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"Defending Ukraine, Deterring Putin"

Committee Members Present:
Representative Steve Cohen (D-TN), Co-Chairman;
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Committee Staff Present:
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Participants:
Andrew Bowen, Analyst in Russian and European Affairs, Congressional Research Service;
Maryna Vorotnyuk, Associate Fellow, Royal United Services Institute;
Katsiaryna Shmatsina, Visiting Fellow, European Values Center for Security Policy in Prague;
Robert Lee, Nonresident Fellow, Foreign Policy Research Institute

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CECIRE: Good morning, friends and colleagues, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome. On behalf of the United States Helsinki Commission co-chairman, Representative Steve Cohen, who I believe honors us with his participation today, and our chairman, Senator Ben Cardin, I would like to welcome you all to this briefing on Russia's threatening military buildup on and around Ukraine's borders.

My name is Michael Hikari Cecire and I'm a senior policy advisor on the Helsinki Commission staff. It's great to see so many old friends and colleagues from the Hill, the executive branch, the think-tank community, and the public, albeit virtually.

You all know why we're gathering today. But, given the seriousness and urgency of the moment, the situation does bear repeating.

The Kremlin has dramatically increased its military activities and capabilities in and around Ukraine, leading to predictions that the Russian regime may be preparing for an aggressive military operation in the coming weeks or months. Russian military movements have sufficiently worried U.S. and allied observers that CIA Director William Burns was personally dispatched to Moscow to telegraph U.S. concerns. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has also added to a chorus of alarm and Ukrainian President – or, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba has described Russia's movements as preparations for invasion. On December 7th, President Biden held a two-hour phone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin over the apparent buildup.

According to open-source assessments, Russia's force composition on Ukraine's border totals approximately 100,000 troops and a variety of heavy offensive equipment and capabilities. These estimates do not include pre-positioned forces as part of the Western and Southern Military Districts, which can be surged to theater rapidly in the event of a military action. One recent report from The Washington Post cited an intelligence analysis that suggests that as many as 175,000 troops are being prepared for a renewed invasion into Ukraine.

The title of this event is "Defending Ukraine, Deterring Putin." This is meant to capture several key goals of this discussion: First, the importance of preserving and supporting Ukraine's freedom and sovereignty; and second, the urgency of deterring an expanded Russian invasion.

To that end, I'm beyond thrilled to welcome an all-star panel of experts to lead this important discussion. In a moment I'll briefly recount their impressive biographies in their speaking order. After they speak, we'll set aside some time for a healthy Q&A. For those on the Webex platform, please enter your questions in the chat and we'll get to them as they come.

But before we kick off, I do want to recognize and thank Co-Chairman Steve Cohen for his participation in our event today. I believe he's here. Mr. Co-Chairman, I would like to invite you to offer some remarks before I turn to our panelists.

(Pause.)

It seems that he hasn't joined us just yet, so I'll move on to introducing our panelists.

First I'd like to welcome our frequent collaborator and longtime friend of the Commission Dr. Andrew Bowen, who is an analyst in Russian and European affairs at the Congressional Research Service, where he focuses on Russian politics, Russian military and intelligence, and U.S. foreign policy towards Russia. He is also, as of yesterday, a newly minted Ph.D., so I believe welcome as well as a hearty congratulations is in order.

Second we'll be hearing from Robert Lee, who is a Ph.D. candidate at the War Studies Department at Kings College London and a nonresident fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute. In addition to being a highly respected expert on Russian military capabilities, Rob is a must-follow on Twitter for his original open-source analysis and keen insights on Russian military activities.

Third I'd like to welcome my old friend Dr. Maryna Vorotnyuk, who is an expert on Black Sea security and currently an associate fellow at the Royal United Services Institute in London. Dr. Vorotnyuk hails from Ukraine and can provide both a Ukrainian perspective on the unfolding crisis as well as a broader assessment based on her extensive experience working in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as from her current perch in the United Kingdom.

Last and certainly not least is my friend Katsiaryna Shmatsina, who is a Belarusian analyst on Eurasian politics and security. She's a visiting fellow at the European Values Center for Security Policy in Prague and a fellow at the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies. Like many independent Belarusian experts and civil society representatives, Ms. Shmatsina has had to leave Belarus due to a high risk of prosecution for her work. So we thank her for her courage as well as her participation today.

Unless Mr. Cohen has joined us, I think we can move on to the panelists. Andrew, Dr. Bowen, congratulations on that again. Maybe you can lead us off here with a baseline on the strategic state of play.

BOWEN: Absolutely, and thank you for that introduction, Michael. Always glad to work with you and work with the Helsinki Commission.

Over the past year, rhetoric from Russian policymakers and the use of a wide range of coercive policy strategies have escalated tensions with Russia's neighbors, the European Union, and the United States. Throughout it all, Russian intentions have remained opaque. In my remarks I will briefly touch on: one, possible factors explaining Russia's intentions, including some of the larger themes relating to Russian perception of its strategic environment; two, recent shifts in rhetoric from Russian policymakers; and three, some potential major areas of concern for Congress.

Many of the issues and concerns highlighted in recent weeks, some of which I will describe below, are longstanding, leaving some commentators to question why Russia is overtly

escalating tensions now. Analysts are also speculating about what Russia could gain by conducting such aggressive and coercive policies, including threatening potential invasion.

One possible framework to understand Russian intentions is that Russian leaders are concerned about a deteriorating strategic environment. In this scenario – (audio break) – leaders could believe that Russia's current economic, military, and political situation is relatively advantageous but may not continue into the future, thus weakening Russia's bargaining position. To prevent a weakened bargaining position in the future, Russian leaders may believe it is worthwhile to conduct even more aggressive and risky policies to gain concessions or settle issues on terms more favorable to Russia now despite the potential penalties and costs. Some analysts also point to an array of domestic considerations, but I'll perhaps leave that dimension to the other speakers.

Russian political and military leaders assert that the increased expansion of NATO and the presence of European and U.S. military forces on its border and the Black Sea are an existential security threat to Russia. While Russian policymakers explicitly identify NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia as red lines. (Audio break) – also note that Russia's central concern is really the basing of Western military forces and capabilities on or around Russia's borders, which include the construction of NATO or U.S. military infrastructure. Russian political and military leaders are concerned that NATO and U.S. military forces could eventually place long-range precision-strike and missile-defense systems nearby, especially in the Black Sea region, which could threaten Moscow – (audio break) – nuclear capabilities.

Russian policymakers cite these factors as attempts to encircle Russia while seemingly ignoring the role that aggressive Russian policies play in destabilizing the region. In particular, Russia has improved and increased its military force posture on its western strategic direction, which includes Ukraine and the Black Sea region. Russian leaders do not appear to acknowledge this change as a cause for increased tensions. Moreover, Russia has grown increasingly concerned regarding the Ukrainian leadership's aspirations to join NATO, even though these aspirations are hardly new, and the perceived unwillingness by Ukraine to abide by Russia's interpretation of the Minsk Agreements and negotiate on the political status of the Russian-backed entities in the Donbas.

These concerns – which, again, have existed for years – come amidst increasingly aggressive and concerning rhetoric from Russian policymakers. Increasingly, Russia's political and military leadership has cited growing aggression from NATO and U.S. forces based in NATO member countries. As previously noted, Russia's leaders have also spoken out more forcefully against the possible expansion of NATO to countries such as Ukraine and Georgia. Specifically, President Putin himself, as well as other Russian leaders, have grown increasingly strident in their denunciation and vilification of Ukrainian leaders. This rhetoric is coupled with negative characterizations of the Ukrainian state and people, accusations of genocide, and the Russian leadership's attempts to rewrite history towards a more favorable narrative to support current policies. Many analysts and policymakers are concerned that such rhetoric could be used both as a pretext and justification for more aggressive action.

Now, turning to the role of Congress in the face of Russian malign activities, Congress has passed new legislation, supports allies and partner nations, and continues to implement measures to deter and limit Russian aggression. These measures and legislation include sanctions on Russian energy, defense, and arms sales sectors. Some members of Congress support harsher sanctions to advance a range of goals, such as deterring or responding to Russian military activity, targeting corruption, and addressing Russia's abuse of the Western financial systems for illicit finance purposes. Congress has, additionally, encouraged efforts to bolster U.S. and NATO forces, including the enhanced forward presence in the Baltics and Poland. Congress has also supported providing Ukraine with lethal and nonlethal security assistance and training. These policies aid Ukraine's efforts to reform its military to not only defend its territorial integrity, but also to meet NATO standards.

Ukraine, supported by partners, has improved its capabilities since 2014 and now fields a more capable, professional, and experienced military. I would also be happy to speak more on these changes to the Ukrainian military in the Q&A period. Nevertheless, Ukraine's military still has much room for improvement.

