

FDD Media Call: Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Three Years Later

February 20, 2025

Featuring RADM (Ret.) Mark Montgomery, Bradley Bowman, and John Hardie

Moderated by Joe Dougherty

This transcript was edited for clarity.

DOUGHERTY: Good morning and thank you for joining us for today's call. My name is Joe Dougherty, I'm Senior Director of Communications at the nonpartisan Foundation for Defense of Democracies. We're grateful that you've taken the time to join us as FDD experts mark the third year of Russia's illegal and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, and to discuss the latest developments on this issue from the White House, from European capitals, from Kyiv, and Moscow. Lots of news happening for sure.

Joining us on today's call, we have Bradley Bowman, Senior Director of FDD Center on Military and Political Power. He's a former national security advisor to members of the Senate Armed Services and Foreign Relations Committees, and a former Army officer and Black Hawk pilot and former West Point assistant professor.

Also with us today is Rear Admiral Retired Mark Montgomery, FDD Senior Fellow, former policy director for the Senate Armed Services Committee, former NSC Director of Transnational Threats, and former lead for US military to military relations with Ukraine. Mark has traveled to Ukraine to participate in operational planning courses and provide pro bono training on specific military planning and organizational issues. And Mark is returning to Ukraine soon.

Also with us today is John Hardie, Deputy Director of FDD's Russia program, focusing on Russian foreign and security policy, US policy toward Russia and the post-Soviet space, and transatlantic relations. John has expertise in Ukrainian and Russian military strategy and tactics.

Some quick housekeeping: today's conversation is on the record and we will share a transcript and recording from this call within 24 hours. Quickly, today's run of show, we'll start with Mark, followed by Brad, wrap up with John, and then we'll open it up to your questions.

During the Q&A portion, you may submit your questions via chat or you may use the raise hand feature, in which case we'll let you know when you've been unmuted so you can ask your question. Okay, let's get underway. Mark, over to you from Taiwan. Thank you.

MONTGOMERY: Hey, thanks, real pleasure to be here. I'm in Taiwan where they definitely are concerned about what's happening with Ukraine. But I'll talk about Ukraine first. And, look, my assessment, I think a common assessment, is Ukraine is on the back foot. The manpower challenges I think John might talk to in a little bit, but I'll just say, the manpower challenges of just getting people is amplified by significant battle fatigue with the soldiers, particularly the career soldiers and senior officers that they have fighting.

The munitions problem is, it's more than just shortfalls, it's an uncertainty, which makes it really hard to plan. We know what they are, the ground munitions, like 155 artillery ammunition and mortar ammunition and even 120 millimeter. In the air, they're very short on AMRAAMs for their NASAMS and PAC missiles for their Patriot systems, which causes them to have to be selective in their engagements, allowing a lot of inbound weapons to hit.

And then finally, we always have to remind ourselves, they are fighting four adversaries that are fighting together. And we tend to think the iconic part of that is either a Shahed drone or a North Korean soldier. But I'll tell you the two things that are really hurting them -- North Korean artillery, five to six million rounds of different artillery and mortar sizes, that five to six million rounds is helping give them that seven or eight to one ratio on the front of Russian artillery versus Ukrainian.

And the other big issue is Chinese backstopping of their economy. That can't be understated. The growth in imports and exports since February 2022, above 25% between China and Russia, they have picked up where Europe weakening the effect of any sanctions by the United States and Europe. So they're on the back foot. Look, Russia is not in a great position. We'll talk a little bit about their manpower in the question and answer period. But they're beginning to struggle in the sense that they're having to shift to recruiting Slavic kids from west of the Urals instead of minorities and prisoners.



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And eventually this is going to be a domestic challenge, I think, for Vladimir Putin. But right now, no doubt Ukraine's on the front foot. As you head into these negotiations, it's clear to me that the negotiating team lost John Hardie's and my op-ed on what to do. We were pretty clear that you needed to do the pressure first.

And by pressure we just meant deliver the weapons that are en route, the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative weapons that are coming. Look, to be establishing a new loan package, not a grant package; increase the impact of the sanctions on the shadow fleet -- I would call the Biden sanctions a nine out of 10 in terms of the quality of the written sanction, a three out of 10 in terms of the enforcement. We had to increase the enforcement of that.

And then, from my point of view, give them better time sensitive targeting, better release of weapons. In other words, all those kinds of things, we laid them out. Shockingly, instead of that, what we have is a rush into negotiations. To meet some false sense of urgency that the president had set.

Second, we just gave away all our leverage at the start. We had a Secretary of Defense just kind of freewheeling it, saying out loud what our negotiating points were on NATO membership and on recovery of sovereign territory.

And then finally, the president just blatantly mischaracterized who started the war. And probably the one thing that you don't do to President Trump when he says something that irritates you, is punch him back in the nose. Well, President Zelenskyy did that, and that unleashed further President Trump comments about the legitimacy of Zelenskyy's reign and whether we need elections beforehand. Really channeling Russian talking points.

Again, I think we learned this with President Trump and Chairman Xi during Trump 45, that the response to President Trump doing something to you is not to do something back right away. You tend to get this kind of reaction.

And finally what I'd say is this is part of a broader issue where I know the administration's characterizing themselves as disruptors. I think a better term might be destabilizers. And unfortunately the destabilizing is sometimes us and our allies. Still looks to me like we have a removal of USAID assistance to Ukraine that paid for salaries and things. I haven't quite seen the full unfreezing of that.

