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1. **Opening**

Thanks to CFR for having me, and thanks, Nick, for that introduction. I’m happy to be here, because CFR has long been a standard-bearer of bipartisan thought on foreign policy.

This body was founded between the world wars at a time of disagreement and debate over America's role in the world. President Wilson was championing the League of Nations. The Senate was opposed. Ordinary Americans were split. This Council emerged from that lack of consensus, to answer one fundamental question: How should America engage with the world to keep us safe?

Today, we’re faced with a similar question—and it feels appropriate to try to answer it here, with you all.

This is a personal topic for me. By training, I’m a national security professional. I’m also what we now often refer to as a 9/11 baby: I happened to be here in New York City on my second day of grad school when 9/11 happened. It completely changed my life. I was recruited into the CIA and served three tours in Iraq alongside the military, before serving in the Pentagon and the White House under two presidents: one Republican, one Democrat.

Here’s what that experience has taught me: A national security strategy worth its salt must do two things. First, protect U.S. citizens, the homeland, and our way of life. And second, advance American prosperity. That’s it.

But that’s easier said than done. In the years since I left the Pentagon, the world seems increasingly chaotic, contested, and out of control. Authoritarian powers are on the march, coercing smaller neighbors. A full-blown revolution in technology is underway. Institutions we all grew up with are fading away. The global economy is fragmenting. We know the old playbook isn’t working – but we don’t yet know what the new playbook looks like. President Biden nibbled at the margins of that playbook. President Trump is burning it all down, the good with the bad.

With all the noise, it’s easy to spend all our time on the issues of the day – troops in our cities, Ukraine, Gaza. But for our safety over the next 50 years, we have to think long-term. Because if I’ve learned anything as a CIA officer and Pentagon official, if you don’t give the future a seat at the table, you make America less safe.

To get back to basics, I went to what many in this room may feel is an unlikely source: Michiganders.

1. **Michigan Town Halls**

Since 2017, I have been representing the great state of Michigan in Congress—first in the House, and now in the Senate. I often feel as if I have one foot in the national security world and one foot in my life in Michigan.

So when I decided to give this speech, I wanted to do something most national security folks wouldn't think was important: reach out to regular Michiganders and get their thoughts on the subject.

Last month, I held town halls on national security in Benton Harbor and Troy, Michigan, with people across the political spectrum. For 90 minutes each, we talked about what they saw as the greatest threats to their safety and prosperity, and what they expected from their government.

Here’s what I heard:

First and foremost, economic stress is impacting every aspect of their lives. No matter what we were talking about, our discussions veered into the cost of living, trade, tariffs, and how U.S. policies could hurt the already-struggling economy. Michiganders across the board saw China as the single biggest threat to American economic security. To them, China owns everything. The clothes on our backs. The phones in our pockets. Our treasury and our debt. And, in the words of one Michigander, “when you have someone entrenched in your own house, how you deal with them is very important.”

Second, technology is putting our citizens on the frontlines, and the government isn't doing enough to protect them. From social media to AI to cyberattacks, tech threats were top of mind for everyone who attended these sessions. One Michigander said it well: “Warfare is still on the ground, still rockets, but it’s also changed—cyber warfare can be just as brutal.” Their bank accounts, their hospitals, their kids’ data. Everyone had a personal story of being hacked or ransomed.

On AI, most seemed to know it was coming, but they didn’t know what it meant for them. They heard AI can do good things, but they also fear a new round of job loss—which we’ve seen firsthand in Michigan. Regardless of the type of technology, Michiganders feel utterly unprotected—like the government was just “shrugging their shoulders” on these threats. That’s a direct quote.

Some folks brought up President Trump’s approach of burning everything down. For most, the jury is still out. And there’s a message in that ambivalence: Many Americans have lost confidence that we know what we’re doing abroad. And they have good reason to feel uneasy. They’ve seen forever wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, support to Ukraine and Israel without resolution, all while the middle class suffers at home. While most still believe in a strong American role in the world, there’s no mistaking that there’s a trust deficit after the last 20 years.

Before I move on, I just want to flag what didn’t come up in these townhalls: Traditional security issues like missile defense, nuclear weapons, and major terrorist attacks were not top of mind. Michiganders still expect their government to protect them from these threats, but as a rule, they are focused on their pocketbooks and their kids. I’d count this one as a victory. For all our faults, we should be proud that for almost 80 years, we haven’t had another world war or a nuclear exchange. And despite how President Trump paints those who work in national security, we should continue that critical work.

