Good morning, everyone. My name is John Hamre, and I welcome you to what’s going to be a very important conversation with Congressman Tom Malinowski. We’re privileged that he’s given us the time today to share with us his insights, having just returned from Ukraine. And he was at the Munich Security Conference and then went to Ukraine. So he’s got a very fresh and vibrant understanding of the situation in Ukraine, and this tragedy that’s unfolding.

There are a lot of Americans that will say, well, this isn’t our issue, this isn’t our fight. But we have to remind Americans that back in the early ’90s, we wanted and needed Ukraine to give up the nuclear weapons that were on their soil. And they did that in exchange for an agreement from us, and ironically from Russia, that we would respect their defense and sovereign integrity. And we do have an obligation to Ukraine that is very direct, in addition to the larger issue of promoting a Europe that’s free and prosperous. And so these are all questions on the table.

We’re very fortunate that Congressman Malinowski is with us today. He comes not only to this challenge with a great intellectual gift, but also very personal involvement. He was born in communist Poland. And he and his family fled and came to the United States. It caused him to dedicate his professional life to the cause of freedom. I first had a chance to meet the Congressman when he was on the staff of the National Security Council during the Obama administration. He subsequently became the president of human rights – of Human Rights Watch, the executive director. And then subsequently, in the Obama administration, as the assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights, and labor. And then in 2018, he ran for Congress. I think it’s a platform that’s worthy of his talents. And in this very short time, he has become the vice chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. He speaks with both intelligence and insight, but also passion. And we’re very fortunate to have him with us today.

Andrew Lohsen is going to conduct this interview. Andrew lived in Ukraine. He’s on our staff here at CSIS and lived in Ukraine, and so he has much more currency to be able to interact with Congressman Malinowski.

But I’d just like to say my sincere thanks to the congressman for taking the time this morning. You know, this is a work period for the congressman, but he’s carved it out and he’s given it to us, all of us. And so thank you, Congressman. We’ll turn to you. I think you’ll have some initial comments before we get started with the actual interview.

Thank you, John. Thanks, everyone. Great to be able to spend this time with you. I was, indeed, at the security conference in Munich last week. And I was also in Kyiv, in Ukraine, with a bipartisan delegation of members of Congress just about three weeks ago. And when I was there I tried to imagine what it would be like to see planes in the air dropping bombs down trying to kill me, tanks in the streets
firing on the buildings that I was having meetings in, or going out to eat in, at the people who I was meeting in this normal European capital.

And it was almost impossible to imagine. We see this in movies. We read about it in history books. This wasn’t supposed to happen ever again in Europe. It’s what happened in World War II. It’s the world that we – that we hoped would never emerge again. All of American foreign policy since 1945 has been about preventing this sort of thing from happening, preventing big countries from gobbling up small countries, just because they can. Preventing dictators from changing borders with tanks.

And that’s important to us, because when you think about it every single international border is in some way artificial. Every border is the product of past wars, and conquests, and empires rising and falling. Everyone in the world has kinship with somebody across an international border – kinship based on language, or culture, or past shared history. And yet at some point we just decided that we’re going to respect the borders that we have, even if none of them make perfect sense, because once you open up that can of worms and allow power and strength to determine where borders are drawn, then nobody in the world is safe.

And that’s really what’s at stake here, for me and for us. We may care about Ukraine. We may have friends there. We may sympathize with the cause of its people. They’re fighting so hard right now to protect their independence and their freedom. But fundamentally, it’s not about Ukraine. It’s about protecting a set of rules that protect all of us. And I think that’s important for all of us to repeat.

People ask, why is Putin doing this? I’m sure we’ll talk about that a little bit. And I think it’s also become pretty clear. The mask is off this man. It has nothing to do with any kind of legitimate concerns he has about Ukraine joining NATO. There’s no military threat from Ukraine to Russia. Little-known fact of recent history, Ukraine actually promised not to join NATO in 2010. They passed a resolution in their parliament, a resolution of neutrality, that they would join no military blocs, whether led by Russia or by the United States. And four years later, in 2014, Russia invaded them anyway, because – well, because they had overthrown a corrupt Putin-type, Putin-style leader, and established a much more healthy and vibrant democracy.

