

**Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe:
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Helsinki on the Hill Podcast

**“On the Precipice: Leading the U.S. Response to Russian Aggression at the
OSCE”**

Guests:

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Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)**

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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 Russia's brutal war against Ukraine grinds on, with its dismal rhythm of human suffering and atrocities that continue to surface on what seems to be a daily if not hourly basis, we have the extraordinary opportunity today to spend some time with someone who is very much at the leading edge of the Biden administration's response. I could not be more delighted and honored to be able to welcome to the podcast Dr. Michael Carpenter, the U.S. Permanent Representative to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the OSCE. Ambassador Carpenter, thank you so much for joining us.

CARPENTER: Thanks, Alex, for having me.

TIERSKY: Well, it's really lovely to have you on the podcast and to have you, as usual, in close collaboration with the Helsinki Commission is so many different ways.

CARPENTER: Great. It's a pleasure.

TIERSKY: Well, if I could, Ambassador, I'm really eager to jump into the substance. But I think I'd be doing our listeners a disservice if I didn't just take a moment or two at the outset to give you even just a minimal introduction. In a formal sense, you came to this job with, I think it's safe to say, a fairly unique set of qualifications. I just want to tick off a few.

Prior to this position you were the managing director of the Penn Biden Center for Diplomacy and Global Engagement at the University of Pennsylvania. You served in the Pentagon as deputy assistant secretary of defense for Russia, Ukraine, Eurasia, and conventional arms control. You worked in the White House as a foreign policy advisor to then-Vice President Biden and as director for Russia at the National Security Council. As if all of this weren't enough, you previously served as a career Foreign Service officer in a number of directly relevant roles.

So I could go on, but in short, Ambassador, not only are you a deeply experienced expert on Russia and on regional security issues, you've also had a long and close working relationship with the president himself. So I just want to start there. It would seem to me that your appointment to this position seems to be an extraordinarily rare match between the man and moment, as it were. What do you think about that?

CARPENTER: Well, I feel fortunate to be in this job. It's really an incredible honor and a privilege to be Permanent Representative of the U.S. to the OSCE because, in a sense, my entire professional career has led up to this point. I spent a lot of time, as you noted, working on Russia and the states on Russia's periphery. I've worked on some rather abstract issues, like the OSCE's Minsk Group, which worked on resolving the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.

And I also have some personal history in the region. My maternal grandparents were married just a couple months before the start of World War II. And they both fought in the underground Polish home army throughout the course of the war. And then after the war, my grandfather in particular was tortured by the Soviet secret services, NKVD at the time, and was asked to divulge the names of his fellow home army officers. He refused and lost his job. But he remained – well, he remained a strident anti-communist, a believer in democracy and human rights throughout his life, and eventually lived to see an independent sovereign, democratic Poland emerge in 1989.

So a lot of the issues that the OSCE takes up, whether it's democracy or human rights or a value on freedom – individual freedom – are sort of near and dear to my heart and have been with me since – literally, since childhood.

TIERSKY: Yeah. Yeah. Well, let's talk about your arrival at the OSCE for a moment. If I'm not mistaken, you presented your credentials here in November. If you can think back to that time when you first arrived. I mean, you were obviously well-experienced on what the OSCE was and it was it was really all about. How did you see the contours of your position back then?

CARPENTER: Well, it really felt at the time as if I was walking into a crisis that was about to become a conflagration, something that was really about to spark and just take off. And in fact, that's exactly what happened. I mean, I arrived in November, and the United States already had intelligence at the time suggesting that Russia was about to launch a full-scale attack on Ukraine. We didn't know the exact timing, but we knew that it was in the works. And we were warning all of our allies and partners that this was about to happen.

And so I arrived just before the OSCE ministerial. And that was part of my mandate from day one, is to work on this and to warn our allies and partners that this was coming. But it really – it felt like we were on sort of the precipice of a new era, in a bad way. And unfortunately, that proved to be correct.

