Chairman Cardin, Co-Chairman Cohen, Distinguished Members of the Helsinki Commission,

Thank you for the privilege to provide testimony today. I served 38 years in the United States Army, concluding as Commanding General, US Army Europe (2014-2017). I now serve as the Pershing Chair in Strategic Studies at the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) in Washington DC. A native of Florida, I currently live in Frankfurt, Germany. I am grateful for the opportunity to provide a US military perspective, with some European context, on the situation in Ukraine. At the time of my testimony, I will have just returned from a short trip to Kyiv as part of a delegation of five former Ambassadors and former SACEUR/COMEUR General (Ret) Philip Breedlove. I expect that my visit to Ukraine will inform my oral testimony beyond the contents of this written testimony.

The threat from Russia is real and it is growing. While a new Russian offensive is not imminent, I fear it is increasingly likely. In addition to the thousands of Russian troops and military capabilities that have been in Crimea and Donbas since the Russian invasion of 2014, the Kremlin has moved more than 100,000 well-equipped troops to the Ukrainian border in the east and north, including now in Belarus. It is reinforcing its naval and amphibious capabilities in the Black Sea and Sea of Azov as we speak. We are clearly in a new age of emerging technology, where military mass and conventional force has for many become something of an anachronism, but the images of tanks, heavy equipment, convoys of armored vehicles, and railcars groaning under the weight of Russian armor heading towards Ukraine all demonstrate that the Kremlin sees the use of blunt force as an essential component of their overall effort to compel.

There is no sign of de-escalation and the language from the Kremlin has not been very encouraging. Putin appears overconfident and is exhibiting a high level of risk-tolerance. He seems intent on applying maximum pressure on the West in this self-manufactured crisis, in hopes that Ukraine or NATO will eventually make concessions. While the West seeks to avoid conflict, Russia is in a wartime mindset. We, the West, continue to be surprised by what the Kremlin does because we have a hard time believing that a leader of a European nation, a great power, would initiate a large-scale war in Europe in the 21st century.

What is at stake? As German Foreign Minister Baerbock stated during Secretary Blinken’s recent visit to Berlin, it is “the whole European peace order.” Stability and security in the transatlantic area are endangered if Putin can enlarge Russia’s territory and expand his sphere of influence at will, without regard for international law, existing treaties, and the cost in human suffering as well as lost freedoms. A failure of deterrence would further open the door to the ‘Russian way of war’ against more of Europe with cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, aggression in the air and maritime domains, targeted assassinations and kidnappings on European soil, and the weaponization of Russian-controlled energy resources. A new influx of potentially tens of thousands of refugees into Western Europe would have destabilizing effects across Europe, which is in my view one of the Kremlin’s intended outcomes of such an attack.
What would a new Russian offensive look like? Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2014 gives us some idea. A new attack is most likely to occur after the conclusion of the Beijing Winter Olympics (Putin invaded Ukraine days after his own Sochi Winter Olympics in 2014), after the conclusion of the Russia-Belarus military exercises in Belarus, and once all Russian ships currently underway from the Baltic Sea arrive in the Black Sea.

I don’t believe that a single, large-scale attack towards Kyiv is likely as it will generate too many Russian casualties, and it’s not actually necessary to achieve their strategic aims. I anticipate that a new offensive will be a continuation of what they are already doing. The 30,000+ troops in Crimea and significant presence in and near Donbas already give them a bridgehead, and the growing strength and logistical build-up on Ukraine’s border will give the Kremlin multiple options and flexibility. A new offensive is more likely to be a series of rolling, limited objective operations to (1) demonstrate that the Kremlin is not deterred by NATO, (2) further weaken the government of Ukraine, (3) limit Russian casualties, (4) facilitate support and logistical sustainment of operations, and (5) frustrate Western decision-makers with actions below some perceived threshold of violence that might make going forward with the most severe sanctions more difficult. The Kremlin could also pause the pressure, wait for the West to lose interest, and then resume operations — the same pattern it has employed since 2008 in Georgia.

Cyber strikes would be used to disrupt command and control, blind Kyiv from the actual situation at the Front, and disrupt transportation and air/missile defense. Disinformation efforts would be used to panic/confuse the public, start another refugee crisis, and create a “provocation” as a pretext for Russian attack. Cruise missiles from the Russian Black Sea Fleet and long-range rockets from land forces would target Ukraine’s anti-ship weapons, ammunition storage sites, command and control nodes, and transportation hubs, similar to 2014. I anticipate amphibious operations along the coast lines of the Sea of Azov and Black Sea and probably sabotage and attempted assassinations inside Ukraine.

The Administration, and in particular the Department of State, deserves credit for leading perhaps the most comprehensive diplomatic effort I have seen since the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords. Although there are still significant differences among some nations about how to respond, every NATO country has agreed to reject the Kremlin’s demands. And it seems the Administration has fortunately transitioned from passive deterrence (the threat of punishment after the fact, which means deterrence failed) to active deterrence (demonstrated will and capability before the fact). Most of NATO seems to agree on this as well, as evidenced by the heightened alert of the NATO Response Force, other nations delivering weapons, growth of the Air Policing Mission, and offers to deploy a new enhanced Forward Presence Battle Group to Romania.