That’s what threatens Putin above all, that these people who do share a lot of kinship with Russians and a lot of history, who are very close by, who he believes are part of his sphere of influence, have set an example for the Russian people that you can boot out a corrupt and authoritarian leader, because they’re choosing to align themselves with Europeans. They want to be part of the European Union. That is actually much more threatening to Putin than NATO membership. And so he’s just decided that Ukraine doesn’t have a right to exist, unless it’s completely subjugated by Russia. That’s what he’s fighting for here.
And I think that is – it’s both awful and evil, but it’s also a weakness for Putin, because it’s not an obsession. His obsession with ending Ukraine as a country, with reconstituting the Soviet Union, is not an obsession I think that most Russians share. I think it may not even be an obsession that most Russian officials working for Putin share. If you – if anybody caught that surreal meeting of the Russian national security council that Putin staged just before the invasion, in which he humiliated his own officials and forced them to, in effect, ask him to do this thing on live television, they didn’t look very happy. (Laughs.) They didn’t look like this is – this is where they would be leading their country at this moment.

So I think, you know, although the Russian military has enormous strength compared to the Ukrainians, they clearly have superiority on the battlefield. They’re probably going to win a lot of tactical victories. They may take the capital of Kyiv, and all of that will be awful, I do think that strategically our side has more advantages than the Russian side. As long as we’re unified across the Atlantic, as long as we’re unified within the United States, as long as we understand the stakes and have the staying power to stand by the Ukrainians through what could be a long and difficult fight, I think a tactical victory for Putin could turn into a very significant strategic defeat. And that needs to be out goal. Thank you so much.

Andrew Lohsen: Well, thank you very much, Representative Malinowski, for joining us. We’re really pleased to be able to speak with you today on what is a very important time for the history of Ukraine, for Europe, and for the world. Certainly, all of us here in Washington, around the world, we’re looking at these images of what’s happening in Kyiv, what’s happening around Ukraine, and we’re asking the question of: What can we do to help? What can the United States do to respond to this aggression and to help Ukraine?

So perhaps I’ll start out, with my first question, just noting that sanctions are really in sharp focus right now. There’s plenty of discussions around it. And yet, you know, we hear that President Biden had announced sanctions yesterday on several Russian banks, on export – announcing export controls on sensitive technologies. And there seems to be a bipartisan appetite in Washington and in Congress to stand up to Russian aggression. And yet, we don’t have a legislative package that’s been agreed to actually initiate sanctions against the Russian Federation. I was hoping you could tell us a little bit more about where those conversations stand, and what’s at the core of disagreements in Congress about how to proceed? What do you expect to happen in the next couple of days?

Rep. Malinowski: The disagreement before the invasion was about whether we impose certain sanctions before Putin made his move or wait until after he made his move. Some argued that we needed send that message sooner, make him pay a price sooner. Others, and I was more in this camp, argued that if you imposed all the sanctions
before he made his move, then he would have nothing to lose. He might say, well, I’m going to suffer the pain of sanctions anyway. They’ve done their worst. I might has well just take Kyiv for – you know, for compensation.

That debate is moot right now, I think. There’s no – he’s done what he’s going to do. And so the question is, what can we realistically muster in response? The president announced very tough sanctions yesterday. The sanctions against the major banks in particular were at the very high end of what anybody might have expected. And he has the authority to do that. In other words, he doesn’t need additional legislation to impose those kinds of sanctions. I think we still can and should pass legislation. I think it’s important to show our political unity. And that will be an opportunity.

The Democrats and Republicans are largely on the same side here. And we largely are – despite the kind of pro-Putin faction of the Republican Party being very vocal, and other Republicans just, you know, looking or any opportunity to whack Biden – I think there is a solid core of members of Congress of both parties who want to work together. So I’m hopeful that we do that.

There are some things that we haven’t done yet. We have sanctioned some of the oligarchs and kleptocrats around Putin. I think that list needs to be much larger. And I think we need – we need to start thinking of sanctions in a slightly different way. It’s important that they be thorough and effective, but I also think they need to be more theatrical. I think – I think the world right now is craving images of Russian oligarchs’ yachts being seized in ports. I think we need images of police tape around their mansions and properties, whether in Miami, or the Riviera, or in London. The people need do see that in Russia. People need to see that in Ukraine. And as powerful as the banking sanctions that were announced are, they don’t – they don’t convey as dramatic an image. And in this way of images, which is partly what it is, we need a little shock and awe on our side as well.

Mr. Lohsen: Well, I understand that you were at the Munich Security Conference recently speaking with other Western leaders about how to respond to Russian aggression. And I’m curious whether the – our European allies and other leaders around the world are on the same page on trying to implement these tough measures – potentially some theatrical sanctions. I take note of the fact that, for example, in the U.K. there’s discussion now of seizing properties belonging to oligarchs in central London. What do you think about that?