TIERSKY: Sure. We fell off that precipice on the 24th of February with Russia's full-scale reinvasion of Ukraine. And I wonder, to what extent – inasmuch as you were prepared, the administration was talking about this as a coming possibility, did it still seem somehow unexpected or unreal?

CARPENTER: It did. I mean, the notion that Russia could launch this full-scale invasion and try to take the capital city of Kyiv and decapitate the Ukrainian government did seem fantastic. It seemed like it would be against Russia's own interest because it would turn generations of Ukrainians for decades to come against Russia, and that it wouldn't pan out. I mean, the notion that Russia could do this with even 150,000 troops did seem crazy at the time. And yet, we saw the information streams that we had available, and judged that it was credible that the Kremlin would try this.

TIERSKY: Sure. Sure. Well, to the extent that you already in your position here in Vienna – you were in regular dialogue with your colleagues from other countries, other OSCE

participating States, I would say you were, in a sense, well-prepared. And you were clearly helping deliver the administration's message that this was coming. Did the other delegations – were they also prepared? Or did they face a different kind of shock when this actually happened?

CARPENTER: I think it – the whole notion that Russia could launch this scale of attack on Ukraine was considered fantastical by a lot of my colleagues. But what we did as soon as I arrived here in November, is we really focused on working with our likeminded states – in fact, working all states here at the OSCE – to engage the Russians in dialogue and diplomacy, to try desperately to find a way out, so that we didn't enter into a period of war, so that people didn't have to unnecessarily die and that there wouldn't be suffering.

And so my job was to work as closely as I possibly could with the last year's chair, Sweden, this year's chair, Poland, to try to set up some sort of a structure where we could have discussions with the Russians about their stated concerns and see if we could find a way out. And in the process, we were willing to make some real compromises on our end to try to avoid this war. Ultimately, as it turns out, you know, Putin was probably set on war all along. He never really intended to engage in any sort of diplomacy. But we tried. We tried. And we prove to the world that we were willing to try. That was – that was important.

TIERSKY: Well, let me – let me pick that up. Because you do hear kind of out there in the ether this idea that the OSCE is an organization that has had tools at its disposal that were designed precisely to prevent the emergence of this kind of large-scale conflict among the participating States of the OSCE, which of course we know include Russia and Ukraine, among others.

Is the eruption of this conflict or the eruption of this conflagration, this new stage in Russia's war against Ukraine, is it a failure of the OSCE? Or, to put it differently, why didn't some of these mechanisms that already existed at the OSCE – why didn't they work? And let me add to that, what you just described, this real effort to engage the Russians in conversations here in Vienna, was that a new mechanism that was developed for the purposes of what you were seeing brewing? And again, why didn't that work?

CARPENTER: So I think a lot of the tools that we had at our disposal did work for the purposes that they were intended. But the OSCE, like any international organization, can only achieve so much when you have a nuclear power like Russia, a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council, intent on launching a full-scale attack against its peaceful neighbor. And so we tried to make it more difficult for Russia. We extended the offer of dialogue and diplomacy. We launched with the Poles this new enhanced European security dialogue on, I believe it was, January 13th.

TIERSKY: Let me just clarify that here you're referencing the Poles as the current chairmanship in office, or the leadership of the OSCE.

CARPENTER: That's right. This year's chairman in office of the OSCE is Poland. And after talking with the Poles rather intensively for many weeks in the leadup to their assumption

of the chairmanship, they agreed that they would launch this renewed European security dialogue. And we tried to see if there was anything that the Russians would be interested in where we could make some compromises and perhaps address their security concerns. So we talked about confidence building, and risk reduction, and even suggested the possibility of reciprocal limitations. And the Russians wanted none of it.

So we used that tool to expose that fact, to expose the fact that the Russians were not interested in a serious dialogue on security. And in the leadup to February 24th, just in fact the week before the war commenced, we invoked something called the Vienna document, which is a risk reduction mechanism at the OSCE, that is supposed to allow for military transparency in moments of crisis. And we took Belarus, and we took Russia, and we invoked this Vienna document. And we demanded of them that they explain the huge number of troops that they were accumulating on Ukraine's borders and what they intended to do with those troops.

