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Helsinki on the Hill Podcast

"Russian Intention, Russian Aggression: Looking Ahead to ZAPAD 2021"

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TIERSKY: Hello, and welcome back to Helsinki on the Hill, a series of conversations hosted by the United States Helsinki Commission on human rights and comprehensive security in Europe and beyond. I'm your host, Alex Tiersky.

Listeners, as the staff here at the podcast scanned newspaper headlines in the last six months or so, it seemed like every few weeks there's been a jump in reports that the Russian military was involved in some sort of action that had the potential to spark violent confrontation between Russia and some combination of other countries. Let me just name a couple of examples. In late March, there were warnings of a major escalation in the Ukraine war by Moscow as it deployed some 100,000 new troops in and around Ukraine. In June, there was an incident in the Black Sea in which Russian forces seemingly faced off against the British destroyer HMS Defender. And these days, we're reading a growing number of reports suggesting a major Russian military exercise scheduled for September in and around Belarus might have nefarious intentions behind it.

So what are Helsinki on the Hill listeners to make of these developments? Is a major escalation and conflict with Russia imminent? Is this some sort of deliberate, coordinated strategy by the Kremlin? Are there any guardrails that could prevent Russian aggression against its neighbors, or a direct conflict with NATO for that matter? Well, today on the podcast to help us understand just what is going on and what we might expect going forward, we're thrilled to welcome General Ben Hodges, who retired from the United States Army in January of 2018 after a brilliant military career, including serving as commanding general of the United States Army Europe from 2014 to 2017. General Hodges now holds the Pershing Chair in Strategic Studies at the Center for European Policy Analysis.

General, so glad you could join us for the podcast.

HODGES: Alex, it is a privilege for me. Thank you for the opportunity.

TIERSKY: Terrific. Well, sir, I'd really like to start at the 30,000-foot level and just put what we're seeing today in the context of recent history. Could you take us back to when you took on the job leading U.S. Army Europe in 2014? Of course, you had to deal with the immediate aftermath of Russia upending European security with its annexation of Crimea in 2014. I can't imagine what that was like. How significant was that event at the time? And how has it ushered in the circumstances we're seeing today?

HODGES: Well, Alex, you're right. That was quite a time to be showing up at U.S. Army Europe. I had just come from being the commander of NATO Allied Land Command, which is based in İzmir, Turkey. So the jolt to the – to Europe and to the United States after Russia's invasion of Ukraine and then the illegal annexation of Crimea did, in fact, completely change the security environment. Interestingly, the U.S. Army in Europe, like most of our European allies, had been in the process of downsizing, sending things home, because we had all had the misperception that somehow Russia was going to be a partner for us. And – which was in the previous NATO strategic concept back in 2010.

So all the armor was gone. The attack aviation was being sent home. I mean, so many of the key things. And so we had to figure out, how do we assure allies, protect American interests, and deter Russia, even though the capabilities we had were shrinking. And that was true across the board in Europe. So that was – that was pretty exciting. But I will say that the administration in 2014 and the Army – everybody started reacting quickly.

TIERSKY: Mmm hmm. Now, you're talking about our response to the illegal annexation of Crimea. Was there really a sense that that was a kind of one-off by Vladimir Putin? Or was there a sense that that signaled a new kind of Russian intention throughout the former Soviet space?

HODGES: Well, you've actually hit I think on the key point of this entire situation. The Russians will only stop when they are stopped. What happened in 2014 was actually a continuation of what began in 2007 when Putin launched a modernization effort for the Russian federation forces and Russian military, invaded Georgia in 2008, didn't do so well but obviously overwhelmed Georgia. They still occupied 20 percent of Georgia. They learned a lot from that.

And then the next sort of thing that happens, 2013 the Assad regime – supported by Russia – leaps over the red line that our administration had put down about Syrian government using chemical weapons against their own people. And the Kremlin saw that the United States, Germany, France, U.K. – none of us did anything about that. And so I think that they felt confident that they could in fact – (laughs) – in the days after the conclusion of the Sochi Olympics – could invade Ukraine.