The perturbations in DOD budgeting and control and the blatant omission of EUCOM as a COCOM that would be supported. To me, these are all challenges. And I really think this all stems from the president made a pledge: "I'll do it on day one." He rightly saw before the inauguration, it wouldn't be day one. So I think they went for 100 days, and he got a call back from these negotiators in Saudi Arabia that 100 days wasn't looking good. And I think that's what kind of started this accelerating train wreck of comments between President Trump and President Zelenskyy.

So overall, we're ending the third year of the war here with Ukraine in a tough position and the alliance of the United States really in extremis.

BOWMAN: Great. Thanks, Mark. I'll just jump in here, Joe, if that's all right with you.

DOUGHERTY: Absolutely, Brad, thank you.

BOWMAN: Thank you, Joe. Thanks to everyone for joining. I know you're all busy. Grateful for your time. Want this to be helpful. All of us want to be a resource for you as you report on these, I'd say, quite consequential times. Four quick categories I'll run through as quickly as possible so John can go and get to your questions.

What happened then, then being three years ago, who's to blame, the stakes, and what happened in the last few days. There's my four categories.

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What happened then? Well, February 24th, 2022, I was on C-SPAN Washington Journal that day or the next day. I forget. This was the largest invasion in Europe since World War II. It was naked aggression. It was unprovoked aggression. There's one person responsible, some Republican senators have even said in recent days, and that's Vladimir Putin. And any suggestion that anyone else is to blame is patently false.

Vice President JD Vance talked about the use and misuse of history. What I just said is historical fact. And where I come from, good policy begins by starting with the truth and reality as the vice president said. And the truth and the reality is that this is the largest invasion in Europe since World War II. That it is Vladimir Putin's responsibility, he's a war criminal. And this war could end tomorrow if Vladimir Putin would simply withdraw his invading forces.

Blaming this invasion on Ukraine or Zelenskyy is akin to blaming a homeowner for a home invasion. That would be like blaming the victim. Okay? So that's not what we Americans do. We don't justify authoritarian aggression and undermine our democratic partners. Maybe they're not perfect. We're not perfect either. But we don't do that typically as Americans. And when one's talking points start to sound eerily similar to those of the Kremlin, it's a good time for a timeout, a look or two in the mirror, and some serious reflection I'd say.

So that's what happened then, and we've been dealing with the consequences of Putin's naked aggression for three years. Tens of thousands of people are dead, and Vladimir Putin's responsible. Is it any clearer than that? Okay. Is it any less clear than that?

So who's to blame? I just covered that. I did a BBC interview the other day. I went on after some Kremlin talking head. He was talking about how NATO expansion was to blame for this war. They've been repeating that cynical assertion that the reason this has happened is because of NATO expansion.

Let me just reiterate once again. NATO is a defensive alliance and Putin knows it. And if you don't believe me or you say prove it, okay, here's my proof. Look at the borders where NATO member countries are adjacent to Russia. And what do you find on the Russian side of those borders? Very, very little Russian military fortification.

So if NATO is an offensive threat to Russia, note to self, why are those borders between NATO-member countries and Russia so relatively unfortified? Answer: NATO is not an offensive threat, and Vladimir Putin knows it. And anyone who suggests otherwise is wittingly or unwittingly helping the Kremlin in their talking points.

Why does Putin not like NATO expansion? Because when a country becomes a member of NATO, it is more difficult and costly for the Kremlin to coerce, control, bully, and invade that country. And, by the way, why would Russia oppose peacekeepers in Ukraine following an agreement? It's because Putin is not done with Ukraine or Europe. And so I would say that.

The stakes are clear, I think in Europe and Ukraine. Republicans, and I worked for three Republican senators in the US Senate. So, I know how Republicans think, I know what they believe, I know what they say behind closed doors, and I see what they say in public. And Republicans like to say, correctly, that Biden's catastrophic withdrawal from Afghanistan may have played a role in Putin's thinking when deciding whether to conduct this largest invasion of Europe since World War II.

I think that's probably right. I can't prove it. But follow the logic there, follow the logic: if withdrawal in Afghanistan helped contribute to the invasion of Ukraine, how much more will failure in Ukraine potentially invite aggression in the Indo-Pacific? Why is that? That's because deterrence is based in part on the perception of political will. And if we don't have the political will to spend about 2.8%, compared to what we spent on the Pentagon in the same time period, to help arm Ukraine, to help them defend their homes against this invasion, why would Beijing believe we're going to send troops to fight and die in the Indo-Pacific, thereby inviting the aggression we don't want?

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I'll move to close here quickly. A few comments on Vice President JD Vance's exchange with historian Niall Ferguson. The vice president talked about the "Generosity of the United States." Supporting Ukraine is not generosity, and it's not charity, it's a wise investment. This is not 170,000 American troops fighting and dying in Iraq. This is financial assistance to Ukraine to give them a baseball bat over the back fence, so they brutalize Putin the home invader, so he reconsiders his line of work. So this is not generosity or charity, it's a wise investment.

He says, "Deal with reality." Everything I said is reality. And I think unfortunately, some of the recent positions stray a bit from that reality.

And he also talks about "substantial leverage." All I see in the last few days is us forfeiting our leverage and weakening our negotiating position. I see all the leverage being applied to our democratic partner who after all was invaded, and almost no leverage on Vladimir Putin.

And I don't understand that. Well, it's unwise, I'll say that. And then Monty's in Taiwan, he talked about how they're concerned. I'm sure the reporters on the call have seen Taiwan in the past arguing that we should support Ukraine. Why does Taiwan believe we should support Ukraine? Because they understand that these two regions are not hermetically sealed and isolated from one another. What happens in Kyiv will not stay in Kyiv. The consequences will be felt far and wide, including in the Taiwan Strait. So anyway, I've gone on too long. I hope that's helpful. Over to John, thanks.