And the Russians boycotted those meetings, and the Belarusians essentially said things that didn't add up to reality. And so we also exposed that they were hiding something, that they were not being genuine, that there was not real transparency. So we didn't stop the war because this is – you know, the OSCE is not the world's police. Neither is the U.N. Neither is any international organization. But we did use the tools at our disposal to show that we were willing to negotiate in good faith, but that the Russian side was not.

TIERSKY: Sure. And as you said, these are tools that were designed for a certain purpose. And in my own experience of tools like the Vienna document, they're designed to dispel misperceptions and reduce tensions when both sides are essentially participating in good faith and they're trying to avoid a kind of accidental conflict, if I can put it that way. And if I understand what you're saying right – correctly, this was not an accidental conflict.

CARPENTER: No. No. This was likely planned at least a year if not years in advance. And even the best mediator cannot bridge a solution when one of the parties is intent on waging war, especially if that party is a nuclear power that has the capabilities, that has the combat forces – the tanks, the armored personnel carriers, the fighter jets, et cetera – to be able to launch such a war. And that's the case here. Russia and Putin were likely intent on this all along. And we proved that they were not genuine about diplomacy, but we couldn't stop – unfortunately, we couldn't stop this war.

TIERSKY: Well, Ambassador, I want to come back to the strategic picture and the war in a minute, as well as Russia's intentions – which you started to hint at. But let me stay with the OSCE right now. We've established that you, your colleagues, the administration, and the organization itself made efforts to try to defuse and prevent and avoid this conflagration. We're obviously past that point now. So what I'd like to ask you to talk about is where and how is the OSCE providing value right now, as regards Russia's aggression against Ukraine?

CARPENTER: Yeah. Great question. So, in a couple of ways. First, we're exposing what Russia is doing. We're exposing the atrocities, the war crimes, and what the most recent OSCE fact-finding mission pronounced crimes against humanity. And so we are ensuring that no country in the world can be numb to what Russia is doing in Ukraine. The horrors, the

brutality of this war is brought to life, and that everybody understands what the stakes are as well. In other words, we're talking about what's happening on the ground, but also about the fact that this is a naked land grab. That this is a repudiation of all the fundamental principles of the international order, in an attempt to change borders by force – which no country should tolerate.

And so we're speaking about this. And we have successfully, in fact, isolated Russia at the OSCE, because there is not a single other country here that defends Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine. There are some countries that choose to be silent because they are likely afraid of what Russia would do if they spoke out against Russia. But no country is siding with Russia. And so that in itself is – serves a purpose.

But also, you know, I'll tell you, Alex, the OSCE also has – it has projects that it manages. And it has field missions on the ground in a lot of the countries that are actually the most vulnerable to Russian malign influence. Central Asia, the south Caucasus, Moldova, the western Balkans. And we want to preserve as well the OSCE's ability to do good works in these countries and to make them more resilient and make them less vulnerable to either Russian or PRC or any other form of malign influence.

TIERSKY: So you see – you see the OSCE's role elsewhere, further than specifically on Ukraine, as part of the same whole of dealing with what I guess we could call the Russia problem?

CARPENTER: Yeah, absolutely. We want to get the OSCE back into Ukraine. There is a small presence there now, but we want to expand that footprint over time so that we can get the OSCE involved in strengthening Ukrainian civil society, improving governance, and helping spur democratic reforms, making Ukraine more resilient, but also dealing, frankly, when they do go back in, with the horrific consequences of the war. To include trying to prevent people from being trafficked, trying to deal with sexually-based violence that we've seen an uptick in, and any other number of things – the tremendous psychosocial needs of victims of war.