While benefitting from high levels of patriotism, which supports recruitment, its military culture is still influenced by its Soviet legacy, which does not adequately promote professionalism and competency, resulting in higher-level decision-making hindered by outdated bureaucratic processes and redundancy of command and control. This also contributes to high turnover of professional officers and soldiers, making retention a major concern, and leads to issues with mobilization and force projection.

Furthermore, Ukraine has a large defense industrial sector which produces a wide range of systems, including anti-tank, anti-ship, and tanks. Many of these are capable systems, but Ukraine is still in immediate need of systems to fill gaps in its pyramid strategy. This includes more urgent assistance in support and logistics, improving command and control, defenses against electronic warfare, short-range air defense systems, and medical supplies.

For many in Congress, supporting effective strategies to bolster Ukraine's efforts to defend its territorial integrity remain a top priority, and this will likely be a key area of focus in the days and weeks ahead.

I look forward to your questions and comments and hearing my other co-panelists. Thank you.

CECIRE: Thank you so much, Andrew. That is incredibly helpful information and very useful analysis, alarming though it may be.

Turning to Rob, if you could add to that from your perspective, what would you say is the situation with regard to Russian military capabilities in theater? And what does that tell us about Russia's strategic intent? Over to you, Rob.

LEE: All right. Can everyone hear me? Is it working? OK, great.

CECIRE: Yes, sir.

LEE: Thanks so much for having me.

So, yeah, as Michael said, I'll dive into some of the military details of the buildup. I think what's important to emphasize at the beginning is that what we're seeing right now is a continuation of what began in the spring.

So in March and April Russia came with a large-scale buildup near Ukraine which involved units from the Russian ground forces, navy, aerospace forces, and airborne forces in many of the same locations. Despite the very large and very public buildup, much of which was covered on social media accounts, Russia didn't provide much of an explanation or many details of what they're doing, which is quite abnormal for them. This buildup included a number of tank, motorized rifle units, and Iskander-M short-range ballistic missile systems from the Central Military District's 41st Combined Arms Army in Novosibirsk, which is quite a – quite a kind of unique movement that normally doesn't happen during normal exercises.

Russia also deployed a number of attack and transport helicopters and short-range attack aircraft to Crimea to move them closer – sorry, Russian-occupied Crimea – and Russia also sent in significant reinforcements of its naval capability. So in April Russia likely had the largest naval grouping it has had in the Black Sea since the fall of the Soviet Union. And in addition to the Black Sea Fleet's ample capabilities, it also added four large landing ships from the Northern Fleet and Baltic Fleet, and more than 10 boats – artillery boats and large – and landing craft from the Caspian flotilla. So Russia had a quite strong amphibious capability at the time, which it tested during the exercise at the end of that event. They also conducted a large-scale airborne operation, regimental-level airborne operation, during that exercise, in which 40 transport aircraft dropped 2,000 paratroopers with 60 airborne armored vehicles.

And during the exercise, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced that the inspection was a success, that all units would move back, with the exception of the units from the 41st Combined Arms Army, which he said would remain behind in Voronezh until the Zapad Joint Strategic Exercise with Belarus in September. However, during that exercise a lot of that equipment was not – did not actually take part, which indicates that that was not the purpose of its actual deployment.

The most recent activity began in October, around the time when Ukraine conducted its first airstrike in the Donbas with one of its Turkish TB2 unmanned combat aerial vehicles. Compared to the build in the spring, the most recent build has been less public, a lot of equipment's been moved at nighttime, and Russia's been taking more efforts to kind of obscure what they're doing or obscure what units are being moved.

During the spring buildup, a lot of the equipment was moved to Crimea in particular, but there wasn't as much on Ukraine's northern border. So one of the big significant differences this time is that the equipment from the 41st Combined Arms Army, which is based in the Pogonovo training area in Voronezh, was moved to Yelnya, about 150 miles north of Ukraine's border, and that creates space in Pogonovo where units from the 1st Tank Army based in Moscow have been

moved, from the 2nd Motorized Rifle Division and 4th Tank Division. And a lot of the videos we're seeing right now have been from the Train Station Maslovka, Voronezh, where – which is near Pogonovo and where that equipment is being moved to.

Compared to the spring, the Russian military has far more combat power on that northern border. And again, the northern border from Russia to – is only about 110 miles to Kyiv. And there's somewhat less in Crimea, even though there is still an enhanced posture. This means Russia has a greater capacity to conduct a large-scale invasion from Ukraine's northern and northeastern borders and really threaten Ukraine's capital.

Part of the reason why we're seeing reinforcements there is that some of the Russian permanent units based there are still being formed. So the Russian 3rd and 144th Motorized Rifle Divisions are not fully formed yet, and so these units from other districts or other areas are coming in and are compensating for that.

In addition to units from the 41st Combined Arms Army that was deployed in the spring, they've also sent elements from the 55th Motorized Rifle Brigade. So there's elements from three of their rifle brigades and elements from the 90th Tank Division all at Yelnya.

In addition, units from the Southern Military District and Western Military District, which both border Ukraine, they're moving units that are based farther away. So we've seen units from the Western Military District's 138th and 25th Motorized Rifle Brigades, which are based in Leningrad. And we've seen units from the Southern Military District's 49th and 58th Combined Arms Armies, which are based in Stavropol in North Ossetia. All that has been moved closer to Ukraine's borders. And in addition, the VDV, the Russian airborne forces, they've also – we've seen some of the units move close to the border as well.

So in addition to the units being temporarily deployed near Ukraine, it also appears they are deploying more permanent units. So in addition to the units I was talking about before, it appears that a new motorized rifle regiment (is) being formed in Soloti. We've seen equipment move there. And the VDV's 56th Air Assault Brigade has been now created into a regiment as part of the 7th Air Assault Division and it's been moved into Crimea. So now you have additional permanent base units based in Crimea.

In addition, we see equipment such as heavy engineering equipment, mine- and obstacle-clearing vehicles, bridging/trenching equipment, air defense systems, logistics convoys. We've seen TOS-1A thermobaric MRLS systems, BM-27 Uragan MRLS, a lot of significant assets. And these are important because if Russia did intend to invade, they would bring all of these important asset – these supporting assets as well as tank and motorized rifle units. So they wouldn't just invade with regular tank battalions; they would also have all these supporting assets. That's the way the Russian military fights.

In terms of size, the Ukrainian military said Russia deployed 53 battalion tactical groups in the spring near Ukraine, and it appears right now there's a little bit under 50. So it's a little bit smaller than in the spring.

A BTG is a combined-arms formation with typically between 700 and 900 personnel, although it can be – change up or down depending on the task. Typically, it's based around a motorized rifle, tank – (inaudible) – infantry, or VDV units, and then it's plussed-up with its supporting attachments: air defense systems, electronic warfare, tank – and the tank companies, and other supporting assets. BTGs are manned exclusively by contract soldiers. There are no conscripts. And they're supposed to be permanent-readiness units, so they can deploy on short notice.

So from The Washington Post report that Michael mentioned before that quoted assessments from the U.S. intelligence community, they said they thought about 50 BTGs near Ukraine now, and the plan would be that they expect up to 100 BTGs to be there. To put that into perspective, the Russian military has about 168 BTGs in total, and so right now the current force is a little bit less than a third of Russia's total ground combat power. And if they plus-up to 100 BTGs, that would be about two-thirds of Russia's total ground combat power near Ukraine's borders.

There's also a report about an additional hundred thousand reservists. It appears that's part of this new BARS reservist program, with contract soldiers. It's a little unclear exactly how that's worked, but that was announced new this year, this summer.

One of the most concerning aspects – and Michael touched on it a little bit – is that Russia's moving units that are based far away and a lot of heavy equipment, so things that take a lot of time to move and that are very public to move. What that means is if – and this includes units from Siberia, and in from Moscow, and beyond. So it's hard to conceal those things.

The thing is, they're pre-positioning all that now. And so the concern is, if Russia decides that they do want to invade, the next steps are going to be much faster and there would be less warning and it would be less visible, because Russia can move a number of units also based in their Southern and Western Military Districts that are only a couple hundred miles from the border. They can move VDV units, which are lighter. And in some cases, it appears that equipment has been deployed, but maybe not all the troops. It's, obviously, much easier to deploy troops than it is always heavy equipment. So although it's not deterministic, Russia's moving a lot of the – is moving military units near Ukraine that would give it the capability of conducting a large-scale ground invasion, potentially directed at Kyiv, if it wants to.