HARDIE: Thanks y'all. Thanks for joining. Thanks Brad and Mark, Joe. I think I'd start by addressing some of President Trump's recent comments just very quickly. I think this is basically his very ill-considered way of pressuring the Ukrainians to sign the minerals deal. It's obviously the wrong way to go about it. And I think the terms of that deal itself are frankly predatory in nature. I think US-Ukrainian cooperation on minerals, other natural resources can be a really great thing in principle if it's done in a mutually beneficial way. And I think as Brad said, our security aid is not charity, it's an investment in our own security, and I think it's unwise to tie that to the minerals deal. If Trump insists on doing that, which it sounds like he will, that deal needs to be mutually beneficial. We're not a colonial power trying to strip Ukraine of its natural resources.

Just to move on, I think part of what's really concerning about some of the recent US policy shifts in rhetoric is that it's likely emboldened the Kremlin. The Kremlin likely feels it's closer to achieving its maximalist aims in Ukraine, which, by the way, stretch beyond Ukraine to include a revision of the broader security order in Europe. And there's no doubt that Putin will try to exploit these negotiations, not only to achieve his long-standing goal of making Ukraine a vassal state, but also trying to get Trump to do things like hold back NATO forces in Eastern Europe.

So I think as Monty said, we need to revisit some of these ideas for pressure, things like sanctions on Russia's oil revenue. Of course, continuing to supply Ukraine with military aid to exhaust Russian forces so that Putin can't continue to press his battlefield advantage for greater leverage. And we also need to be working with the Europeans to provide clarity on the sort of US contribution, absent combat troops on the ground in Ukraine, on the sort of contribution that Europeans can expect for a European-led security guarantee, a reassurance force, or whatever you want to call it, in Ukraine after the war. That US backstop, you've heard multiple European leaders say that they think that US backstop would be critical, and so they need clarity on what, if anything, they can expect from the United States as they formulate those plans.

And then, lastly, I'll circle back to some of Trump's recent comments and address the election issue. As I said, it seems like Trump has been escalating the rhetoric as a form of pressure on Zelenskyy. But also, the administration's call for elections in Ukraine actually predates the conversation about the minerals deal, or at least that, the recent negotiations on the Minerals deal. And I don't know exactly where the Trump administration got this idea that an election now is a good idea in Ukraine, but it's just straight out of an ongoing Kremlin operation to try to push this idea, de-legitimize Zelenskyy, and I think in Putin's persistent delusion, replace him with a more pliable leader.

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And just to share with folks who may not know why Ukraine, which of course is a democracy, should not hold an election right now, they've been under martial law since February 2022. Of course, under martial law, you can't hold an election. There are tons of practical considerations, challenges that make it difficult. How do you get votes from people abroad or occupied territories? Putting aside all that, if you lift martial law, you gut the Ukrainian military, because people have the right to return home, people can leave the country, money can leave the country. And then, other than that, that electoral period, you'd see Ukrainian political infighting, which is still fairly subdued relative to where we were prior to the war, although not quite as much as the early days of the war, you'd see that really come back roaring. And then, that would also give Russia a chance to meddle in Ukraine, because with martial law lifted, it'd have a freer hand to use its agents in information operations, et cetera, to meddle in Ukraine.

And so, I think Putin would love to see this happen, because he wants a weaker Ukraine, because that would strengthen his hand in negotiations. Why the United States is playing into this idea, I don't know, but I really hope they will reconsider. Over.

DOUGHERTY: Thank you, John. Thank you, Brad. Thank you, Mark. We will now transition to the question and answer portion of the call. A reminder that you can use the raised hand feature, and that way, you can ask your question and we'll unmute you, or you can submit it via the chat feature here. While we get those underway, I do want to get the first question. Brad, you had mentioned Vice President Vance's social media commentary with Ferguson. Wondered if you wanted to flesh that out a little bit, what your thoughts are there?

BOWMAN: Yeah, for those of you that haven't seen, it was a very interesting exchange between Niall Ferguson, whom I view as a serious historian who knows history, it's kind of a strength for him as a historian, and the Vice President of the United States. Not everything on X has tons of value, but I thought it was a very enlightening exchange that I would encourage you to look at. There was a little name-calling from the Vice President, I thought that was unfortunate. In my experience, sometimes, when you have ad hominem attacks, that's a sign of a weak argument. So I think it's good to try to avoid the name-calling and really look at the essence of the arguments being made.

And the Vice President used the term "irrelevant history." I'm not sure there is much "irrelevant history," especially when you're talking about great power politics and American foreign policy history. As someone who taught a course in American foreign policy at West Point and a grand strategy course, and an American Politics course, I'm not sure I'd ever use the term "irrelevant history." Yes, times change, presidents change, parties change. We've certainly seen some changes within the Republican Party, for sure. But I think really what Niall Ferguson was talking about there, as I understood it, and he can speak for himself, was he's talking about American principles and interests. And those principles and interests, those principles are, I would say, enduring, or should be enduring, and our interests tend to be pretty constant. So while adversaries evolve and change, and politics evolve and change, I think Niall Ferguson was highlighting the point about American principles and interests, and those are enduring. So, I think it's unfortunate the Vice President used that term "irrelevant history," and accusing a historian of historical illiteracy, I think, was unfortunate.

And we also have this term, "globalist," he started with that. I don't know, maybe I've been called that in the past. I've, at times, used the word isolationist. I try not to do that because it's viewed as a pejorative, but some people, I think, earn that title. Globalist, I don't view myself as a globalist, I view myself as someone who believes the United States of America is an extraordinary and exceptional country, where we enjoy unprecedented -- from a historical and current international relations perspective -- freedom, prosperity and security. And my read of history tells me that if you have something like that, it's worth defending, and there's people who are going to want to take it away from you.