And of course, they were correct. We really didn't do anything of substance. And since then, they have only continued to be aggressive in Ukraine. Forty-five Ukrainian soldiers killed in the past year during a ceasefire, and over 150 wounded. They have cemented their hold on Crimea. They have – we now have Russian so-called peacekeepers in Azerbaijan, specifically in Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as still in Armenia and in 20 percent of Georgia. They still have troops in Transnistria.

So in other words, what's happening in the events you describe beginning in March, this is a continuum. And it's not even peaks and valleys. It goes up, and then up, and then up. And so today, here in the weeks before the start of Zapad 2021, you've got about 100,000 Russian troops in and around Ukraine, plus a very large Black Sea fleet at a higher level of readiness.

TIERSKY: Yes, sir. And I'd love to come back to Ukraine a bit later, as well as the exercise you mentioned – Zapad 2021. And in fact, I'll ask you about the Black Sea as well. But I do want to underline here something really important that you said. In our introduction, of course, you know, I talked about 2014 as one marker. But of course, it goes further back. As you said, the invasion of Georgia and the current annexation – not annexation – but occupation of some 20 percent of Georgian territory continues until today. So 2008 is perhaps just as significant a marker, as you mentioned.

I do want to ask you, though, we saw after 2014 a series of measures by NATO to deploy forces further eastward to, as you said, reassure our allies, whether it was in the Baltics or other

parts of kind of the eastern flank of NATO. The rhetoric you've heard from the Russian perspective is: Russia's being encircled. These deployments are aggressive against Russia. Can you talk a little bit about those deployments and the extent to which the Russian rhetoric about them makes any sense to you?

HODGES: So thank you for offering me a chance to clarify something. Of course, we all reacted after Russia's invasion, but it was reaction in terms of strengthening NATO itself, our preparation, our level of readiness. And that was manifested in 2016 with the agreement at the Warsaw summit – the NATO summit at Warsaw, when the United States and other nations – including Germany – agreed to deploy enhanced forward presence battlegroups.

The Obama administration made the decision to put armor back on the ground in Europe, and preposition. So a lot of things did happen inside our great alliance. But that was about making sure we could protect ourselves. And then, of course, a concerted effort led by the United States but also including Canada, U.K., Poland, Lithuania, to help Ukraine improve its own capabilities – so with equipment, training, et cetera.

The point that you make about the narrative coming out of the Kremlin, though, is key here, because even today, in 2021 here in Washington, I am hearing again, unfortunately, let's just say, thinking and comments coming out of the administration about, hey, we can't provoke the Russians. We got to be careful. We need to do everything we can to be more transparent. Maybe we need to take a look at exercises. Are they too big, too many? And it's unbelievable that there are some people that still believe that we are responsible for provocation.

And this narrative, this fairy tale that comes out of the Kremlin about somehow they're threatened, they're being encircled – let's unpack that. Thirty thousand American soldiers in Europe – 30,000. That would not fill up half of the stadium where the Washington football team plays. I mean, that's what we're talking about. U.S. Navy Europe has four warships, plus a command and control vessel. That's for the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, the North Atlantic, Arctic, everything. That's it. And also, they're responsible for the seas around Africa.

So in terms of a threat, when we deployed one company of paratroopers – so we're talking about 120 young infantry soldiers, paratroopers, on their feet – a company each into Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, that was the initial American response. That's the threat that's encircling Russia. So it's a totally false narrative, but unfortunately there are senior people in European capitals and even here in Washington that are willing to accept that somehow it's our fault that – we caused Russia to do what they're doing.

TIERSKY: General, one of the instances in which Moscow has deployed this narrative of a provocation from the West is something I mentioned at the top of the episode, which is this incident in the Black Sea in late June with a U.K. warship, the HMS Defender. Can you remind our listeners more or less what happened? Why was the Defender there in the first place? Why did Russia seem to take exception to that presence? And, you know, at the time some headlines were suggesting war in the Black Sea, you know, was either happening or was imminent. You know, was that a realistic possibility? Please.