If Russia does not decide – does not decide to escalate beyond its current action in the Donbas, the – I'm sorry – if Russia does decide to escalate beyond what we've seen in the Donbas, a likely goal would be to compel Kyiv to give into Russia's demands, which Andrew just mentioned. This means the objective wouldn't necessarily likely be to seize territory, although that could occur, but instead to inflict enough pain on Ukraine to alter the incentive structure and make conceding the preferable option. That could be done by destroying Ukrainian military units, killing Ukrainian soldiers, destroying infrastructure, or occupying key terrain, making the situation unsustainable for Kyiv.

The extent to which Russia pursues the most dangerous course of action depends on how ambitious Russia's goals are. And again, Andrew mentioned a number of those. Even if Russia

decides not to conduct a large ground invasion, it could – it could still inflict significant damage on the Ukrainian military by relying on its superior fires capability. So that includes artillery, mobile-launched rocket systems, Iskander-M short-range ballistic missile systems. There are about four Iskander-M brigades relatively close to Ukraine's borders now and they can send more if they need to. And also, Kalibr cruise missiles. So the Black Sea Fleet has a number of S-6 submarines, three frigates, and more than four small missile ships that can fire and be equipped with Kalibr cruise missiles with a range of more than 2,000 kilometers.

Anyway, that's the end of my spiel, and I'd be happy to answer any questions you have.

CECIRE: Thank you, Rob. Thank you for that very interesting overview, but also rather ominous one.

I want to take a pause here and invite Co-Chairman Stephen Cohen to offer his remarks before we move onto the other panelists. Co-Chairman Cohen, the floor is yours.

COHEN: Thank you. I appreciate it. I got in a little late, but I did hear enough to make me realize that Russia has more than enough forces to cause concern in Ukraine, which I indeed have. Mr. Lee, you didn't come to a – and nobody can come to an extremely well-informed, I guess, opinion on what the Russian intention would be. But can you give me any kind of thought about – from their actions – if this – have they done something like this before? If they have, when, where? If they haven't, does this indicate that they are prepared to invade?

LEE: Thank you, sir. So what I'd emphasize is that it's hard to kind of determine if it's probable or the probability of a Russian invasion or escalation. What I will say is it's almost certain that the risk of a large-scale Russian escalation is greater now than any time since 2015. The capabilities are there. As I said before, they moved a lot of similar capabilities in the spring. They haven't really done anything like that since 2015/2014. The capability they have there now is more significant than what they had in 2014/2015 because the Russian military is more capable.

In terms of assessing how likely it is, it's hard to tell. I think the issue is that when you recognize that this is a continuation of the buildup in the spring, Russia was trying to send a signal in the spring and trying to warn, I think, NATO, U.S., and Kyiv about actions we were all taking that Russia considered crossing its red lines. Then, if you look at events over the summer, which include the HMS Defender incident, continued arms exports to Kyiv, and the TB2 strike, I think from Russia's perspective they think those red lines have been crossed and this is the last warning we're going to get.

And so what concerns me is that they're going to have the capability in place if they need to conduct a large-scale escalation soon, and the demands and rhetoric has become much more heated and much more specific than it was before. And because they already conducted a large-scale buildup in spring with warnings, and because that failed, it becomes a bit more of a credibility test for the Russian leadership. So all of that makes me much more concerned.

I don't know if I could say it's a probable event, but I think it's certainly – I would not be surprised if this occurs. And there are a number of people who are following this closely who think it is more likely to occur than not occur.

COHEN: What happened in 2014 that – you said the last major buildup was 2014 and 2015 and it wasn't as large as this one, but the military has increased. But proportionally, it might have been as large possibly. Is that true?

LEE: So the size is larger now. The Russian military has more constant readiness than it did back in 2014 and 2015. And also, I'd, obviously, mention that the Ukrainian military is much more capable today than it was back then as well, so Russia would need greater combat power to actually invade now than they would back then.

In terms of buildups, I'm not sure if we've seen anything really since 2014/2015 like we've seen this year, with the spring and the October kind of – the fall buildups, just because they were so public, they involved so much equipment, and it involved such a high percentage of Russia's military combat power. So 2014 was somewhat unique, obviously, because Russia decided to invade. I don't think they were expecting that ahead of time. This time, obviously, they had time to plan, they had time to prepare. And what they've done since 2015 is they deployed a lot of their key units near the border with Ukraine. So they brought back divisions, which they think are better than brigade structures to fight large-scale conventional wars. The Southern Military District has been a priority for sourcing contract soldiers, for receiving modern equipment.

So all that points to Ukraine being basically the biggest problem set for the Russian military based on disposition and based on the emphasis in placing it. And the buildup we're seeing now is unlike anything we've seen really any time before this, if we count the spring as part of this continuation.

COHEN: In 2014 and 2015, is that when they went forward?

LEE: Yes, sir. So the annexation of Crimea occurred in 2014 and then the – there was involvement of Russian forces over that summer. But the really large involvement came in August and beyond August, when the Ukrainian military was able to kind of band together, was able to push back a lot of these kind of somewhat hybrid forces where you had volunteers, you had Russian military, you know, other kind of groups. They started to have success in July and August, and in August is when the Russian military kind of deployed in a large-scale, somewhat – not necessarily overt, but it was essentially overt – structure.

COHEN: How many casualties did the Russians take on the – in the – incurred in action?

LEE: I don't have the data on me, sir. And the Russians obviously, they don't acknowledge their actions there, so they try to hold off on publishing those casualty figures. But certainly, there were hundreds of deaths. And there are some units that were – that took some pretty significant casualties that were identified, including the 76th Air Assault Division, based in Pskov, and some other ones.

COHEN: Thank you. Well, I want to listen to the other panelists before we go further, but we certainly need to do what we can to protect Ukraine and let the Russians know that we're not going to accept their aggression, and there will be sanctions and additional – we've got to – we've got to support Ukraine. Because otherwise it's Putin and the Soviet Union.

CECIRE: Thank you, Mr. Cochairman. I couldn't agree more. And on that note, I think we can move on to Dr. Vorotnyuk, who can provide a perspective from a Ukrainian view, but also as someone who has worked in and around the region extensively, and also has a unique perspective working from London and among our friends there who are also looking at the situation unfold with great interest and concern. So over to you, Maryna.

VOROTNYUK: Thank you very much, Michael. And thank you for this opportunity to address the Helsinki Commission on this very important subject today. We witnessed the unprecedented military – Russian military buildup next to Ukrainian border in the occupied Crimea, coupled with Moscow's heightened rhetoric against the West.

And as we've seen, Russia's intentions are obscure. We don't fully grasp whether this is merely brinksmanship, show of force, to intimidate Ukraine and to coerce West into the dialogue on Russian terms, or whether this is a preparation for some sort of military scenario, an all-out offensive against Ukraine or limited incursion, or some kind of scenario – military scenario involving targeting critical infrastructure, for instance.

So the previous speakers have discussed already, we see the offensive capabilities in place. And if Russian meant to invade, and if the political decision was taken to do so, so it has all the necessary military assets in place at its discretion. So it's prudent, I believe, for everybody to assume the worst since we are all, of course, very well-aware of Russia's overall strategy towards Ukraine and the West, and there is a sense now that Russia chose to escalate and raise the stakes considerably.

Let me just a bit stop on Russia's recent proposal on the legal security guarantees, because I believe this might shed light on the nature of Russia's expectations and scenarios which are in Kremlin's cards. So this proposal signals that its policy towards Ukraine and the concrete scenario is going to opt for are dependent on the progress of the discussion on the security guarantees with the U.S. and the West.

So and of course it makes perfect sense for Russia to link the two, because Kremlin's war against Ukraine has been Russia's proxy war with the West. And intimidating Ukraine has been instrument to engage the U.S. and the West in a dialogue about what Russia calls a more just international order – international security order. Which implies basically the limited sovereignty for the states in the post-Soviet space.

And the security guarantees that Russia demands include the official disavowal of the Bucharest Summit in 2008, that Ukraine and Georgia will become the NATO members. And also, it demands that the U.S. and other NATO member states commit not to deploy strike weapon systems in the territories of states neighboring Russia, including the NATO member

states. So this is basically, as we see, the Russian reading of the principle of the comprehensive and indivisible security. And this reasoning, of course, is running contrary to all the principles that the Western democratic systems are based on. And in particular, that – the principle – the freedom of strategic choice that each sovereign nation is entitled to.

So now Kremlin tests the ground and the receptiveness of Western governments to this idea, to this notion of the security guarantees. And if rejected, of course, Russia is likely to embed this sentiment into its foreign policy and domestic policy discourse. But the calculation has been, I would argue, is to have this proposal at least partially accepted, that the dialogue will start with the West where the West will elaborate or offer some kind of confidence building measure for Russia. Perhaps nobody will call it the security guarantees to Russia, but Russia expects or hopes that this will allow successfully to put on hold West – or, close the cooperation, military cooperation, with Ukraine, or abstain from a more robust military presence, for example, in the Black Sea, and et cetera.