We want that to happen in Ukraine, but we also want to strengthen the other states that are not experiencing war but that are also vulnerable, because they see this Russian aggression in Ukraine. And many of the states on Russia's periphery are deadly afraid that they could be next. And so we need to shore them up. And that's where the OSCE has a role to play.

TIERSKY: Ambassador, thank you for that. I want to just turn a bit to something that you mentioned, which was the OSCE's role in accountability and in documenting the atrocities that are ongoing right now. And it brings to my mind your own statements, both within the OSCE context and elsewhere in the press. It seems like you are very deliberate in terms of your reminding the international community of the human perspective of this conflict. Because, of course, we can talk about the strategic picture, and I'd like to do that, but you've frequently focused on really vivid human examples of exactly who is suffering in this unprovoked war. Why is that so important?

CARPENTER: Alex, I'll tell you, I think it's critically important. And I don't mince words. I convey the realities of this war as they are. And I try to highlight individual stories, personal accounts to the extent that I can, drawing on eyewitness reports whenever possible, but also on media reports and other types of information, to really bring this home. That, you know, Russia's engaged in this disinformation campaign, claiming that Ukrainians are neo-Nazis. And so I want to talk about the mother whose 4-year-old child was killed by a Russian missile strike.

And I want to ask the question: In what way is she and her child – are they neo-Nazis? Of course, it's all ridiculous, but it needs – you know, sometimes it needs to be baldly stated. Look, these are human beings living in their city, going about their business in their neighborhoods. And they're being targeted and they're dying. And it just – people need to be reminded of this, because there's a tendency to focus on statistics and perhaps to think about whether, well, condemning Russia's aggression might result in some sort of blowback.

I want to make it patently clear to everyone what is happening here and what the stakes are, so that no one can be neutral about this conflict. Because you can't possibly be neutral about this sort of depravity. I mean, let's call it for what it is. And I want other participating States at the OSCE to take a similarly strong stance. And I have to say, I'm heartened that a lot of them have. That I'm not the only one that is speaking in vivid and clear terms. Others are too. And I think that is useful because it really does galvanize outrage, as it should. And it also encourages our allies and partners to support Ukraine – economically, militarily, with humanitarian assistance, or however else they can.

TIERSKY: Let's stick on that point for a moment, then. In terms of the support to Ukraine, of course, the Biden administration has at a minimum, I would say, made a significant investment in the future of Ukraine. I'd like you to spend a minute or two talking about how you see kind of the strategic picture, U.S. support for Ukraine, where you see our allies and likeminded states in terms of the support to Ukraine, and where you think this conflict might be going in the medium and the longer term?

CARPENTER: Yeah. Well, I think the support for Ukraine is essential, not simply because Ukraine is a peaceful country that was attacked and, frankly, deserves the ability to defend itself and to survive as an independent, sovereign nation-state. But quite aside from Ukraine, this war has ramifications that are truly global in terms of their impact and scope. I already mentioned that you have countries on Russia's periphery, but even a little bit further afield – the western Balkans, certainly the East European countries, south Caucasus, Central Asia. All of these countries look with fear at what is happening. And they understand well that should Russia be victorious in Ukraine, that they could be next in the Russian crosshairs. That their sovereignty could be attacked, that their population could suffer as a result of Russia's imperial ambitions.

But not just that. We're also talking about the very principles of the international order. We have – as I said before – we have a country that has violated the principle that borders cannot be changed by force, that disputes must be settled peacefully. And that has ramifications for the Indo-Pacific, for the Western Hemisphere, for literally the entire globe. And so we have to make that clear. And our support for Ukraine is also support for the international order. It's a support

for those principles, in addition to concrete, tangible support for a particular country and a particular people in their time of need.

TIERSKY: Sure. I've heard your team here be quite vocal in making the linkage, for instance, between the challenges Ukraine is facing vis-à-vis Russia's aggression and you mentioned the Indo-Pacific. Of course, the OSCE has partnership programs including a number of Asian countries. You know, in this context, in Vienna, my understanding is Japan, Australia, others will also speak now, since February, about how the aggression against Ukraine and against the international order is also relevant to their part of the world.