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And the next step I do, is that what happens over there matters here. We learned that in Pearl Harbor, we learned that in 9/11, we learned that in COVID, we learned that in two World Wars in the first half of the 20th century, that, sorry, we're more than territorial disputes. They became world wars because we let little problems become big problems, the very thing this administration is at risk of doing, I would argue, in the Middle East and Europe, not so little problems, are becoming bigger problems. Most consumers, most people are outside the United States, and we need to lead, we need to engage, we need to be strong, and we need to have international partners.

I'll end with this: Mark talked about the axis of aggressors, China, Russia, Iran, North Korea. We're conducting detailed, comprehensive research here at FDD on the axis of aggressors, we'd love to talk with reporters about that. If our adversaries understand the value of partners in this moment, we should too. And that is, I think, one of the most unfortunate elements of what we're seeing from the Trump administration, is at the very moment when we most need allies, we're taking our best allies for granted and we're insulting them. I'm not trying to insult the Trump administration, yet they're very happy to insult our allies, which is not wise if you're going to need their help. If you want Europeans to do more in Europe, maybe we should respect them and stop insulting them so that they'll do what this administration wants, so yes, we can do more in the Indo-Pacific. So Joe, there's a few comments, thanks.

DOUGHERTY: Copy. Thanks, Brad. We do have some questions to get to. Nike, Patrick and Dimitry, we will go in that order. Nike, over to you, you will be unmuted so you can ask your question.

NIKE CHING: Thank you. Can you hear me?

DOUGHERTY: We can, thank you.

NIKE CHING: Thank you so much for this webinar. My question is on China. Can I please get your thoughts on China's role, do you see China's strategy as waiting for its geopolitical competitors or adversaries, if you will, to fight each other and ultimately reap the benefits? And then, separately, do you agree that China wants it both ways? The reason I ask is I was reading very carefully on China's comments after the US-Russia talk in Saudi. On one hand, Chinese officials complimented the US-Russia talks in Riyadh, saying that Beijing is, "Glad to see all efforts committed to peace, including what has been agreed on peace talks by the US and Russia." But on the other hand, Chinese officials said that they hope, "All parties concerned and stakeholders will take part in the peace talk process at an appropriate time." They were asked to comment on why Ukraine is being excluded from the talk. So I would love to get your thoughts on that. Thank you very much.

DOUGHERTY: Mark, can we start with you, and then Brad and John?

MONTGOMERY: So I'm not going to attribute a grand strategic plan to China stumbling into this good news. In other words, I don't think China was in on the decision to invade Ukraine, on the Russian decision. I do think though that they've gained a much stronger strategic and operational position because of the Russian invasion. It's actually driven together the four axis of aggressors in a way they haven't been before. We had not seen this kind of sharing of in-situ combat equipment as a crisis was going on, we certainly had never seen the sharing of troops as we did from North Korea, and they've gained significant economic leverage over Russia and benefit from buying cheaper Russian oil and natural gas. So they've accrued a great deal of advantages. That's before the negotiations.

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Now, in the negotiations, the United States, as I said, those were fairly shocking conditions, where we rushed into the negotiations without achieving a position of leverage, we immediately gave away what leverage we had through announcements, and then, of course, misattributed who the aggressor was. And if it's true, we'll have to see what happens with this UN --the reporting is that in the United Nations, the United States is not a sponsor of a Russia-should-get-out-of-Ukraine bill. This is a first for the United States to not be clearly on the side of democracies, alongside some of our key traditional allies, and we'll have to see how we vote on this. If we abstain, that'll be just jaw-droppingly, earthquake-level seismic changes in American foreign policy.

So again, let's not give China... I know we say China plans things out 1,000 years and they've got all this stuff wired. That is not what happened here. They just dumb-luck walked into these advantages that have followed to them. But coming out of Riyadh, of course they're going to compliment the United States on being a feckless poor-performing negotiator that gave all this leverage to the Russians, so no surprises on all that. Don't give them credit for it, but they certainly get the benefit.

BOWMAN: Thanks, Mark. Joe, three quick things here in response to your great question, Nike, which I appreciate. First of all, let me point you to the NATO Summit communique from last summer. If you don't have the link, we'll send it to you. And specifically paragraph number 26. This is what every member of the NATO alliance said about China. I won't read the whole thing to you, but I think it's so important. "The PRC has become a decisive enabler of Russia's war against Ukraine through its so-called no limits partnership and its large-scale support for Russia's defense industrial base. This increases the threat Russia poses to its neighbors and the Euro-Atlantic security." And then, it ends with this, this referring to support, "This includes the transfer of dual use materials, such as weapons components, equipment and raw materials, that serve as inputs for Russia's defense sector." And then, here comes, in rather undiplomatic speak, not common to Brussels and company, the following, "The PRC cannot enable the largest war in Europe in recent history without this negatively impacting its interests and reputation."

Great truthful stuff. And my question for our European allies is, how are we implementing that threat right now, and what are we doing to counter China's Military-Civil Fusion policy, by which they're trying to licitly and illicitly acquire, steal, beg, borrow technology from European and American industry to create Chinese national champion companies, to put our companies out of business, and then siphon that technology to the People's Liberation Army to facilitate aggression in the Taiwan Strait potentially in the coming years? I have no doubt that diplomats from China are whispering in ears around the world about the unreliability of Americans, and unfortunately, this administration is giving them some talking points, to make that cynical information warfare campaign that China's conducting, detailed in our Cognitive Combat monograph, which we'd be happy to send you, more persuasive to ears around the world. So I'll stop there, thanks.