So that’s what I heard from Michiganders. And while they may not use fancy language, it’s clear they understand that warfare has changed. So, informed by them, I’m going to focus on the three big things that, if we get right, will define American security for the next 50 years.

**First, we need to treat economic security as national security—and be ruthless about growing the middle class.**

**Second, we need to win the Tech Race, just like we won the nuclear and space races. This is especially true for AI.**

**Third, we need to fundamentally rethink how we protect Americans—since they are now on the frontlines.**

1. **Economic Security**

First, on economic security. **We need to treat economic security as a national security priority—because it is.**

I believe in my bones that the existential threat to the United States is the shrinking middle class here at home. Using the term “existential” is not hyperbole: if you want to understand how the US got to this fractious, authoritarian moment in our history, all you need to know is that the American middle class has shrunk since its highwater mark in 1970. In the last 50 years, the share of Americans in the middle class has fallen by nearly 20 percent. And all that lost wealth has moved towards those who already have it, rather those who are striving for it. That’s not a political statement. That is cold, hard fact.

What does that mean for everyday Americans? It means that they can’t provide for their kids what was provided for them. A home of their own. A fishing cabin up north. A trip to Disneyland. These are things that define a comfortable, middle class life. And when Americans can no longer afford them, they feel angry. They feel shame. They lose their dignity. And they start looking for someone, or something, to blame. That’s how we begin to tear each other apart from the inside—and how voters end up jumping into bed with anyone promising change.

Back in June, I fleshed out an Economic War Plan to grow the middle class through domestic policy. But the truth is, this needs to be a national security priority, as well. Because while the wars of yesterday were fought with tanks and guns, the wars of today are economic – and they’re already underway. China certainly has been engaging in economic warfare for years—and has gone so far as to build it into their national security strategy, published this year.

So to get our heads in the game, there are three things we need to do to protect the middle class:

First, we must ensure that the dollar remains the world’s currency. We built the global financial system after World War II, and we have deeply benefited from molding that system in our image. Dollar dominance means lower interest rates for things like mortgages and car loans, more valuable 401Ks, cheaper imports, and lower inflation.

But right now, the dollar is being undermined—largely by our own actions. Trump’s efforts to bend the Fed to his will, his sloppy tariffs, and a self-generated trade war. Already, the dollar’s value has fallen more in the last seven months than it has in the last 50 years. Countries are looking for alternatives. This all plays directly into the hands of China, who want the world to run on their currency, not ours. So we need a comprehensive plan to maintain the dollar as the leading global currency.

That also means leading on the money of the future. Just as countries like Kenya are skipping traditional banking and going right to mobile money, we want the digital currencies of tomorrow to be keyed to the dollar. Despite Trump’s abuse of the Trump meme-coin, we need to double down on dollar-backed stablecoins. And the U.S. Government should issue a global digital dollar, just like the Chinese did back in 2020.

The second thing: We need to treat our critical supply chains as national security assets. While some items, like Rubik’s Cubes and ladies’ razors, will never again be made in the U.S., critical items like pharmaceuticals, chips, and autos should be made, at least in part, in the U.S. China has weaponized these supply chains, giving them a veto on our economy that we should not accept. We therefore need real industrial policy that strengthens American industries and offers taxpayers a return on their investment. We need to stand up a proper Sovereign Wealth Fund to invest in technologies that usually scare off investors. And then we need a Rare Earth Reserve to stockpile critical minerals, just as we set up the Strategic Petroleum Reserve in the 70’s after the oil crisis.

By the way, as someone from Michigan, let me just say that smart industrial policy also means prosperity for the middle class. New manufacturing, engineering, and construction jobs. And critically, it means spreading the wealth across America, not just enriching 18 tech executives in Silicon Valley.

But if we want to do *any* of that, we need allies.When I held those town halls in Michigan, most people understood that our friendships keep us safe. To that end, we need to expand our participation in partnerships, and think more creatively than the old Cold War organizations. What if, in addition to military alliances, we had a Lithium Alliance? Or a Chip Alliance? One can imagine a NATO-like body where countries agree to shared export controls, tech, and protection against Chinese coercion.

