS: Ambassador Haley, thank you for today and thank you for all you do.

HALEY: Thank you very, very much. I appreciate it. (Applause.) Thank you. (Applause.)

HAASS: (Laughs.) President Xi.

(END)