CARPENTER: Yes. I think they very much see it that way. And you're right. The Japanese and the Australian ambassadors in particular have been quite vocal – especially the Japanese ambassador, who is, of course, a member of the G-7 and, I think, feels that this is very much a war that impacts his part of the world as well. In other words, East Asia. Because, frankly, Russia is a Pacific power, as well as a European and Eurasian power.

And this truly does have global ramifications. Every single revanchist dictatorship that perhaps is eyeing its neighbor and wanting to redraw the borders to grab a piece of territory is looking to see how this shakes out. If Russia is judged to have failed, that will send a message throughout the international community. Conversely, if Russia were to succeed, it would send a very dangerous signal to the international community that might makes right. None of us wants to live in that type of world.

TIERSKY: Ambassador, as we come to our final few minutes of this conversation, I want to ask you a big picture question. I think you would agree, most of us would agree, that the 24th of February shattered once and for all the notion that the Russian regime is in any way a joint stakeholder in the better future that the OSCE was supposed to deliver. Can you give us your reflections on how you see Russia's role in the international system in the medium and longer term, and what factors might influence what we see in terms of a future Russia?

CARPENTER: Well, unfortunately, the Russia of today, the current occupants of the Kremlin, are essentially chaos actors. They are willing to tear up the rules of the road that govern international behavior in order to get their way. And we've seen this happen time and again. I mean, we saw it in Georgia in 2008. We saw it in Ukraine in 2014. We see it with the horrific war that's unfolding before our eyes today. But we also see it in other arenas where Russia flaunts the rules of various international organizations. Whether it's, you know, not implementing some of its commitments here at the OSCE, or whether it's violating the terms of the chemical weapons convention, or the attempted assassination of individuals in the U.K. using novichok and, you know, agents of that nature, to a whole range of other actions.

It is a country that is not guided by norms of behavior that guide most other countries in the world. And that is deeply problematic for as long as this current regime exists in the Kremlin. And so I don't think it's part of Russian DNA. I don't think it's inevitable. I think it could certainly change. I don't think it was that way in the 1990s. But it is that way today. And so it's very important that this revanchist, irredentist, revisionist attitude on the part of Russia be constrained, and that it fail.

I mean, I like to say that our number-one goal is for Ukraine to win. It's very important. But the flipside of that is that this revanchism also has to fail. I mean, they're two sides of the same coin. We want Ukraine to succeed, but we also – we need for this sort of revisionism to fail. Because if Russia doesn't do it, there's another country that might do it in the future. I think a lot of eyes are focused on the PRC, and rightly so, in terms of the five- to 10-year timeframe. But we don't know what other actors in the international system might choose to flaunt all the rules. They should know that they will pay dearly if they do that.

TIERSKY: Ambassador, those are some terrific words, I think, to conclude this conversation. I want to thank you, again, for joining us for Helsinki on the Hill. I want to give you a personal thanks for your close and continuing collaboration with the U.S. Helsinki Commission.

Listeners, I do want to flag for you that the ambassador's weekly statements at the OSCE's Permanent Council, which often make international news, are posted in full right after the ambassador delivers them. They are available at the mission's website, which is <https://osce.usmission.gov/>.

Ambassador Carpenter, any final thoughts you'd like to leave our listeners with?

CARPENTER: Well, you mentioned the Helsinki Commission, which I think is a wonderful bipartisan supporter of our work. And we, of course, also fully support their work through the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and through a number of other venues, including through domestic legislation, to advance our shared aims. I think it's wonderful that at this moment of crisis we have such likeminded agreement on what our chief goals are and how we should stand by our principles. That's terrific to see.

TIERSKY: Ambassador, I couldn't agree more. Thank you, again.

With that, listeners, we've come to the end of another episode of Helsinki on the Hill. Thank you, again, for joining us. Until the next conversation, I'm Alex Tiersky signing off.

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