HODGES: Well, first of all, as the Navy would say, bravo zulu to the commander and crew of HMS Defender for a very well-executed mission, sailing from Odessa up – exercising what's called innocent passage, which is a common maritime construct, en route to Georgia. Now, this was not an accident, of course, but this is how you enforce international law, and things like freedom of navigation, which the United State Navy does a lot out in the Indo-Pacific region. And this is going to continue to take place. International law really ends up being what the international community says it is. And if nobody challenges Russia's illegal claims or, for that matter, China's illegal claims – if you don't challenge it, then de facto it becomes accepted. And then it's much harder – much more difficult to unpack that, so – or to undo it.

So the way the HMS Defender carried out their mission, I was – I was really impressed. What's most interesting, though, to me, is the reaction or the overreaction of the Kremlin to what happened. They were caught by surprise. They were embarrassed. And that's why you see these dramatic reports about they fired shots, they ran off Defender, they had multiple aircraft up in the air. That's because they didn't know what was happening. They were embarrassed by this. And of course, what they did by their reaction is to remind the entire world that their occupation of Crimea is illegal.

And I think that it was also smart for the Royal Navy to have Jonathan Beale of the BBC on board HMS Defender as well. And I think this is a practice that should be copied throughout naval operations when you're doing these kind of things, so that you have a respected, independent journalist who's able to report. Because you can be sure the Kremlin will offer their own view. We were not close to war at all. But I think that the – we'll have to continue to do these kinds of operations.

TIERSKY: I take your point on messaging and transparency in particular, and the role of – the role of the media is absolutely crucial. But of course, there were different narratives about exactly what happened. From the – from the U.K. perspective, and I think the United States backed them up on this, the U.K. was doing something that, yes, was asserting an international – was asserting international law and respecting international law. From the Russian perspective, it was a violation of what they called Russian territory, because as you said they've illegally annexed Crimea.

And the issue here was this interplay between what the international community considers Ukrainian territory and Ukrainian waters around Crimea and international waters, and the Russian claims to that. But then, of course, there were the differing narratives about whether the Defender itself was shot at or whether this was just some training exercise by the Russians that the U.K. authorities were well aware of. What do you think the purpose is of these differing narratives?

HODGES: Well, of course, this highlights probably – I'm saying this as a former infantry soldier, not a sailor. So the only fault I could find with this particular operation by the Royal Navy was that they didn't have the messaging worked out ahead of time. I mean, surely they – I mean, again, it was not an accident that they passed where they did. So maybe having had the messaging and everything in place a little bit better beforehand, so that they had the chance to make sure what was happening, and that the whole world could see that. And then the

predictable Kremlin response would have been more – even more clearly a false – a false narrative. So that would be the only critique I would I have.

But this goes to the larger – the larger question. Things like HMS Defender sailing through – or, executing innocent passage. Or when the Donald Cook is in the Black Sea as part of normal operations, this has to be part of a larger strategy for the Black Sea region. These various tactical events that have strategic implications, or could have, need to be woven into a larger fabric of what is it we're trying to accomplish. And of course, one of the objectives there is to make sure that the Black Sea remains nobody's lake. It's not a Russian lake, or a NATO lake, or Turkey, or whatever. It's international water.

And we have allies that are there as well as partners. And we have to complete in military terms, but also in diplomatic and economic terms. This exercise was partly military but, more than anything, it's an information and diplomatic domains. And so you – it has to fit into the larger effort. That was – that's where – that's how you win in the information competition.

TIERSKY: Sir, I totally take your point. But if we could zoom out even further a little bit, you've written really compellingly about the Black Sea region in some depth. I would love for you to give our listeners a better sense of why the Black Sea matters and why things have changed so dramatically in recent years in the Black Sea region. Why should it matter to the United States what is going on in the Black Sea? And who are some the other key players that have a role to play on Black Sea regional security?