So I believe that Russian MFA's statements about the security guarantees will prove to be a crucial threshold, and a reference point for the long-term future of the Russia-West interactions. Because it's a comprehensive outline of Russian requests, or even demands. And done under these exceptional circumstances of the massive military buildup. Of course, it's a language of ultimatum. So I believe it will enter into history as, like, Putin's Munich speech. And Russia is likely to advance the idea of the security guarantees within all relevant international platforms. And it already mentioned that it's going to advance – it intends to advance this idea also at the next round of the U.S.-Russia dialogue on strategic stability.

So Russia – Kremlin sees its appropriate at the moment to put pressure on Washington. Now, at the moment when it feels that U.S. is preoccupied with China, and U.S. have not used its leverages to block the Nord Stream 2 project, U.S. has indicated that it's open for the dialogue with Russia on the strategic stability and some other crucial issues. And recently there has been a number of various analyses, including in the U.S. on what the West or U.S. should do to address this – Russia's growing belligerence and this pressure. And naturally, those discussions have reverberated in Ukrainian – in Ukrainian policymaking circles, in civil society.

And let me translate some of the messages here. So it has been reassuring for Ukraine, of course, to hear from Washington that no discussions will take place about Ukraine without Ukraine, and that Ukraine will be not pushed into some kind of concessions under the U.S. pressure to advance this dialogue with Russia. And this is, of course, a very important signal since we are aware of the apprehensions that Ukraine and many other, some other Central Europe and Eastern European states might have – or, have had based on their historical experience of being left out of these great power conversations about their fate.

It has been quite worrisome that some of the arguments we've heard and read recently are arguments advocating not to provoke Russia, have cited Ukraine's security interest in the first place, a desire not to undermine Ukraine's security as the main motivation. So those analysts have cited their asymmetric engagement and the fact that West will never match Russia's interest in Ukraine. But I would argue, and many in Ukraine see it this way, that the argument that Ukraine would be better off if West disengages and stops providing military assistance, this

argument is misguided at best, or even dangerous, because there is no evidence suggesting that as a result of any kind of bargain between Russia and the West, in exchange of the concessions, Russia will provide some sort of reciprocal security guarantees to the West, or not to mention even stop destabilizing Ukraine or stop waging its war in the east of Ukraine.

So I think that, yeah, there is a perspective that's – I mean, this has been the Ukrainian perspective as well, that yielding to Russian pressure would not necessarily bring a lasting solution in de-escalation that everybody is very hopeful to get, because there is no evidence to suggest that these actions of the West that in the first place provoked the current crisis, led to this massive escalation. So most – contrary to what some might argue, I think that the most visible de-escalation tool would be raising stakes for Russian offensive actions, to the extent that it will start to assess the potential losses and gains, and it would be dissuaded from this aggression. So this kind of escalate to deescalate strategy is a very feasible option, I believe, at the moment.

To sum up, what is the best policy response to this – to the proposed security guarantees, to the military buildup, Russian growing belligerence in general? I think the critical point here is to remedy this asymmetry of engagement that I've mentioned in Ukraine, because it can embolden the Kremlin. It can invite to even more aggressive actions. And this, in the end, makes the conflict even more plausible than just abstaining and trying not to provoke Russia. So I think that the risks of yielding to Russian pressure actually outweighs the risks of engagement or bigger engagement. And we've seen that in the past Russia has used the military force, because it saw – or it found the absence of sufficient deterrence. So no cost associated with its actions. So I think this lesson has to be learned. And the aim should be now to raise the cost for destabilizing Ukraine.

So the last point is that of course talking about the future and what kind of scenario will Russia opt for. Of course, sustaining the existing low-intensity conflict in Ukraine, maintaining this veto power on Ukraine's future, already serves Russian interests sufficiently. So I believe that the decision to escalate militarily – so invade, even reinvade, let's say, even more profoundly Ukraine – will be taken only in the event if Russian decision-makers assess that achieved outcomes and territorial gains would be even more beneficial than the current status quo, and that there will be no – or, the costs will be acceptable.

And I believe that – now, you might think that Russia is quite emotional about Ukraine, so it can act irrationally. But I believe that nobody should be misled by this notion, because Russia is acting on the basis of rational calculation. And so it can be deterred from military actions if there is a credible deterrence policy in place. Thank you very much for your attention and I look forward to the discussion.

CECIRE: Thank you so much, Maryna. I really appreciate that analysis.

Turning to Katsiaryna, you also have a unique view as a Belarusian, and as someone who watches the larger space and security dynamics in the region. What do you think? To what extent do you think is Belarus potentially involved in the broader gambit?

SHMATSINA: Thank you, Michael. Great to be here. And in my remarks I'll try not to maybe overshadow the discussion about Ukraine with a Belarusian perspective, but still would talk to something relevant to my home country. And in August 2020, when I had to – when the political crisis unraveled in Belarus and when I had to flee the country, I later met with the European ambassadors later that summer. And one of the top questions they were concerned about was not so much the crisis in Belarus and the repressions and the protest, but also the question to what extent Russian would use the situation to somehow maybe attack or use the vulnerabilities of Belarusian government to attack Ukraine, now or maybe in the coming months.

And as we are having this conversation today, it only shows that – also maybe emphasizes how the international community views Belarus, but also how sort of thoughtful those remarks of the ambassadors back then were. And I would also emphasize that now, as the Lukashenko regime is sort of clinging to power by any means, it became clear that he survives only due to Russian support – political support, also economic support, and sort of this diplomatic rhetoric internationally when Moscow says that any call for some sort of solution to Belarusian crisis is interference into the Union State affairs.

And when Lukashenko becomes more and more vulnerable and more prone to sort of accept any offer coming from Russia, there are now talks about whether we will see actual military bases appearing in Belarus. And that is something that even Lukashenko was unwilling to discuss with Russia five years ago. But now we have seen the establishment of this so-called training center in Grodno on sort of the Belarusian western direction. And there are actual talks about what kind of capabilities could be employed there, and to what extent we can call this as an actual training center.

Then there is this intel report, brought up in this discussion earlier, about possible plans to attack Ukraine, also partially from Belarusian territory. Let alone this hybrid migration crisis, so to say, which we've observed on Belarusian border in the past month. And it was interesting to see how, let's say, Russia launched the nuclear capable bombers to monitor Belarusian airspace as a sign of sort of solidarity with the Union State ally, to Belarus. And I think that it was an interesting way for Moscow to be indirectly involved into this migration crisis, to test the patience of NATO, to think about the NATO solidarity, how NATO members would react to this sort of damage and provocations on the border of Baltic states and Poland, without, again, direct interference.

And then there were the calls of some European leaders, maybe, and I think Putin also expressed his readiness to some sort of offer, maybe not a dialogue but also somehow to handle Lukashenko in this crisis and to be an intermediary in this conversation, which also in the end, again, serves the Russian interest. And I would also bring up the interesting episodes from the past, such as the landing of the Ryanair plane, which also unlikely happened without some sort of implicit, at least implicit, acknowledgement of Russia. And there are also some sources that suggest that Russian special services were involved into this operation.

There's also evidence and something claimed by Bellingcat investigation, that Russian special services infiltrated to Belarusian diasporas in Ukraine. And there were other episodes of, let's say, cooperation of Belarusian and Russian special services, be it in Ukraine, in Russia, and

elsewhere. And it just brings, like, an open question how far this cooperation could go, and how Kremlin would use this to its own advantage to play around sort of desperate Lukashenko, and again push for some sort of further concessions, and use Belarus as a source of sort of instability in the region.

And I would also – what I want to emphasize is that there is the Ukrainian issue, which is obviously important for the Eurasian security architecture. But there is also Belarus, and the unraveling crisis, which would bring even more instability in the coming months as this crisis is prolonged. And Russia is an obvious sort of stakeholder in this crisis. And also, if we talk about the possible policy accommodations, and what the Belarusian sort of expert community is talking about, I will discuss this in a minute.

But I would also bring up the China factor, which is sort of invisible now and we don't see it much when it comes to – we don't think about it immediately when we think about Belarus. But also, as the crisis started in Belarus in 2020, there are some sources that suggest that China asked Russia to interfere into the Belarusian crisis to stabilize the situation, because Beijing had certain economic interests in Belarus. And this also brings another angle of the Sino-Russian cooperation and how it could come into play, even in places like Belarus.

And then if we talk about some recommendations, what could be done, I think it would be over simplistic to talk about some clear solutions, some quick fixes that could sort of solve the crisis or somehow put an end to Russian geopolitical appetites. But there were some calls to, let's say, include Belarus higher up into the agenda in conversations between Moscow and Washington – something similar to Ukraine. Just because, again, like, this is an important puzzle of the region security and should be – and the U.S. attention to Belarus should be a little bit higher up than, for instance, what we saw during the Biden-Putin summit in Geneva, when Belarus was just mentioned very sort of marginally, among other topics.