1. **Winning the Tech Race**

But to protect our economy, we also need to acknowledge that another key battlefield is tech. We are in a Tech Race with China right now, whether most of us know it or not. And there’s no area more important to win than on artificial intelligence.

I had the opportunity to visit Los Alamos National Lab last weekend. They are building a new AI research center that will be housed at the University of Michigan. Los Alamos was the birthplace of nuclear technology 80 years ago—and I left the tour with the distinct feeling that AI raises some of the same fundamental questions that nukes did. How should it be used? By whom? Under what rules? Only this time, we are creating technology that can become smarter than the humans who design it. And, unlike nuclear weapons, AI is almost entirely created and controlled by the private sector.

The last time we were in a race like this, we won by setting up the Manhattan Project. We brought together the brightest minds of a generation—including many foreign and immigrant scientists. Research funding exploded. Years later, Congress set up the Atomic Energy Commission, where government leaders worked with the private sector to develop civilian nuclear energy. Together, they mapped out the rules of the road that still govern nuclear power today. We need the same level of ambition now, updated for the modern age. If Congress were healthy, we’d be setting this up now. Today. And I’m ready to work with anyone who wants to win this race.

But it’s not enough to simply invent the next technology. We also have to adopt that technology, especially in our military. We all know the wars of the future will be fought with advanced tech. But the Pentagon has simply not kept pace with adopting that tech, and our defense industrial base is falling far short of delivering at scale.

China is eating our lunch on this score: They’re able to take a new weapon system from idea to the hands of their soldiers in five years; for the U.S., it’s 12. To help speed up our adoption, we should take a page from Ukraine, and, whenever possible, start with commercial technology, what’s already on the market, and adapt it for military use. We need to take a battle-axe to the old way of doing business, where we spent excessive time and money building the next big toy only to use it for just one threat.

1. **War Comes Home.**

Finally; **In this new era of economic and tech warfare, it’s our citizens who are now serving on the frontlines. And they’re under attack.**

Every day, our adversaries are using commercial tech to target Americans. Some of those attacks are on American individuals or businesses—scamming seniors or hacking schools. But other attacks are on infrastructure. The Chinese government putting malware into our water treatment plants or hacking every single phone in America. A Russian group hacking our oil pipelines and shutting off gas to the Eastern Seaboard. These attacks target our civilians, in an attempt to effectively make us go blind, deaf, and dumb. Make no mistake: These are homeland attacks. And AI will only make it worse.

It’s therefore critical that we re-orient the government to protect our citizens at home. We need to train a Cyber National Guard that deploys to help prevent or respond to attacks. We also need to go after these criminals at much higher rates, by equipping and resourcing the FBI and DOD to take down their operations abroad.

And on the national level, we need a new vision of homeland security, updated from my era of 9/11—with new playbooks, new authorities, and new capabilities to protect Americans from digital warfare. We have the most sophisticated hacking tools in the world, so instead of being scared to use them, we need to fight back and hit our enemies where it hurts. If China is going to target our power grid and local water systems, we need to take offline the servers they are using to do so. And if a cyberattack in the U.S. causes the same damage as a physical strike, we need to treat it as an act of war.

1. **Conclusion**

To sum up: We need economic security to be a national security priority. We need to get our ass in gear on the tech arms race, particularly on AI. And we need to protect Americans at home from those new threats. We do that, and we have a good shot at protecting American security and prosperity into the future.

This will require a fundamental re-organization of the way we do our national security work. And old habits die hard. But our security once again depends on our ability to change and adapt.

To that end, let me put in a final plug: Our whole national security approach is currently organized by the National Security Act of 1947. It created the Defense Department and the CIA. It was an incredibly important document at the time—and the re**-**organization helped us win the Cold War and the Space Race.

But we’re overdue for change. The good news is that we have a moment of rare opportunity here. Trump is indeed burning everything down. But instead of snapping back to the old way of doing things, we have to build something new out of the ashes. I’m not naive—I know we have real problems right now, and a real lack of leaders that are focused on the future. But if our leaders can rise beyond their partisanship, America still has a really good hand to play. We have the best workers, the best researchers, and the best innovators in the world. Our economy has been the envy of countries across the globe. And we have a long history of doing the impossible.

That’s what this moment demands of us. That’s what the American people demand of us. And it is our duty to deliver.

Thanks so much for having me here today.

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