HODGES: Well, great question. And it's not always an easy one to answer. I mean, honestly, until I was the commander in İzmir, Turkey I didn't fully appreciate it. You know, in most maps you look at the Black Sea and Turkey are – they're down kind of in the righthand – the bottom righthand bottom of the map, when you look at maps of Europe in any NATO headquarters. So it's almost psychologically slightly out of sight.

And even though Turkey has been a great ally since 1952, challenging many, many times including right now, but nonetheless they've been an ally since 1952. We usually look to them only because of their ability to block the Soviet Black Sea fleet sailing out of the Black Sea through the Bosporus and Dardanelle. So that was the extent of strategic thinking for most people, I think, and certainly for myself up until just recently.

The reasons that I think the Black Sea matters, and why it's so important, and why we have to have a strategy for the Black Sea region really kind of falls into three categories. Number one, we have allies that live on the Black Sea – Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey. So in order to help ensure that they are included in collective defense, we have to be able to protect them or support them, as well as partners like Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova. So there's an obligation sense there from a security standpoint.

The second reason is Russia uses the Black Sea as a launching pad for everything that they do in the Balkans, in the Caucasus, obviously in Ukraine, their malign influence in Syria, their support for the Assad regime, their attempts to expand their influence in the Eastern Med and into Africa. That's all only possible because of their illegal bases in Crimea. That is how

they support what they're doing. And so we have to compete to prevent them from – not from operating in the Black Sea – of course it's international water – but from exporting their aggression and expansionist efforts from the Black Sea.

And then the third reason, the area where I think we have the most room to improve is in economic investment in the region. If you think of east-west trade between China and the West, or between Europe and Eurasia, there's three corridors. One goes through Russia, one goes through Iran, and one goes through the Caucasus and the Black Sea.

If we compete and we for example, help Georgia become this portal, and you get European countries investing there to establish logistics hubs that would significantly increase the speed with which commerce can happen between Europe and Eurasia. Not just energy, but also product. It has a positive effect for Ukraine. It has a positive effect for Turkey. For sure Romania and other countries on the Danube would benefit significantly. But because there is no steady, safe, large-scale east-west traffic in the Black Sea, Romanian infrastructure is weak, the Danube is suitable really only for local commerce and our grandparents on the Danube River cruises, and we don't – and we have not challenged Russian adequately. And that's how you end up with Russian troops now in all three countries of the South Caucasus.

TIERSKY: Sir, when you say "we" have not challenged Russia effectively, you also talked just a few moments ago about the role – the fact that we have treaty allies who are on the Black Sea itself. And you spoke to Turkey's centrality as an ally, and importance. How well do you think we're doing in terms of coordinating working together with our allies – our Black Sea allies? Turkey in particular, but some of the others as well?

HODGES: Well, I would say at the top of the list, in terms of strong, positive effective relationship and investment and effort, is Romania. Part of this is their location, their geographic location. They're on the west side of the Black Sea. The United States Army, the United States Air Force have grown considerably in there at the invitation and with the support of Romanian government. Romania, of course, is by far a 2 percenter. They're modernizing – they're doing all the right things themselves. So Romania has become our center of gravity, if you will, for U.S. defense efforts in the Black Sea region.

Turkey is an extremely important ally. The problem is, like I say, they're always at the bottom righthand corner of the map. So if you kind of – you take the Black Sea and move it to the middle of the map, it completely changes how you think about the region and the role of Turkey. Turkey is not only important for the Black Sea; it's also important as a bulwark against Islamic extremism, against Iran. I remember talking to a senior staff officer in the Turkish general staff a few years ago. I said, sir, how's it going? And he said, Ben, I tell you what, I wake up in the morning and I've got Russia to the north, Iran-Iraq-Syria to the south, the Balkans to the west, and the Caucasus to the east. It's a hell of a neighborhood. (Laughs.)