There are also calls to include Belarusian – or to put further pressure on Belarusian enterprises on behalf of the sort of U.S. sanctions, should Belarusian government decide to place or to host Russian military capabilities in Belarus further. And it also comes in an interesting interplay with the already existing measures within the Belarus Democracy Act, and the current sanctions on behalf of the U.S. towards – which actually also prescribe the possibility of introducing sanctions on the U.S. – on the Russian individuals and companies that are involved into supporting Lukashenko.

And here, I just have one sort of caveat, based on previous years of experience of, like, observing the Belarus-U.S. relations. When there were times of normalization of relations, and there were some sort of successful attempts of the Belarusian regime to lobby also on the Hill, to sort of persuade that the sanctions should be postponed temporarily and to exploit some loopholes and vulnerabilities, and essentially bring those sanctions towards more, like, rhetorical condemnation and then essentially make them insignificant.

And I think I will stop here. Also, again, with the understanding that the issue is so complex that it's just – it's just hard to say that there's just one easy fix, and if we introduce this particular strategy it will work today and mitigate all the future risks.

CECIRE: Great. Thank you so much, Katsiaryna, for that really rich and, I think, textured context that really envelops the entire region and really puts into good relief just how broad this crisis really is, and that it's well-beyond just Ukraine.

I want to move onto some questions, but first I'd like to recognize Representative Marc Veasey, who is with us – who has joined us. And he's a commissioner with the U.S. Helsinki Commission. So welcome, Representative Veasey. Thank you for joining us.

I want to give Cochairman Cohen an opportunity to ask some questions, and then we can maybe move to Representative Veasey, if you would like to also make some remarks and ask some questions. Cochairman Cohen.

COHEN: Thank you very much. I think I'd yield to Marc. I kind of asked some questions earlier, and unless one of our panelists is Nostradamus, I don't think they can answer my questions. So I'll yield to Marc for the time being.

VEASEY: Steve, thank you very much.

CECIRE: OK. Representative Veasey.

VEASEY: Oh, thank you. Thank you very much. Steve, thank you for yielding to me.

I wanted to ask in particular – I visited Ukraine in 20 – oh, God, it's hard to even remember what year it was. It was before COVID. I went with the speaker at the time. It was around 2015-2016 timeframe there. And one of the things that they, you know, made clear to us during the trip was that Russian really didn't want to take over. At least, that was the opinion of the people that we visited with. They didn't want to take over the Ukraine, but that there were strategic reasons on why they wanted to be in Crimea, particularly because of the access to the Black Sea. And that, you know, long term they just wanted to keep things sort of disorganized over there. And I was wondering, you know, what do some of the panelists think that Russia has to further gain by creating activities outside of Crimea and further into the country?

CECIRE: Maybe we can start with Maryna.

VOROTNYUK: Yes. I mean, I agree with this analysis, that it has been about keeping Ukraine in chaos and maintaining the veto power over Ukraine's future, because of course we understand that having the representatives – and after all these constitutional amendments that Russia – in Ukraine constitution – that Russia pushes forward. Of course, it's likely to have this Trojan horse, the power to block Ukraine's independent foreign policy choice to join NATO or whatever other foreign policy choice Ukrainian people can opt for.

So and this is – I believe this is still valid, this point. But I mean, I might be mistaken. And but I hope that the understanding that even though there is, of course, a huge military disparity in the – in the military – in the military potential between the two countries, Ukraine and Russia, still it will not be a fast victorious war because one needs to keep these territories,

again. And so it will not be, of course, understanding this level of patriotism and willingness of Ukrainian people to protect their motherland.

So of course, it will not be – you know, it would – it would be not an easy military campaign for Russia as well. So it might be one of the dissuading factors, together, of course, with some other – you know, let's say, the show of resolve on the Western side that it will not leave Ukraine alone while Ukraine is shouldering the primary responsibilities for defending itself and its land, there would still be this military assistance and support on the side of its partners.

There, of course, can be some other considerations. And we might ask ourselves, raise this question, why now? What is – what can possibly change in Russian – in the calculus of Russian decision-makers? So it is about some limited incursion? Many would argue that it could make the sense because in this case it's some kind of escalatory dominance that Russian could use as a card against the West.

Or it's really about some changing of the strategic landscape, gaining access, for example, to the – to the south, to Odessa, where currently Ukrainian Navy is headquartered. And which of course would finalize – would be the final vote for this Russian dominance – for establishing the Russian domination in the Black Sea. Because, of course, I mean, now it's almost absolute, but still Ukrainian Navy is present there. So or many would argue it's about getting access to the – to the water for the Crimea, so – and so there are so many scenarios in place that we can – we can look at.

So as I said, I think it's prudent to assume the worst, be prepared for the worst, and to work on everything that could prevent those calculations actually prompting Russian decisionmakers to take this political decision and go in for that. I mean, I believe that this is the language that – this is the message that could be understood. And so, of course, we should think what West will be doing if the offensive is happening. Actually, it's very important to be prepared and have this contingency planning. But it's most important to do everything which is in our power now to send this message that Russia should not go for that, because the response will be very strong.

VEASEY: Yeah. No, thank you very much. Also, since Russia seems to have – be putting so much energy into wanting to be disruptive in the Ukraine, what about Georgia? I mean, is Russia – is the Ukraine seen as a much easier target in many ways than Georgia? Will this sort of be able – will it give the people in Georgia a little bit more breathing room, as we say in America, because they know that the Russians will want to basically try to be as disruptive in the Ukraine, and spend most of their time over there now? Because remember in 2008 when, of course, you know, the Russians, you know, tried to go into Georgia. What – do you have any thoughts on that, or does anyone else have any thoughts on that? Please.

LEE: So I think from the Russian perspective the Georgians, in their view, learned their lesson in 2008, in that they won't try and retake Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the future. I think they saw that, demonstrated that, and they realized that they're not going to attempt that.

In the case of Ukraine, Ukraine is a much larger country. It is – it is still a goal to return the Crimea, to return the Donbas. And the Ukrainian military continues to become stronger, they continue to fight, the fighting is ongoing. So in Georgia, you know, after the – after the war there really wasn't much of a frontline where there's actual, you know, ongoing hostilities. We have – ongoing hostilities have gone on since 2015 still. And so the situation, I think, is quite different.

And I think also Ukraine, its role just in Russian history, Russian culture is kind of so significant that, you know, I think the big issue – and this is a little bit at your question before – is that we're in a position where Russia is in a – they made this problem in 2014, right? They removed three of the most pro-Russian voting areas in Ukraine, they changed the electoral map of Ukraine permanently, and they make Ukraine basically a hostile country. I think from a Russian perspective, they were hoping at some point there'd be a rapprochement. But I think now they see, you know, with – they had – Ukraine had a good election, Zelensky in power, and still Ukraine is a hostile country from their perspective.

And I think they're looking now saying now we are – we are now treating Ukraine as a long-term hostile problem and we want to solve the issue now, whereas before I think they had hopes that things might come around. It's pretty clear that it hasn't come around.

VEASEY: Michael, if you don't mind, if I could ask one more question to follow up on that?

CECIRE: Please do.

VEASEY: Thank you very much. Does the – does the corruption issues that they have in the Ukraine versus some of the other players in the region, like Georgia, make the situation even harder to get a handle on? And then sort of fuel a lot of the Russian aggression there, in your opinion? Or even if they were able to significantly clean up the corruption, do you think the Russians would still continue to do the things that they do in these provocative ways?

VOROTNYUK: Yeah. This is a very widely debated topic. And, of course, there has been progress since 2014. And we've seen reform in this place. And of course, I mean, probably it's not 100 percent success story, but still there has been – there has been progress. And it's very important I think to understand. And actually, this is what Western partners sometimes also often emphasize, that Ukraine actually is waging two wars or conducting two struggles. You know, the first war and struggle against Russian aggression, of course. And the second is against the dysfunctionality of its own state.

So this, we understand, is a very specific distinct context that the reforms need to be carried out in those conditions. And at the same time, Ukraine still needs to be a militarily capable state. So a state capable to resist this aggression. But on the other hand, of course, I mean, however corrupt any state A or B is, you know, it does not really validate any, you know, attempts to annex the part of its territory. And I think it's very important to resist, you know, or to succumb to those very often Russian-promoted impression, you know, that by supporting

Ukraine, by providing military assistance to Ukraine, we actually feed the corrupt regime in Kyiv.