DOUGHERTY: Thank you, Brad. Thank you, Mark. Nike, thank you for your question. Patrick Tucker, we are over to you. You're unmuted, and ask your question, please.

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PATRICK TUCKER: Hey. Yeah, thanks for doing this, everybody, really appreciate it. I wonder if you can comment, right now, it's reports, and they're only reports, on background, but it's something that I've been following, and a lot of other people have been following, waiting for someone from EUCOM to come down on this either one way or another. But reports, US considering removing it's portion of NATO forces from Eastern flank countries -- Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia. I'm hearing as many as three brigades. What impact, if that's true, and you don't have to, if you have been talking to anyone in the administration that was in some of the initial meetings, you can absolutely say, based on my understanding of what this person said, and they can be not attributed. But regardless of whether or not yet that is true, it's certainly something that many folks are reporting. What would be the effect of basically drawing down US forces, rotational or otherwise on the Eastern flank in terms of overall European security posture. And when you look at the effect of that plus everything that's happening now with the negotiation, do you have a firm sense of a worst case scenario for Europe over the next five years and the general precariousness of the security situation in Eastern Europe, the Suwałki Gap, et cetera. Are you confident or do you have any inkling that perhaps following Trump's this term, there would be an honest push to retake those Baltic countries and fracture NATO along Article 5 lines? Thanks.

MONTGOMERY: Yeah, I'll take a first bite and there's a lot in that apple, so I'll leave a bunch of it to Brad. I'll start by saying there's two initial impacts, Patrick. I think the first one is immediate, which is these are forces that, particularly ones in Poland that are used for training Ukrainian forces, they're mixed in. These forces forward are both brigades that are part of a forward stationed force. There's battalion level and company level, and some of the Baltic States, we're not in all of them all the time all at once, but a good number of forces are in Poland doing rotations for training and helping the Ukrainians with specific things. So there's an immediate, I think, degradation in our efforts to prepare to support Ukraine in getting ready. That's probably part of the intent if they were moving forces. What they would do accidentally though, by pulling forward stationed forces is pulling the forces that are either permanently there or permanently on rotation, the forward stationed or forward deployed in Poland particularly.

This is a buildup that was initiated under Trump 45, so I guess he was wrong then if he's taking them out now. But we'll let that go. And they're critical. I was the EUCOM J5, the head of planning and war planning ops at EUCOM. And I'll say gently that this is a tough fight in the Suwałki Gap. It was made easier by two things recently. One, the Trump 45 decision to put forces into Poland, which was carried out by President Biden. And two, the weakening of the Russian army by beating its head against the Ukrainian infantry, against Ukrainian forces. And during these negotiations, the Russians may get a respite that allows them to solve number two and get better and get healthier. And number one, if we self deter by pulling those forces out, we're weakening ourselves. And I cannot tell you how important American forces forward there are.

First of all, we have a lot of what's called European Deterrence Initiative stowage in that area. These forces will immediately be augmented by other forces that can fly in quickly and become a very significant deterrent effect within hundreds of kilometers of the Suwałki Gap, ready to get in and stop any Russian malfeasance. Look, I don't think Russia is thinking of attacking, but I will tell you, having the right forces there, ready to deter, lower that likelihood even further. So these forward stationed, forward deployed forces are critical not just for their own value, but because they can be flown in on, and increased significantly in size, by follow-on forces. And then the final thing is they're great trainers.

The Poles are buying what can only describe as a metric butt-ton of US equipment. They're spending four and a half percent of GDP there. If we build it, they're buying it. Now, they buy this stuff and you want to help them integrate it rapidly. The best thing you can do is have US forces in the locality helping with the training. It's good for us to use this equipment, good for them -- we lose that opportunity. So if this is happening, it's a big L across support to Ukraine, deterrence versus Russia, and the readiness of our allies and partners to execute war plans that we're involved in. So big loss, Brad.

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BOWMAN: Thanks, Patrick for the question. And Admiral Montgomery speaks with authority and experience on that topic based on his role in EUCOM. So I agree with him. And let me just... I'll put something in the chat that, I don't know if you guys have seen what I'm putting in the chat. Here's a document from NATO that talks about the eight battlegroups. This is as of February 2025. So that's this month. The eight battlegroups in Eastern Europe are in Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia. The United States is the framework nation for one. And that's in Poland. Another country is the framework, or organizing lead, nation for the other seven. And then look at that list in there, all the contributions of our allies and partners. So any suggestion that our European allies are not stepping up to the plate does not withstand scrutiny. And I just sent you the evidence of it.

With that said, the United States has a unique role to play in Eastern Europe indefinitely, but certainly over the next few years. Why is that? That's because our European allies have, for the most part, generally speaking, have under-resourced defense spending, and so their militaries are not as capable as we'd like them to be. Their stockpiles are not as deep, and that's especially true since many of them have been so generous in helping Ukraine. So what we have here is a window of vulnerability for the next few years, and Monty will have a more fidelity on how long that window is, where American forward station combat power is uniquely important for deterring aggression against the alliance. There's a saying in the Army, if you want it quick, you're going to get it bad.

If we do this quick, it's going to get bad, I predict. And so this is a window here. The Europeans are starting to wake up and realize that unprovoked aggression is not a relic of the black and white newsreels of the first half of 20th century. It happens today. Human nature has not changed, newsflash. They're increasing defense spending. But what you spend today tends not to manifest on the battlefield for one to five years. So we got to give them the time to step up and carry even more of the burden. But one of my key points here is they're already carrying a lot of the burden.

DOUGHERTY: John, Moscow's perspective on that.