When he said that it was, like, well, that was so obvious, but I had not thought of it that way. And so Turkey is concerned that we, NATO, as well as the United States, sort of take them for granted. And they have to hedge their bets a little bit. And look, I don't excuse any of the – of the bad decisions they've made. The S-400 obviously is a terrible decision that only hurts

Turkey. They're now out of the F-35 program, correctly, because of that decision. And of course, for a journalist Turkey is not a good place to be. For a democratically elected government to suppress media the way they do is very unfortunate.

But I can also see why they have lost trust in us. Our decision to give weapons to YPG, for example, to fight against ISIS is unconscionable. Turkey can't understand that.

TIERSKY: Sure, YPG being a group that they consider terrorists, and then regularly reminding us of such, yeah.

HODGES: Yeah.

TIERSKY: Yeah.

HODGES: So I think Bulgaria, a long way to go there. I see flashes, but not consistent in terms of what we're doing with them or what they do. Georgia is such an important country, a friend. Georgia should be in NATO now. But Georgia has a responsibility to also make sure it is welcoming to business, that they have transparency, that they support the institutions of liberal democracy. Recently, of course, they did the opposite. It makes it tough to advocate for them. And also it makes them vulnerable – it makes them very vulnerable to Russian influence. Russia announced today they're ready to reestablish normal relationships with Georgia. So that's – this is the competition we're talking about.

TIERSKY: General, thanks. And I'd just remind our listeners that you mentioned the S-400 purchase by Turkey, which of course is a Russian air defense system that all of their NATO allies – all of Turkey's NATO allies, including the secretary-general himself, were warning: This is incompatible with NATO technology and a real problem in the bilateral relationship, and it has been for a number of years. Clearly unresolved to date.

Sir, if we could, I want to move to talking a bit more about Ukraine specifically, and major Russian military movements both recent and upcoming, and spend a few minutes talking about – you know, of course we could talk for hours about the hot war in Ukraine. It's anything but a frozen conflict. You mention the servicemen who have been killed recently. Of course, more than 14,000 lives claimed since the conflict began. And it's very much ongoing. One of the most recent kind of dramatic flashpoints was this massing of troops both in Ukraine and on Ukraine's eastern border in late March, early April.

Again, the figures were something like 100,000 troops. And the newspapers were reporting – frankly, our Ukrainian friends and partners were suggesting a major military offensive against Ukraine was conceivable in the context of that deployment. What were you thinking as you watched this Russian buildup? And its wake, do you think that Moscow achieved whatever objectives it might have had going into that deployment?

HODGES: So if my assessment is correct that I laid out a little bit earlier, that they will stop only when they are stopped, then I would say what happened in the spring was just the next stage of deploying capability into a place where they can use it when they want to, or when the

conditions are set, or when they're ready. Now, you know, whenever I talk to some European friends and they say, Ben, why are you so worried about Russia? They have the GDP of Italy.

OK, first of all, I don't trust any number that comes out of – out of Moscow. But let's say – let's say that was their GDP. But yet, they're willing to deploy hundreds of thousands of troops and keep them deployed for extended periods of time. This is really expensive. So if their economy is small and weak, and yet they're willing to do that, it's for a reason. Whether it's to intimidate, or whether it's to invade, or whether it's to continue to erode – undermine the Zelensky government in Kyiv, this is for a purpose. This is not just for training.

Now, it could be I'm completely wrong here, that they are – they were just exercising and I'm overreacting to it. And I will acknowledge that if it turns out that that's the case. But when I – when I look at what they have done, I really believe that this is going to be a long, hot summer for Ukraine. It already is quite warm, but when you think about the presence that they have there, the lack of a meaningful reaction from the West –I mean, think about it.