I think we need to be clear about this, that what we are doing by providing support to Ukraine is actually making Ukraine more democratic and more resilient to those trends, and not – to those threats – not the opposite. So I think with this – with this thinking, of course, there should be important checks. And I think it has been this – always this gentle nagging, you know, from the Western side that really pushed forward the reforms in Ukraine. We've seen that clearly. And so it needs to be continued in this way. But, again, nothing like – no issues like this should dissuade us from providing more, you know, substantive support, both to Ukraine and Georgia, referring to your previous question.

I mean, I would be happy to say that, you know, Russia concentrating on Ukraine so Georgia could feel safer. Unfortunately, it's not the case I believe because Russia is very capable to maintain several hot spots simultaneously. And it actually has been the essence of its expansionist strategic, you know, policy, as we've seen in Syria and elsewhere, in its presence in the frozen conflicts in Black Sea, for example.

VEASEY: Yeah. Yeah, no, very good. I appreciate that. When we were there one of the things that they kept impressing upon us, and that we've heard – that we heard several times, is that – we met with a former heavyweight boxing champion, Klitschko, when we were there. And that because he had made – people in the Ukraine knew that he had made a lot of money in America. And so they were very hopeful that he was going to, you know, be this really honest leader. And I'm not sure exactly how his mayorship turned out, or if he's still in office or not. I haven't followed it since we left. But I thought that was fascinating for us to hear that so often with different groups that we visited with.

Thank you very much, Michael.

CECIRE: Thank you, Commissioner Veasey. I really appreciate your participation and those excellent questions.

I believe Mr. Klitschko is still the mayor. And I think I saw a report the other day saying he said that he would be willing to go to the front himself in the event of a war – of a renewed invasion. So look out, Russia, on that front. (Laughs.)

I want to move – we have some great questions from the audience. But I did want to ask one question that's been kind of a burning question in my mind, among other things. And maybe I'll pose this to our panelists really quickly. So Russian demands, to the extent they've been made clear, appear to be largely fixed on this question of revising the European security architecture. This, as opposed to ambiguous complaints about something like NATO, seems to be what is the defining element here. And I guess to the Kremlin's very mild credit, they had been pretty consistent on this point. It sounds a lot like former Russian President Dmitri Medvedev's proposals following the 2008 Georgia invasion, which is another ominous indicator.

However, it also seems to me to be a functional nonstarter, because it would essentially carve up Europe into spheres of influence, sacrificing the sovereignty of states that Russia decides it should control, in a kind of neo-Yalta arrangement. So this strikes me not only as bad for the likes of Ukraine as well as Georgia and Moldova, but a bid by Russia to break the normative system that has really undergirded decades of relative peace and prosperity in Europe, and in the whole as a whole. And thus, guarantee what would probably be generations of future conflicts.

So I'd like to ask our panelists, what do you think about this Russian demand in general? And is there a way to achieve a mutually satisfactory arrangement with Moscow when its core message seems to be predicated on what some might describe as neocolonial policies? And let's start with Andrew and Katsiaryna, to bring them into the conversation as well.

BOWEN: Sure. Thanks, Michael, for that question. Yeah. And it's important to note also too, when you speak about kind of normative frameworks and, you know, undermining, you know, several decades of kind of European security architecture, the Russian policymakers' argument that they make is that they are in fact the ones that are kind of following longstanding traditions of international politics, and kind of reasserting Russia's role as a kind of great power, and the kind of key player in their kind of regional sphere of influence.

And what it seems very clear, due to kind of the rhetoric coming from Russian policymakers, is that they are unhappy with the security architecture in Europe. They feel that Russia has been left out of discussions since the kind of fall of the Soviet Union. And that Russia has kind of regained a level of economic and military and political power that they are going to kind of reassert what they view as kind of Russian security interests in the region. So kind of looking at debates about possible Russian intentions and Russian signaling and messaging is it seems like they're kind of messaging to possibly a variety of kind of audiences and actors, right?

So on one level they are directly messaging to possibly Ukraine, arguing that Ukraine needs to recognize that – they want to Ukraine to recognize that Russia is the primary military actor in the region. They're threatening, you know, possible invasion. They also signaled that, you know, the West will not come to Ukraine's aid, and that Ukraine has to abide by, again, Russia's interpretation of the Minsk agreements, and kind of come to Russia's understanding. At the kind of larger level, they're also possibly signaling to Europe and kind of the West that they want to be included in these new negotiations and understandings of a kind of Europe security architecture, and to better include the Russian security interests in kind of these discussions and understandings, possibly in the same way that many of the kind of negotiations happened between the West and the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

But again, I think it's important to understand from the Russian perspective, I think what they're doing is, again, forcefully reasserting their claim to the West understanding of Russia's kind of territorial interest and dominance in their sphere of influence. And again, that's not justifying their approach or their statements, but it is important to kind of understand the framework that they are using, and to then craft effective policies and strategies to respond back to Russian claims and signals.

CECIRE: Thank you, Andrew.

Katsiaryna, what do you think? Is there a possibility for an agreement in such an environment?

SHMATSINA: I think it brings us to this old conflict between the democracies and autocracies, and the overall, like, what are the chances that they would agree on something and that those – like, the authoritarian ruler would respect this sort of agreement? And also, if it seems today that it is sort of safer and less sort of expensive, less difficult to have some sort of dialogue and make some concessions to the troublemaker in the region, then, again, what are the guarantees that this same troublemaker wouldn't come up with further demands tomorrow? And it also raises or leaves unanswered the questions of the nature of Putin's regime and all the violations of human rights and the lack of democracy and oppressions that are happening in Russia against the political opposition and, again, like, how much you can trust this sort of regime that oppresses domestic population and also has already demonstrated for two decades their geopolitical ambitions and appetites.

And I also was thinking about, again, in the case of Belarus that the more – like, that for Russia any solution of peaceful democratic transition in Belarus is an acceptable option even though Belarus won't shift away – won't turn away from Russia. We won't build a fence with Russia overnight, especially because the public opinion polls are not so much anti-Russian and we have some sort of economic interests, which are not necessarily needed to be cut.

But at the same time, in the Kremlin's eyes in this, like, ideology and their worldview, this is an acceptable gain of the democratic or the unacceptable victory of democratic government, and they would see this democratic government as an immediate threat and it's something that would be very much prone to the NATO and the "malign" Western influence, so to say.

CECIRE: Rob, Maryna, care to offer some thoughts on this?

LEE: Sure. So Russian officials have made a number of demands during this buildup. They're saying – you know, one of the main ones is kind of the broader security architecture question, mostly Russia-NATO. I think that's one area where we should engage the Russians. We should – we should look for substantive dialogue. We should absolutely, you know – most of the kind of treaties we had for security cooperation in Europe have lapsed since – you know, the ABM Treaty, INF, Open Skies. There's probably – it's a good opportunity to look at where can we find some agreements about, you know, confidence-building measures, security kind of measures, that we – that can limit kind of the tensions in Europe. So I think that's an area that's useful.

The issue is that, in Ukraine, Russia's goals have shifted somewhat. And so I'm going to steal this quote from someone else, but it used to be Russia's goal with Ukraine was no Ukraine in NATO and now it's become no NATO in Ukraine. And so it's not just – and Putin even mentioned it a month or two ago when he said, it's not just the concern that Ukraine will join

NATO, which I think is – you know, there hasn't been really that much active kind of movement recently; it's a concern that NATO defense cooperation is creepingly increasing. And so NATO arms exports are increasing. NATO training missions are increasing. And I think what they want to do is they want to draw a line now and say, OK, no more.

And so Javelin deployments are one thing. Javelin HGMs don't really significantly alter the balance power between Russian and Ukrainian forces. I think what they want to do is draw a line now before we start deploying something like artillery, multiple-launch rocket systems, missile defense systems, or long-range missile systems, which would significantly change the conventional balance of power between Ukraine and Russia and negate a lot of Russia's conventional advantages. So I think that's what they're really pushing at.

The big question is – they've made a lot of demands, right? We received them from Sergei Ryabkov the other day. The question is, what are the minimum demands? What are the minimum demands that, if satisfied, Russia will say, OK, this is enough, we won't use force? And that one is really hard to tell.

But, you know, the – I think the main thing we've seen so far is that there really isn't that much appetite for making concessions regarding Ukraine and Ukrainian sovereignty, and I don't think we should. We should look at other places where we can make maybe – you know, solve these kind of security concerns of Russia's without, you know, undermining Ukrainian sovereignty.

And I think, also, we take a couple of deterrent steps. One of the things I haven't heard as much is that, you know, Russian officials have been very clear they're concerned about missile defense systems and long-range precision-guided munitions being deployed near Russian borders. So they mentioned that in Ukraine. Well, a pretty obvious deterrent step is that if Russia massively escalates in Ukraine, an option we could take is we could deploy these kind of systems to the Baltics, where we have – we have so far said we're not going to do that. But we could – you know, we could talk to our Baltic allies and say this is a response we'll do, and if we do this, this would significantly worsen Russia's security position and it might be enough to say, OK, whatever gains you have by escalating in Ukraine we will offset that by worsening your security situation in the Baltics and other areas by plussing-up NATO forces there.