HARDIE: Well, as I mentioned earlier, think about the war in Ukraine. It's part of a broader set of grievances against the West, especially the United States, about what they perceive as injustice has done to Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union. So their goal is not just to dominate Ukraine, that's kind of the key and most acute issue in this broader kind of ambition. Their goal is to rewrite the security order in Europe. And if you just think back to the months before the full scale invasion back in November 2021 to January 2022, we went through, it's sort of like Groundhog Day, we went through a lot of what we're talking about now.

If you think back, the Russians basically engaged in a smoke and mirrors diplomatic process to try to amass their intention to go into Ukraine. And one of the demands they put forward, longstanding demand, they call it basically one of the root causes, in their words, of the conflict in Ukraine, is a rollback of NATO forces in Eastern Europe. And they basically want a pact with the United States that we won't put forces anywhere near Russia. So that's one of their main goals. And Putin absolutely will try to exploit these talks to not only get US acquiescence to Ukraine being a vassal state to Russia, but also to make progress on those broader ambitions. And of course, I hope that the Trump administration will not fall for that.

DOUGHERTY: Dmitry and Robbie got you cued up. I just do want to remind those that arrived late to the call that we are recording this. This is on the record. I will share a link with you once it is posted. I'll also get the transcript to you within 24 hours. Dmitry, over to you for your question.

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DMITRY ANOPCHENKO: Yeah, hello. Thank you very much for doing this, Dmitry Anopchenko from Ukraine Television. I'm making this story for today about the talks which already happened in Saudi Arabia and the talks which might happen in the future. I mean, the meeting between Trump and Putin, and I know the public opinion in Ukraine, people are really concerned, really afraid that some deal may be made behind their back. So I got the question for all the panelists. What's your opinion about the round which already happened between Rubio and Lavrov? You mentioned it a little bit, but can you give more details and the most important question for my audience for Ukrainians, what are the risks if Putin and Trump will meet one-to-one? Thank you.

MONTGOMERY: I'll go first then maybe John, take a look. So I said earlier, shocking discussion. I think one of things we didn't say was the degree to which we returned Russia to the stable of normal nations. Here's a country that brazenly invaded another one, is under significant sanction from ourselves and many of our allies, and with no admission of culpability, no promise of change, they're back in, basically, back in the saddle in normal negotiations. And then on the side, we had little sideline discussions of restoration of diplomatic niceties between the countries. I mean, these were broad concessions by the United States with no countervailing Russian concession.

It's as if the United States is in a position of weakness in these discussions. And while we're not in a position of weakness, we're acting like it. And so this sacrificing of leverage, these concessions without similar concessions by the Russians is really unheard of. It's not how we deal with them. There's a structured way of dealing with the Russians that we've used for 30 years -- for the 30 years before that with the Soviets. It is jaw-dropping and it really calls into question the commitment of the United States to any ally or partner. And that's why many of our allies and partners are trepidatious tonight.

HARDIE: Yeah, I would just add that, of course, if you want to get a peace deal, you're going to have to talk, the administration's right about that. But to Mark's point, the sequencing of when you do that, relative to what measures you take to increase leverage, sanctions, military, et cetera, is really important. Another thing that's really important is coordination with Ukraine and European allies prior to those talks and making sure that -- that's important because not only because Ukraine is going to have to agree to anything that is decided, and many of the Russian demands are things that President Zelenskyy couldn't implement even if he wanted to, because it'd be political suicide as I think very well, Dmitry. And then you also need the Europeans at the table or at least giving input because as Trump has said, they're going to have to bear primary responsibility for guaranteeing Ukraine's security after the war's over. You can't negotiate a deal without Europe and then stick Europe with the bill. One, it's not fair, and more importantly, it's just not practical to do that.

BOWMAN: Quickly, very quickly, I know we're going long. Dmitry, thanks for the question. It was a costly mistake in my view for the Trump administration to negotiate with the Russians in Riyadh without having Kyiv at the table. Unfortunately, we've kind of seen this playbook before, from in the first Trump term. Some of you may recall that the Trump administration in its first term negotiated with the Taliban without having the Afghan government at the table. And I was outspoken at the time that that was a mistake because it helped the Taliban in its campaign to delegitimize and sideline the Afghan government. Does that sound familiar? That's exactly the Kremlin's goal with Ukraine. And by not including Ukraine at the negotiating table, we're helping the Kremlin accomplish that objective. Because Putin, as he argued with Tucker Carlson, wants to argue that Ukraine is not a legitimate nation state despite what the Kremlin signed in the Budapest Memorandum in 1994. Of course, they blew that off.

So anyway, when the topic is the future of Ukraine, Kyiv has a right to be at the table, especially in light of the sacrifice and bravery of Ukrainians in defending their homes against Putin's unprovoked invasion. And I'll end with this: Putin understands that the United States and Europe -- and I include Ukraine in that -- are more powerful together. And that's why he's trying to divide us, and we shouldn't help him.

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DOUGHERTY: Dmitry, thank you for your question, very much appreciated. We're going to go to Robbie next and then to Carla. Robbie?

ROBBIE GRAMER: Thanks, guys. Can you hear me?

DOUGHERTY: We can.

ROBBIE GRAMER: Yeah. And I missed the first few minutes of this, so apologies if you covered this, but can you put a finer point on the sort of pro-Ukraine versus skeptical Ukraine camps in this administration, and how you see that playing out? There's obviously Rubio, Waltz, Kellogg that people point to, and then there's others, Elon Musk, Don Jr., some people like Elbridge Colby, etc. JD Vance obviously, who are more skeptical of continuing aid to Ukraine. How do we make sense of this? And does it seem like one side is winning influence over the other side in constructing this policy as it plays out now?