Not all of our Allies have been as decisive as they should, Germany foremost among them. Most of the EU is likely to follow Germany’s lead on most diplomatic and economic sanctions. Yet the German government is at risk of forfeiting its hard-earned moral authority and credibility if it stands by and tolerates or allows Russia to undermine the European values and respect for international law that Berlin claims to champion. I am frustrated that our German Ally has not been decisive regarding NordStream 2 but I do note that the government there has at last said that NS2 is “on the table” as an option for sanctions should Russia attack. The Administration must
continue to work closely with the German government to ensure we remain unified not only in our assessment of the Russian threat, but also in our response. We can accomplish this by continuing the comprehensive diplomatic effort across Europe as well as with Russia, by respecting and understanding the domestic political challenges facing this new German coalition government, and by seeking alternative sources of gas to mitigate the threat of Russia disrupting gas supplies to Europe, which the Administration is now doing. I believe President George H.W. Bush was correct when he said, at the time of German reunification in 1990, that Germany and the US should be “partners in leadership.” A partnership between Germany and the US which ensures a strong, unified effort, in all domains, is what will ultimately give the Kremlin the greatest pause.

What else can the Alliance do to prevent a new war with Ukraine? We need to find a way to take the initiative instead of always reacting to whatever the Kremlin does, recognizing that we have to do this in a way that does not fracture the unity of our Alliance and European Union partners. We need to think bigger and think strategically, and realize that this is about so much more than Ukraine. We need a strategy for the greater Black Sea region that addresses all elements of US and Alliance power (diplomacy, information, economy, as well as military/security cooperation). It would include repairing the damaged relationship with Turkey, which holds the key to the region.

In the near-term, we should be doing everything possible to enable Ukraine to more effectively defend itself — something on the scale of the Berlin Airlift, but with the weapons and equipment that they need. We should be assisting with the preparation and training of Ukraine’s Integrated Air and Missile Defenses (IAMD), protection of cyber networks from attack, more counter-fire radar (which they’ve been using effectively for the last few years), more anti-tank weapons, more short-range air defense systems (Stinger and Avenger), and anti-ship capabilities. The Alliance should take the next steps required to deploy the NATO Response Force (NRF) to the eastern flank for exercises, integration into defense planning, and to reduce the time required for operations should combat spill over from Ukraine into a NATO Ally’s sovereign territory.

We must also be prepared to escalate horizontally to take the initiative from the Kremlin, to force them to look in other directions versus being able to focus fully on its operations in Ukraine. I would recommend ensuring the Ukrainian Armed Forces have the capability to strike the Kerch Strait Bridge and/or the Russian Navy’s illegal base at Sevastopol. We should be prepared to challenge Russian operations in international waters of the Black Sea and international air space over the Black Sea. We should encourage Turkey to close the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits to Russian Navy vessels, in accordance with its authority under the Montreux Convention. This will of course require a significant diplomatic effort with our Turkish Ally and the assurance that they will not be left alone when Russia inevitably strikes back against Ankara. And we should let it be known that we are prepared to blockade the Russian Naval Base at Tartus, Syria.

I fully support Administration's plans to enact sanctions targeting Putin’s personal wealth and to remove Russia from SWIFT. We must continue competing in the information domain by countering false Kremlin-backed narratives, for example that “NATO encircles Russia.” As this Commission knows, the part of Russia which actually touches NATO is only about 6% of Russia’s border. This is the safest part of Russia's border, the one part that we all know and which they know, and from which they will never be attacked. All of the US and British troops stationed in Europe today would not fill a major US college football stadium, yet the Kremlin persists in talking
about the threat from the US and NATO. Unfortunately, there are still many in Europe who accept the Kremlin narrative, so we have much work to do.

Finally, the West should build an “offramp” for Putin. There are things we can do which will not in any way betray Ukraine, our Allies, or any of our values but could give the President of the Russian Federation face-saving opportunity to draw back his forces and reduce the chances of a conflict. We should double-down on exercise transparency and offer to re-establish the mutual military special observer missions which existed during the Cold War. And of course, we should utilize to the maximum the transparency allowed by the Vienna Documents. Russia does comply now, but we can still make such an offer. I actually welcomed when I had inspectors from Russia and Belarus visit our exercises and our barracks in Europe. They could see our capabilities and the quality of our soldiers which, I believe, had a deterrent effect. Invite Russia to do/see even more.

NATO members could also sign an agreement or make a public joint statement where member states guarantee Russia’s internationally recognized borders. We have already done this, in effect, for decades, and on its face, it seems almost ludicrous for Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia or other Allies to have to guarantee that they would never invade Russia. But maybe because it does seem so ludicrous, making a public event out of it might help counter the false narrative of Russia being threatened by NATO.

Of course, the Alliance should still keep communication channels open and maintain dialogue with the Kremlin in every possible venue and format. These exist already. But we must come with realistic expectations and a clear-eyed perspective about the nature of diplomacy with the Kremlin. They are not Boy Scouts. They use chemical weapons, poison and murder against their own opposition, and they use cyber and disinformation to destroy lives and societal structures and trust in our democratic systems. We should talk but we need to understand with whom we are talking.

Thank you to this Commission for the privilege to present my testimony to you and for the service that you provide for security and stability in the transatlantic community. I look forward to your questions.