So I think there are a few different things. But, ultimately, it's really hard to tell what is the minimum demands that will kind of solve this issue right now or at least develop some kind of modus vivendi going forward.

VOROTNYUK: And if I may, to answer your question, I think that Russia and the West operate on conflicting mutually excluding premises, because Russia finds itself and perceives itself at war with the West while the West is very dialogue oriented. So for the West, peace, and, you know, it's a normal kind of state of affairs, while Russia is seeking for this conflict at the moment because of the reasons we mentioned before, being not content with the current international security order.

So I think it's very important now seeing, you know, this messages – messaging around the idea of the dialogue with Russia, especially under the current distinct circumstances of the military buildup, is to have this messaging very well thought out because we could agree that the idea of the dialogue is very important, as it has proved its utility in the times of the Cold War and that it's not some kind of privilege that we grant to Russia. But, I mean, we need it at the time when the relations are at their lowest.

But at the same time, again, I think we need to understand clearly that can – Russia can and is likely to leverage this, let's say, vast proclivity to conduct this dialogue and will try to find the vulnerabilities here.

So one thing is to conduct the dialogue and another thing is to try to find some positive agenda in the relations with Russia now because it's what Russia pushes forward, that let's try to compartmentalize our relations. Let's put aside the Ukrainian dossier, which is hopeless at the moment, which is troubled. So let's solve it later when the conditions are more conducive and let's focus on some other potential, very promising areas of cooperation.

So I think we should not really, you know, fall into this trap because this is very dangerous, saying that, yeah, let's go to this transactionalist mode and let's, you know, put aside the problems and try to focus on, you know, so not to make it look as a positive agenda and rewarding Russia for its wrongdoing and focusing on dialogue where it's necessary, where, you know, it's really something that, you know, like, prevents the unintended military escalations, for instance, but rather than rewarded for the policies that Russia displays.

CECIRE: Excellent points.

So I'd like to turn to audience questions. We have about 15 minutes left. So we're going to try to – and get through these as quickly as possible.

I think the first question here is from my old friend, Alex Raul Fableau (ph), who asks: Why should Moscow decide the foreign policy of other sovereign countries and why, when Russia broke its own legally binding treaty with Ukraine, annexed Crimea, and invaded the Donbass, should anyone trust Moscow's words rather than joining NATO?

Maybe, you know – hey, maybe, Katsiaryna, you want to take the first stab at this?

SHMATSINA: Well, I think, like, why they sort of disrespected the existing arrangements and the international order that just because they could and they wanted to. (Laughs.) I don't know a better answer to that. And could you please repeat?

CECIRE: I guess the question here is why should the West or why should individual countries trust Russia's word when it seems to have gone back on its word in the past, and I think the implication here from Alex, which I think is a sharp one, is that this only promotes and pushes the idea that countries should join NATO – (laughs) – rather than dissuading from them. You know, maybe you can comment a bit on that.

SHMATSINA: I think there is another limitation to how much NATO wants to be – wants to expand. (I would ?) promote this idea, which I already, like, met several times in the past years, about the experts who would claim that if you intend to expand NATO you would irritate Russia even more and, therefore, countries, again, like Belarus or even like Ukraine or others in the region should just be – well, to put it very pragmatically, to be like a buffer zone, not to trigger Russian interests.

And I've also seen a bunch of conclusions by the U.S., like, foreign-policy realists who would claim that, at the moment, why should we care that much about Moscow when Beijing is our key rival, and maybe we should just let Russia do whatever they want in the region. And I think that's a very – that's a very dangerous sort of pattern of thought because we've already seen, again, like, in the 20-something years of Putin's presence in Moscow to what conclusion or, like, what are the possible consequences of the authoritarian sort of inclinations.

CECIRE: Great. Would anyone else like to weigh in on this question quickly?

BOWEN: I'd just like to –

VOROTNYUK: Yeah, I could because – yeah, go ahead.

BOWEN: Sorry. Yeah, I just want to kind of weigh in again to it. You know, unfortunately, when dealing in international politics sometimes the moral questions of why should Russia, you know, be able to dictate the terms of sovereignty of the countries around it is subsumed under questions of what Russia can and will do.

Again, it's bringing back a little bit of kind of the unfortunate reality of the situation is that we have to deal with Russia operating on that premise and that it views certain things as direct threats to its national security and is going to take steps that Russian policymakers believe advance and ensure its own security.

And, again, understanding the framework with which Russian policymakers may, perhaps, be viewing the situation, and then Rob made some really excellent points about potential areas of dialogue with Russia, again, you engage with adversaries and negotiate with dialogue not because you trust them. You exactly come to agreements because you don't trust them and you make clear lines and clear kind of standards of understanding precisely because you don't understand them and they're – not because you don't – because you don't trust them. And so you want to exactly lock them in to certain agreements, standards, codes of conducts that have kind of clear lines of violation, which will kind of blatantly set the standards of acceptable conduct and what will, potentially, violate that.

So, again, it's not trusting an adversary but it's engaging with them to exactly come to the exact same agreements and frameworks of understanding to then judge actions, codes of conduct, and policies and to, hopefully, standardize and deescalate potential areas of conflict and reduce the propensity or the possibility of inadvertent escalation where Russia believes we are acting according to one framework and we believe Russia is according – acting according to another.

So that is the possible intent of the dialogue and I think it's an unfortunate necessity that you do – you precisely – you have to talk to the people that you are not friends with and so you have to have kind of some level of dialogue with your adversary.

VOROTNYUK: Yeah, just a brief remark from my side on the question, you know, why Russia decide(s) the foreign policy of other sovereign countries. They shared this sentiment, of course, and, yeah, I believe that we can – I mean, the fact that Russia feels traumatized by the current setting of the international order, I mean, that doesn't necessarily – I mean, we should respect its interest but that doesn't mean we start giving, you know, and trying to empathize sides of this, empathize with this trauma by, you know, basically, allowing it free hands in its neighborhood because Ukraine, Georgia, I mean, and other nations of the – they're all – they have all been also traumatized, you know, by Russian policies since early '90s, not to mention, you know, the Soviet Union times, et cetera.

So, yeah, I believe this is something, the principle, that should be kept, you know, in mind when we talk about, you know, dialogue with Russia, that other nations have to be present and their interests have to be taken into account.

CECIRE: Right. Yeah, I think it's important to remember sometimes, too, that it's Ukraine's neighborhood as well. It's Georgia's neighborhood as well. So they should have a say – (laughs) – in what happens.

Another question we have, and I think this is directed to Andrew, is – the question states, one detail that's mentioned is that the U.S. is ready to sanction Russia in the event of an invasion. In the media, this phrase about sanctions is typically followed by "and other means of support for Ukraine." To your best knowledge, what kind of military support can Ukraine expect, obviously, excluding boots on the ground?

In particular, one of the chief weaknesses of the Ukrainian army is weak aviation, anti-air missile defense systems. What kind of assistance can Ukraine expect in this regard in the event of a renewed invasion? And we'll start with Andrew, since it's directed to you.

BOWEN: Absolutely. Well, I won't speak to, you know, promises of aid or what is going to happen. I can speak to areas of what military support has been provided to Ukraine previously and some other kind of possible areas that, you know, Ukraine and its allies should probably look towards and we should think about when we kind of assess Ukraine's security needs and potential areas of support.

You know, previously, Ukraine has been a major recipient of kind of nonlethal aid, everything from bulletproof vests, you know, Humvees, all sorts of things. You know, most recently, the most kind of famous security assistance has been the Javelin anti-tank guided missile systems that are extremely capable systems. But, oftentimes, again, security assistance is framed in terms of what we'll upend the kind of strategic balance.

The level of aid required to really kind of shift that is kind of outside the bounds of kind of possibility. So when we think about kind of security assistance to Ukrainian military, oftentimes we think about it in terms of increasing Ukraine's capabilities, increasing its ability to defend its territorial integrity, and, in some ways, filling the gaps that Ukraine's own domestic defense industry cannot do itself.

Ukraine already has very capable kind of, as I mentioned in my comments, anti-ship, anti-tank systems that it does produce domestically and can kind of equip the Ukrainian military. A lot of the kind of resources and supplies that it needs are kind of the less-flashier aspects, I would argue – you know, support with its logistics systems that includes kind of planning and advising, things of that nature – medical supplies.

One major area that, you know, Ukraine needs continued assistance with because the U.S. has been kind of supporting this is defenses against Russia's electronic warfare systems. Russia has developed extremely capable electronic warfare systems. They've incorporated it in their doctrine and it is a major kind of threat.