Nord Stream 2, the agreement between the United States and Germany to allow it to continue, that's part of this whole picture. When you go back to a couple of months ago, when President Putin laid out his long essay about, you know, the history and what Russia's doing – I mean, it is basically – you know, that's "Mein Kampf." I mean, he's telling everybody, this is – this is the plan. Here's what – here's what we believe and here's what we're going to do. And I think people that live closer to Russia absolutely believe that. People that live further away from Russia are, like, come on, they're not going to do that. Why would they do that?

TIERSKY: Sure. General, I think it's important to underline what you said, which is they made this giant deployment in the spring, but of course even though they announced publicly that most of these forces and equipment had been withdrawn, in fact we know that they – much of that has remained. That's in the public domain. So it's sitting there, ready to be used. And of course, as we look forward in, I believe it's September 10th to 16th, those are the formal dates for a big Russian military exercise that they are announcing – Zapad 2021. Zapad meaning "west." It happens every four years.

The last iteration in 2017, our Baltic friends and others on the eastern flank of NATO were quite concerned that that exercise might be prelude to, again, some sort of a territorial grab of some sort, as Russian exercises have been in the past. So as you put this together, the deployment you saw in the spring, what was left behind, and the preparations ongoing today for Zapad 2021 – again, that formally starts in the middle of September but, sir, as you know far better than I do, it's essentially already underway – what are your expectations for the next few weeks?

HODGES: Well, you know, first of all, in the work that you do at Helsinki Commission that's so important, of explaining and educating all of us about the importance of transparency, and why you have agreements – to which Russia is a signatory, by the way – to be transparent about what's going on, to reduce tensions, to reduce the chances of mistakes. The problem is, Russia is absolutely, completely dishonest. They don't report, or they lie. I read this morning the deputy defense minister of Belarus says during Zapad there will be about 12,800 troops

involved. (Laughter.) How convenient, the – you know, the number – the threshold, of course, is 13,000. So they're going to have about 12,800.

TIERSKY: Sorry, the threshold – excuse me for interrupting – but the threshold there, of course, if they were at 13,000, they would have to invite a huge observation mission from all of the OSCE participating States. That's one of their commitments. Please go ahead.

HODGES: No, thanks for continuing to help me clarify these points. And of course, for an exercise there are tens of – for an exercise of that scale, there are actually tens of thousands of other troops – logistics, command and control, communications, transport – all that are part of enabling the actual exercise. And in my view, the Russians sort of – if you look at the map, they'll draw a circle around a little piece of the exercise and say: That's Zapad. And then you have all these other things that are going on that are linked to it. But they'll say, well, that's not part of Zapad. And that's how they manipulate the numbers.

That's like watching a – before a football game you see the kickers are over here, the receivers are over here, the linemen are over here. You know, people are warming up. And calling just one little piece of that, that's the football game. Well that's ridiculous, obviously. So the lack of transparency is what makes this dangerous. And it's why our allies – I spoke with a senior Latvian officer yesterday. They are watching this like a hawk, as you would expect, because they are very concerned. And some people even link this flow of illegal immigrants that Belarus is pushing into Lithuania and Latvia as, number one, they can watch and see how Latvia and Lithuania respond, but also draw attention over there away from other parts of the exercise.

So I think we need to be very sober about what's going on. For me, I look for logistics, I look for field hospitals, I look for those kinds of things because that's what takes the most time to move around. And finally, I would say this is where Berlin really should be stepping up. I think Berlin is the only capital that can truly influence Kremlin behavior. And Berlin should be telling Moscow, like, you guys, this is unacceptable. You're going to have to be more transparent and hold them accountable. But I don't see that happening, unfortunately.

TIERSKY: Well, sir, that's actually a great transition. We only have – we only have a few minutes left. And we've gone through a whole slate of problems and challenges and reasons to be concerned. I think some of the key sentiments that you expressed were kind of sober vigilance and looking at this through a realistic lens of what's happening over the next few weeks and the foreseeable future. Sir, I'd like you to speak a little bit more about what do we do about it? What do we do about it?