MONTGOMERY: Well, yes. Do I think the prioritizers are restrainers depending on what that... and by the way, a prioritizer is someone who says, "My priority is the Pacific, not Ukraine." And a restrainer, someone who says, "I really am not that interested in US military commitments anywhere." I tend to think a prioritizer is just a restrainer who hasn't met every place in the world to say "no" to, because eventually, it seems to me most of the prioritizers end up as restrainers. But whoever they are, those -- the prioritizers and restrainers -- are clearly in the driver's seat, and internationalists like Senator Rubio and I think Representative Waltz are not, and that's pretty clear. If you ask me who the lead prioritizer is, it's the vice president. I'm not even sure the president's really an isolationist, but I think the vice president's very close to one. And this is the big difference between Trump 47 and Trump 45 is that in Vice President Pence, we had an internationalist, and we no longer have that. And so there's no check on anything President Trump thinks or says.

And if anything, I think Vice President Vance is accelerating the move towards an isolationist strategy. I'll tell you, here in Asia, no one's looking at this going, "Wow, thank God they're focusing on us now." They're instead saying, "Oh my, this country now in four short years has abandoned its commitments in Afghanistan in a way that was extremely inappropriate towards our allies and partners, both our fighting partners and the Afghans themselves, and then has appeared to almost have done the same with Ukraine."

You don't think to yourself, "Wow, they must be prioritizing me." You think to yourself, "Wow, they won't prioritize anyone." And so who do I think's winning? The isolationists. And I hesitate to call them prioritizers because I've yet to see them prioritize anything.

DOUGHERTY: Brad?

BOWMAN: Great insights from Monty. Thanks Robbie for the question. Yeah, I think it's clear who's winning this debate. I've long said we're in the midst of a fight for the soul of the Republican Party generally and especially on foreign policy. And this is not new. If people know their American history, we've long had isolationist strains within the party, and those of us who've argued that what happens over there matters here, and that we're safer when we lead and engage from a position of strength. So I think this last week frankly has been one of the worst moments in American foreign policy in several years. And as HR McMaster, chair of our center, and I argued in Newsweek a year or two ago, and as I argued in a letter in the Wall Street Journal more recently, what happens in Kyiv will not stay in Kyiv as I argued earlier.

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So if you're only prioritizing China and you only care about the challenges in the Indo-Pacific, what we're doing here is a mistake. If you don't care about Ukraine, which we should, it's a mistake. I worked in the Senate for nine years. I worked with Senator Rubio's staff a lot. I respect Senator Rubio. He's smart and he's experienced and he knows the truth of what I'm saying. He knows it. The degree to which President Trump is listening to him, I don't know. I think HR McMaster's most recent book -- I said he's chair of our center, we did an event on his book -- provides some insights to some of the dynamics that might be happening right now. And I worry, I worry, I worry, there's a dynamic right now in the NSC and in the White House and among cabinet officials where people are afraid to tell the president something he'll disagree with because it's not a career enhancer, shall we say.

And what is the effect of that? If you've ever studied leadership or Bureaucracy 101, or autocracies, I'm not saying autocracies here, but it's a dynamic in autocracies, is that that results in a declining quality of information and advice going to the decision maker and poor decisions. So I don't know anything about business -- I once ran a lemonade stand. But any business owner, any leader understands, that if you punish people who bring you arguments that are different than what you think, they're going to stop doing that. And when you're the most powerful person in the world and the President of the United States, that's a very dangerous dynamic.

DOUGHERTY: Next up is Carla from VOA, and then we're going to go to John from Minneapolis. Carla, over to you. Thank you.

CARLA BABB: Hey, thanks. I appreciate you guys doing this. If you would, Mark, can you just elaborate a little bit more about some of the things you're hearing over in Taiwan about their thoughts on how the US will support Taiwan moving forward in lieu of everything that they're seeing going on with Russia? And then Brad, for you, what can the Republican senators that are speaking out right now...? I mean words are words and that's one thing, but is there anything they can actually do with a House that is being a little less vocal in terms of supporting Ukraine or passing additional aid? Or is that just not in the realm of possibility in this term?

MONTGOMERY: So I'll start on that first question. So first I'll say very specifically actual government officials are not saying anything publicly. I think they watched Chairman Xi's exchange with President Trump six years ago on tariffs and realize that if you go right back at him, it kind of gets tough. So they're not expressing any opinion one way or the other. Historically, their leadership has said they support the US effort in Ukraine because of their understanding of deterrence and the need to demonstrate to authoritarians that you can't just exert your influence whenever and wherever you want. And that's still their official statement on this. So I think they're supportive of Ukraine. They're not commenting specifically on the US negotiating status. Now, when you talk to think tankers here or journalists, business people, they are petrified.

Let's be clear. I mean Russia is much stronger than Ukraine, seven to 10 times in terms of population or GDP. China is 20 to 25 times stronger in GDP and 30 to more like 50 times stronger in population. It's an extremely different thing. Taiwan cannot be resupplied once a crisis starts. So they have significant disadvantages that Ukraine did not have. And so the idea that one might be abandoned causes them to be petrified and concerned. And they're asking people like me... And this comes on the heels by the way of Admiral Paparo saying, "Hey, that last Chinese exercise looked more like a rehearsal." You know what I mean? So they get this signal from the US like stuff's getting bad and then US taking actions that could lead to stuff getting bad. And so I think they're worried.

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Now I do not think we'll hear anything publicly from their leadership because they're smart. They'll be trying to engage with counterparts. I will say it's tough for them to engage in DC right now. There's no confirmed Undersecretary for Policy. There's no confirmed Assistant Secretary for Asia Pacific. And the way it works for Taiwan is they are not given access at the secretary level for their minister of defense. Their president, vice president have no access points because of how we've treated them policy-wise over the last 50 years. So their normal points of entry don't exist, aren't yet manned either at State Department or Defense Department. So that complicates it further. So there's concern, certainly willingly expressed everywhere but the government, but I suspect inside the government as well.