When it comes to kind of air defense systems, it's – that, again, is a little bit of a tougher question. Ukraine has relatively outdated old kind of Soviet or early Russian air defense systems. So they are in need of kind of newer and updated air defense systems. The question is kind of what air defense systems will kind of best provide for Ukraine's defense needs because, again, when we talk about security assistance it's not just providing the latest and best equipment because we also have to think about the time spent to train Ukrainian personnel on the new equipment, the kind of ability to kind of operate and integrate that equipment with current Ukrainian systems, and training and doctrine.

So there's a whole kind of range of things that we need to think about rather than just sending them, you know, the latest advanced, you know, Western systems, is actually the ability of those systems to integrate with current Ukrainian military capabilities and systems.

We also need to, I think, be cognizant of the cost, not just in terms of how much the – what Ukraine's partners are providing – how much those systems cost to provide to the Ukrainians – but how much those systems cost to actually maintain and train and sustain, because if you provide equipment that is far too costly for the Ukrainians themselves to sustain it actually becomes a net negative to their defense budget and, actually, a lot of their money is going to sustain systems where it could be going towards other areas and other aspects that would actually, arguably, be more effective to increase Ukraine's defense capability.

CECIRE: Great. So we have a – this has been such a complex and multivariate issue that I think we've gotten some really great detail but we're running out of time. So I did want to get to a couple of the final questions, and I'll just kind of read them one after the other and pose them to the panelists to kind of take on as they will, the first being how would a Russia-Ukraine military conflict disrupt U.S.-Ukraine economic relations?

And the second one is what would be the world's response to Russia moving nuclear weapons onto Ukrainian territory after Ukraine signed on to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and

certified that Ukrainian territory would not harbor nuclear armaments? I think the – part of the implication here is Crimea and Donbass or maybe also the possibility of tactical nuclear weapons.

So I'll let the panelists take these on. Maybe on the economic question, Maryna, do you have any thoughts on that?

VOROTNYUK: Yeah. I mean, let me put it in a larger strategic picture. So because, yeah, it's about U.S.-Ukraine economic relations and how this Russian-Ukraine military conflict will affect those relationship(s). And the other – and there is another question I see in the chat is about general ramifications of Russia moving in.

So, of course, I mean, we understand that this would be, you know, a catastrophic scenario that we need to try to prevent, you know, at all cost so at the best of our ability, and, I mean, we've seen already the analysis of, you know, of millions of Ukrainians fleeing from the war, you know, becoming the refugees, you know, so not to mention the dramatic effect that will have from, as I mentioned, from a humanitarian point of view but also, you know, from the point of view, you know, of this political messaging, you know, to the autocratic regimes, something that was mentioned already today, you know, that if there is no any kind of active response to this what it would mean, you know, for the whole – it would lead to the whole – you know, this collapse of the whole system, not to mention the strategic security implications of this.

And, I mean, it's very important what we've heard from the – you know, from the American administration, you know, U.S. civilian, you know, to increase the capabilities to strengthen the eastern flank of NATO, which, I mean, again, you know, it's like, also what concern(s) Ukraine directly, you know, what needs to be done.

So I think that it's – when the messages are sent that – openly that there will be some kind of response but short of sending the American, you know, troops on the ground and other allies if they, you know, equal the same idea, I'm afraid this undermines the principle of the strategic ambiguity that the alliance has tried to develop vis-à-vis Ukraine, you know, because it's bad – if the strategic ambiguity is to work, you know, you'd never start by saying that we don't – do not look into the military solution. You know, the economic sanctions – we'll concentrate on these economic sanctions.

So I'm arguing, in short, that economic sanctions are very important and we all very much hope that they're really, as was stated, the – incomparable to the ones that were introduced on scene from the – you know, as compared to 2014. And there are also the – also some scenarios when there could be a coalition of willing countries willing to send the troops not into combat, not on the front line in Ukraine, but be present in Ukraine, you know, in the support positions to support the Ukrainian army, you know, but also being present there as instructors.

We've seen many countries doing this already in the alliance. You know, would actually send the signal to Russia and dissuade it, hopefully, from more assertive actions. So I think it's a package to be looked into.

CECIRE: Thank you, Maryna. And one thing I'll say is, and I've told this to some friends here at the Commission, that if I were – if I were mid-level Russian analyst and I looked at the administration's statement on U.S. troops, it's actually quite qualified. It says no ground troops to deter Russia right now. So it kind of leaves open a lot of implications, you know, in those gaps. So not to, you know, say that we should divine particular importance from that or particular messaging. But if I were a Russian mid-level analyst I probably wouldn't feel so great about that statement.

The last question – and we are at time – but, Rob, if you can maybe address this about the world's response to the potential of nuclear weapons being moved onto Ukrainian soil. What would be the response? What should be the response?

LEE: Well, honestly, I'm not sure, and it's a little bit beyond my expertise here. So I'm going to punt this to Andrew and see if Andrew wants to dive in on that one.

BOWEN: Giving me all the easy questions, huh, Rob? (Laughter.)

No, I think there's a couple of things. Number one is, that would be a clear violation of kind of every kind of norm or agreement the kind of world has made regarding, you know, nuclear weapons. It would be a clear violation of kind of standards and kind of acceptable uses of and placements of nuclear weapons.

But to kind of also reel it back, too, I'm not quite sure what Russia would, essentially, gain by placing kind of nuclear weapons in Crimea because I think that's the most – of the possibilities, I think placing nuclear weapons in Crimea either on – you know, moving some kind of ballistic submarines there.

But I don't think that's kind of highly likely. I'm not really sure what kind of Russia would kind of benefit and gain other than from clearly identifying them as kind of much more akin to kind of a rogue actor that is not only undermining kind of regional security with that action but also undermining international security by taking such kind of aggressive actions by redeploying their nuclear weapons in, essentially, conflict areas and regions.

CECIRE: Great. Thank you, Andrew.

The only thing I would add to that is I can think of one way that this might be seen as beneficial in some segments of the Russian leadership and that is to maybe bolster this notion that they have promoted in the past that any type of confrontation with Russia is, essentially, tantamount to promoting a third world war and, you know, potentially, this would – something like that could help promote that idea a bit further. But not to take away from anything you've said. I think that's all very true.

So we are at time now and I do want to thank our panelists, and also Co-Chairman Cohen and Representative Veasey and our distinguished audience for what I think has been an extremely informative and lively discussion about what is, clearly, a very serious situation.

Before we close, I'd like to, once again, invite Co-Chairman Cohen and Commissioner Veasey to offer a few closing remarks if they wish.

Mr. Co-Chairman?

COHEN: Thank you. I appreciate it. I just want to reiterate the panel was outstanding and very informative on an issue that is very close to my heart. I'm very concerned about Ukraine and its – I've visited several times. I appreciate the freedom and the spirit of freedom that you feel there. The people got their freedom. They want to keep it.

Leopards don't change their spots and black bears don't either. So I think we can – we'll see. If nothing – at a minimum we're seeing a show of force and trying to make a move on a chess set. We might see a war. It's hard to judge Putin. He's very, very bright, cagey KGB individual and you don't know where he's going to go.

I think it'll be a mistake for them to go to war but they may, and we need to be swift to respond with sanctions. But, nevertheless, thank you for everybody and hope everybody has a happy holiday and we don't read about war in the coming holiday season or ever at all.

CECIRE: Thank you, sir.

Representative Veasey?

VEASEY: Thank you. You know, I think back to my trip to the Ukraine and it was, obviously, you know, very close to the time to when Crimea was invaded and when the students were killed there, and it was a very sad time to be there. You could see the expressions on people's faces as we went around town.

There was a lot of talk about, you know, conscription and people being sent to the front lines. And I really do hope that the world can come together and make it clear to Russia that this is just not in their best interest long term to continue in their aggression towards their neighbors.

We, certainly, don't want to have to be in any sort of war or conflict or any sort of stand down that's going to lead to that sort of escalation. But at the same time, it's clear that the region is going to continue to be destabilized and we will be pushed closer and closer to, you know, some sort of unfortunate conflict that does involve war or involves casualties, at the very least, unless the Russians can come to the conclusion that this is just not in their best interest, and the world will have to come together to convince them of that, in my opinion.

CECIRE: Thank you, sir.

Thank you so much, Co-Chairman Cohen and Commissioner Veasey, and for my part, my thanks again from the Helsinki Commission to our wonderful panelists and to you, the audience.

This concludes our event today. But I do look forward to working with many of you as we continue to monitor the situation and craft effective countermeasures and policy options to counter Mr. Putin's neocolonial agenda.

Thank you, all.

[Whereupon, at 11:38 a.m., the briefing ended.]