Rep. Malinowski: Yeah. It better happen fast. It would be inexcusable at this stage for the Brits not to do that. And by the way, like, if I were a British politician my slogan right now would be: Make London affordable for English people. (Laughs.) It would be a – you know, it’s a win-win. And the Germans, of course, have taken the step we wanted of ending the Nord Stream pipeline. And that’s a huge difference. Remember, after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014 and then German signed the deal to start building the Nord Stream pipeline, right?
So last time not only were they not willing to impose harsh sanctions, they actually initiated a deal with the Russian government that was designed to undercut Ukraine. This time around they’re doing the opposite. So does that mean we’re 100 percent in agreement with everyone all the time? No. But I think in comparison to past security crises, there is more unity today between the United States and our European allies and within the European Union that probably ever before. I know that sounds like a cliché, but I actually mean it literally.

Mr. Lohsen: Also, recent estimates from the United States indicate that there might be 5 million people who are displaced as a result of this conflict – or, as a result of this conflict. And up to 50,000 civilians who may be killed as well. So how did the considerations of the humanitarian impact of this crisis weigh into your discussions on the Hill and other leaders around the world?

Rep. Malinowski: I don’t think we’ve seen the worst of this conflict. And it does – I do think that Ukrainian resistance is going to be stronger than the Russians anticipated. And while we can share that because we want the good guys to win, it also means that Russian – the Russian response to that resistance is going to become more brutal. Because that’s all they know how to do when they’re experiencing frustration. That will, in turn, lead to very significant humanitarian challenges.

Now, as of now, it does not seem as if the Russians are trying to take the entire country. They’re not moving – as one would have expected, they’re not moving in on western Ukraine. And so people from the militarized areas, from the battle zones, do have somewhere within Ukraine that they can go. And that’s a unique feature of this conflict. It’s not like they have to leave the country entirely to find – to find safety.

Those who do leave there will be many opportunities to cross the border into Romania, into Poland, into Slovakia. These EU countries are ready to be generous. And I think that the European Union in general is going to be very, very generous to Ukrainian refugees. We, the United States, should be willing to take our share, just to show that we’re willing to share the burden. But it’ll be mostly their burden. And then see where we go from there. That border, though, because very important if there’s an insurgency. One of the key elements of any successful insurgency is to have neighboring countries that are supportive of that insurgency. And in Ukraine, that condition is absolutely met.

Mr. Lohsen: Well, President Biden had also indicated that humanitarian assistance was going to be a part of the U.S. package to support Ukraine. So as you consider that, and, you know, once Congress is addressing this issue in depth, what particular areas and aspects of humanitarian assistance do you think we can expect? And is there the bipartisan support to implement that very quickly?
Rep. Malinowski: There will be bipartisan support for whatever needs to happen. The president simply needs to ask, and I think that will be provided. You know, we’ll have to see how the crisis unfolds, what the needs are. Certainly, we want to continue to provide military support to the Ukrainians. And if the president needs any additional preparations to enable that to happen, I’m sure that that will be forthcoming from Congress. We are ready to act and I think united on the principles, no matter what the partisan talking points may be on cable news.

Mr. Lohsen: I think that’s really reassuring to know, for those of us who care about Ukraine, and for the Ukrainians who are experiencing the conflict firsthand and in real time. One of the questions that I keep asking myself is how to kind of communicate why this is important to ordinary Americans who simply think that this is a conflict that’s far away from home, that the U.S. doesn’t have a dog in the fight, that it’s better just to stay out and let the Europeans handle it themselves. How do you respond to that? How is this an issue that Americans should care about?

Rep. Malinowski: That was the case I tried to make, that we – America helped build a world in which borders are not changed by force. And, you know, we – there are very few Americans still alive who have a memory of the Second World War, but I think it’s still part of our collective memory as a country. And we know what a mistake it was to let Hitler invade Czechoslovakia just because it was a tiny country far away that had nothing to do with us. And we never again want to learn that lesson the hard way, as we did in – when Pearl Harbor was attacked in 1941.

China’s watching this. China has designs on Taiwan, as we all know, and potentially other countries in its region. Iran is watching this. We absolutely do not want to send a signal to these aggressive powers that anything goes now – that the United States is no longer a serious country, that we’re no longer the head of a serious alliance that is willing to do its part to deter that kind of aggression.

And remember, we’re not being asked to fight. We’re not being asked to send troops. First thing that President Zelensky of Ukraine said to us when we met with him three weeks ago was: We do not need you to send a single American soldier to fight for Ukraine. We will do the fighting ourselves. We will protect our country. We just need you to be on our side, to help us with material support, to use your economic power to punish Russia. That’s all that’s being asked of us here. It’s not a lot.