BOWMAN: Carla, thanks for your question. I got to run here in a second. If you want to follow up later more on this, I'm happy to. I'll just quickly say that I worked for three Republican senators who were effective and had integrity. But something I observed through the years in the Senate was often senators who would say one thing in private and be unwilling to say the same in public. And everyone comes to Congress with, Hey, they want to be a fiscal hawk, they want to focus on defense spending, they want to reform healthcare. And what many discover is that it's kind of nice to be a senator and it's nice to have the "creams and lotions" associated with the position and you don't want to give that up. And then that becomes, whether they admit it to themselves and their family members or not, the number one priority.

And you tend to have phone calls from the president like, "Hey, Congress person or senator, how many votes did I get in your state and district?" And it's a threat. At a risk of oversimplification, almost everything we're seeing here from the Republican Party right now is members of Congress who have decided, despite what they tell themselves and what they say in public, that the number one thing is getting re-elected. As someone who's a huge fan of Congress and that knows there's many, many great people there, I would just humbly and respectfully say to Republicans right now we're in a historic and pivotal moment. And I don't think history is going to look well on people that put re-election over principle. And we're really in one of those moments. And at the end of the day, long after the "creams and lotions" are gone, you're going to have to look in the mirror and people are going to remember what happens in the next few weeks.

DOUGHERTY: Thank you, Carla, for the question. Brad, I know that you have to go, but a reminder very quickly to everyone here on the call that you can reach us at press@fdd.org if you would like to reach out and talk to any of our experts here directly. We're going to go over to John Rash in Minneapolis. John, over to you.

JOHN RASH: Thank you very much for this panel and for the time this morning. I'll try to be quick with my question because I know we're getting late in the hour here. How profound is this split within NATO nations and with NATO nations? And is this in effect the US abdicating its Article 5 commitment in action, if not in actuality, of directly announcing it? And then finally, are there any allied leaders who have the gravitas to rally an effective continental response? Thank you.

DOUGHERTY: John, do you want to take the first crack at that and then Mark?

HARDIE: Sure. Yeah. I think this is an acceleration of a trend that Europe has seen coming, but I think the problem, and the Europeans will be the first to say this, many of the leaders who are clear-eyed, they've talked a lot about it, they haven't done a lot about it, and I think now they're sort of feeling the pain there. I don't think there's an excuse for some of the ways that the Trump administration has tried to cut out the Europeans or Ukrainians, but the Europeans have not done themselves any favors by investing the sort of resources in defense they need to have a seat at the table. And that's exactly why you see Macron try to organize these emergency summits to try to prepare for what's coming and sort of get a seat at the table. And I'm confident that Europe will do what it has to because it really has no other option at this point.

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But we're going to have to see some policy changes with that as well. For example, how the Europeans finance defense. There's some good conversations being led by the European Commission and that needs to happen. I think we discussed this earlier, but prioritization is key to strategy, but so is sequencing. And so the US is right to focus on Indo-Pacific, but we also have to be cognizant of the fact that Europe, for decades now, it's not only reliant on the United States because of its own under-resourcing, also because we've deliberately set up a system where European militaries plug into what we do and we are the indispensable country. And many of those capabilities, whether it's logistics, other things can't be replaced overnight. And so we do have a period, I think maybe Mark or Brad said, a period of vulnerability here. The good news is that the more we degrade the Russian military, the less that risk is and the longer the period of rearmament that Russian will need before it could invade a NATO country. Over.

MONTGOMERY: The one thing I'd jump in on and say is that we get fascinated with the 2% or 3% or 5% of defense spending as a percentage of GDP. That number has meaning. It can be misconstrued and misused, but it has meaning. But equally important is how you've been spending it. And that's where the Europeans have really been letting us down. And John referred to that. Some countries are spending three and 4% and spending it on the NATO capabilities that are needed exactly for them to do their mission. I'd say the Baltic States are in that group, Poland's close to being in that group, but there's other states that are spending 2% or spending 1.5% or spending 2.5%. And then a good chunk of that's not applicable. Why does this matter? Well, when it's time for you to step up for the United States, it's not just that their defense spending's one.

In totality, the defense spending of NATO minus the United States is 40% of the United States. Instead, it's not being spent efficiently or effectively, and we don't spend our 880 well, but we spend it better than the Europeans do. And then the final element of it is -- they've never gotten around the idea of consensually passing munitions production to just one country and stepping back. As a result, everybody bled away from munitions instead of consolidating around one country doing things. We're starting to see that as they're starting back up, like the Germans are doing artillery with Rheinmetall. Of course, big plant in the United States, but we're starting to see a little bit come back, but they've got to both spend the money and then spend it right. And until that's done, Europe is really not going to be able to stand in for the United States in a meaningful way.

DOUGHERTY: Thank you, Mark. Thank you, John. We're going to wrap up this call, but I do want to remind you that you can reach out to chat with any of our experts here. Please email press@fdd.org, and we will arrange a time for you to chat with them, including Mark who is in Taiwan. We will be posting the video here in audio shortly after the call here ends. I will share that link with all of you. The transcript will be ready within about 24 hours, and we'll certainly get that to you as well.

And a reminder that FDD, the Foundation for Defense of Democracies is a nonpartisan think tank. We specialize in defense, national security, and foreign policy. Thank you, John. Thank you, Mark, for being on today's call. Thank you to Krystal in the background for making sure everything went smoothly. Thank you to all you journalists that were on the call today for the terrific questions. I certainly do hope it was helpful. This does conclude today's call.