You've spoken compellingly about the need to have a better strategic focus on the Black Sea region and making sure that we are lashed up tightly with some of our allies there in particular. You just mentioned the potential role of Germany. So maybe that's a good place to start. You've suggested Germany is uniquely able to potentially influence Moscow. Could you say a little bit more about that, and what levers Berlin might have on Moscow, and how we might be able to work with Germany and some of our other allies and partners in the region to address some of these challenges?

HODGES: So Germany, of course, is a leader inside the European Union, as well as being a leader inside the – inside NATO. So they have influence far beyond just their own sovereign borders in that regard – economic influence, diplomatic influence. They have a sort of a moral authority that they've earned over the last 70 years as well. And so there are a lot of different touchpoints that they have directly and indirectly with Russia. And I think Russia has a lot of respect for Germany, for historical reasons as well as current economic ties.

And so this is why I think – in fact, it was the only glimmer of – only positive side I saw to the decision by the White House to forgo sanctions on Germany for Nord Stream 2 was – I was thinking, well, obviously the administration is counting on Germany as an important ally that can do things, that can help us with China, that can help us with Russia, and so on. So I'm hoping that some of that behind the scenes thing – discussions took place and are taking place. I just – I'm just not seeing the evidence of it yet.

And I think the Russians know, if Germany were to get serious – really serious about defense, about readiness, about being tough in enforcing the Minsk agreement to which Germany, and France, Ukraine and Russia are all a party, then I think that would affect Russian behavior. So that's why I would like to see the administration really lean on our German allies to exert some pressure here.

TIERSKY: Thank you, General. Are there other avenues we should be exploring, other than Germany's specific role to really address this comprehensively?

HODGES: Well, I would love it if the president – our president were to come out and say: Hey, Vladimir, I don't have a strategy for the Black Sea yet, but I got my best people working on it and you can be sure we're going to compete – because great-power competition can prevent great-power conflict. When we demonstrate that we care, we put resources against it, it's comprehensive in terms of diplomacy, enforcing international law and economic investment. You start getting German companies, American companies, French companies invested in Georgia, for example, then the Bundestag, the parliaments of Europe will start paying attention to what's going on there. But without investment, they don't care. There's no skin in the game. That sounds kind of cold, but I think that's where we are. So that would be one thing.

Obviously our great alliance, NATO – the most successful alliance in the history of the world – that doesn't mean it's perfect. That doesn't mean that we don't have challenges. That doesn't mean that nations don't gnaw on each other occasionally about things. But the fact is, keeping the alliance together strongly and continuing to adapt, the way Secretary-General Stoltenberg is leading us now and with the United States removing all doubt about our commitment to security and stability in Europe and why it's to our advantage that Europe is not on fire, that will go a long way to deterring Russian aggression.

TIERSKY: Sir, those are terrific words to end on, I think. General Hodges, I want to thank you for being on the podcast and, of course, for your service to our country both in uniform and in your second career. I know you're very active on Twitter. I follow you closely. So I'd recommend to all of our listeners that they follow you there. And they should, of course,

also track your many contributions at CEPA through the website CEPA.org. Any final words you'd like to close with, sir?

HODGES: Well, Alex, thanks to you for this opportunity. And I've enjoyed watching you and working with you over the years. I was always able to tell my European friends that support of the United States Congress for NATO was so important that, regardless of who is in the administration, that the Congress has always in a strong bipartisan way supported our relationships in Europe, worked hard to hold our allies accountable for doing their part. But nonetheless, there was never a doubt. And I think this congressional support for the alliance and for deterrence is essential. And I think our allies, as well as our adversaries, understand that.

TIERSKY: General, thanks so much for that. It's very much appreciated.

With that, listeners, we've come to the end of another episode of Helsinki on the Hill. As you know, we're always interested in hearing from you, and you know how to get in touch with us. Thanks again for joining us. Until the next conversation, I'm Alex Tiersky, signing off.

(END)