And our European allies are with us. In fact, they’re going to shoulder a much greater share of the burden, because they’re the ones who are going to be taking refugees. They’re the ones who are going to suffer the consequences of Russia’s energy blackmail. I mean, Germans are going to be paying twice as much for heating, for heating their homes, because of this. And they’re willing to do it. So they’re willing to do that. We should be willing to do our part.
Mr. Lohsen: Now, one of the things that I also wanted to make sure that we had a chance to discuss was the democracy agenda, and what this means for the U.S. interest in supporting transitioning democracies around the world. Since the revolution of dignity in 2014, the cornerstone of U.S. support for Ukraine has been anti-corruption and governance assistance, and to help Ukraine transition into a more open society and a more fully functioning democracy. And yet, it seems now it’s being punished by Russia for pursuing those aspirations. So how do we take that into consideration as we – as we consider trying to promote open societies around the world and defend democracies from this new wave of authoritarianism?

Rep. Malinowski: Ukrainians didn’t start fighting corruption or building a democracy because we told them to, because we wanted them to. It’s what they want to do. (Laughs.) It’s how people want to live in any normal society in the world. We supported them in making that choice. We provided them with assistance and encouragement. But this was their chosen path. And their commitment to that chosen path only got stronger the more the Russians tried to stop them. And I think that there’s probably no people in the world today, on Friday February 25th, who are more committed to pursuing that path than the people of Ukraine, precisely because of what Russia is doing to them. So, look, we have to be on the side of the good guys here. We stand up to bullies. We stand up for democracy. That’s who we are. That’s our identity. That’s why people all around the world rally to our side when we need them in a crisis. And we’re going to continue to do that.

Mr. Lohsen: I’d like to turn now to a couple of questions from the audience. We’ve gotten some excellent questions in our Q&A. And one of them is, you know, building on this question, again, about what the current invasion means in the long run for democracies elsewhere. But there’s a specific focus on what this means for Taiwan and other countries – democracies that are imperiled by much larger neighbors who think that they can now enforce a might by right principle – or, right by might principle – excuse me. Pushing, you know, other countries around just to build spheres of influence. How would you respond to that? And what the United States can be doing, and the collective West can be doing, for other countries that are really looking for that reassurance?

Rep. Malinowski: Well, all these situations are a little bit different, but I think fundamentally it’s the same principle. And so, yes, the people of Taiwan are watching this very closely. And I’m sure they feel a strong sense of kinship with Ukrainians right now. China’s also watching this very closely. And I think the Chinese government is watching to see how steadfast the United States is going to be. Because that sends a signal. If our reaction is it’s a little country far away, it’s not worth any sacrifice, we’re more worried about the price of gas than the peace of Europe, then I think that’s a signal to China that if they – if they dare to invade Taiwan at some point in the future, that the United States is not going to have to stop them.
And that makes war there more likely. And that war would absolutely come home to the United States. (Laughs.) You don’t have to believe in any of the high principles that I’ve been – that I’ve been talking about in this conversation. Taiwan produces most of the world’s advanced microchips. You want to see car prices shoot through the roof? Invite China to invade Taiwan. If you don’t want China to invade Taiwan, defend Ukraine.

Mr. Lohsen: And one final question, if I may, is from the media, news, and global voices. Trying to understand how the war will impact the European security order. And I might add to that, are we operating in an environment now where the Helsinki Final Act is still valid, – you know, applies here? And to what extent are international norms threatened? What can be done to defend those?

Rep. Malinowski: International norms are being challenged. The most basic norms are being threatened here today. It’s not just the European security order. It’s the global security order, which has been based on sovereignty, based on the idea that you can’t change borders by force, as we have been discussing. And there is no rule that is real if it’s not enforced. We can have a law that says you can’t rob a bank, but if the police don’t do anything when somebody robs a bank, does that rule really still exist?

Now, by the same token, if the rule is written and the police are there and they do their best to enforce it, people are still going to rob banks. I mean, rules are always tested and challenged, and sometimes broken. The important thing is how hard do we try? How committed are we to try to enforce and defend them? And right now, I think it’s going to be difficult, but we are meeting the test. The United States and our allies have come together in a very significant way. And we were ready even before the crime was committed. We built the prison before Putin committed the crime, in terms of preparing these sanctions. I think we are standing by the rule and imposing costs that will deter others from violating it.

Mr. Lohsen: Thank you very much, Representative Malinowski. It’s been a pleasure to speak with you today. It’s certainly always very important for us to understand what’s happening on the Hill, how people are thinking about it. And certainly someone who has your experience addressing challenges to global democracy and human rights, it’s a unique perspective that we certainly value. So wanted to wish you the best of luck in your discussions with Congress. We’ll certainly be looking forward to seeing what comes in terms of potential sanctions legislation in the coming days. And we’ll certainly be watching and thinking about our friends and colleagues in Ukraine.

Rep. Malinowski: Thank you so much. Great to be with you.