Online Event
The Ukraine Crisis and Asia: Implications and Responses

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FEATURING
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Well, good morning, everyone, and thank you for joining us. My name is Jude Blanchette and I’m the Freeman Chair in China Studies here at CSIS. I’m delighted to be moderating this very important discussion today on how the Russian invasion of Ukraine is reverberating through Asia, both in the near term but also looking longer term.

I think as most of us watched the horror and destruction that has been unleashed by Vladimir Putin, we’re also seeing great heroism and courage by the Ukrainian people, and strong condemnation and actions from nations around the world. And this, of course, includes Asia, where events of the past several weeks are being watched with great concern. And it’s clear we’re going to see some very important long-term repercussions, both from the actions of Vladimir Putin but also from other important dynamics which have occurred – importantly, the increasing alignment between Moscow and Beijing.

There’s a lot to unpack here, ranging from how allies and partners are responding to Beijing’s calculations and how they might be shifting vis-à-vis Taiwan, thinking about foreign policy in India. This is really momentous times. And I’m delighted to be joined by three of my colleagues, all of whom bring just extraordinary expertise to the discussion today. They are, in alphabetical order, Charlie Edel, who holds the Australia Chair here at CSIS; Bonny Lin, the director of the China Power Project; and Rick Rossow, who’s the Wadhwani Chair in U.S.-India Policy Studies.

We’ve got a lot to get through, so I want to get right into it. Before we start, just a very brief logistics note. I’m going to be moderating a discussion for probably 40 minutes or so, and then we’ll keep the remaining 15 minutes, if possible, for Q&A. I would invite everyone who’s watching if you have a question, you can ask that at any time. Please go to CSIS.org, click the events page, and look for the specific events page for our discussion today. You’ll see a button marked “ask live question.” Please send that through. Those are being sent to me in real time. And as we approach the Q&A period, I will start posing these to my colleagues.

So with that, let’s get right into it. I want to direct the first question to Bonny. You had a recent commentary up on CSIS where you wrote that if Xi Jinping did indeed have advanced warning of the Russian invasion, and let me quote here, “China’s decision to deepen relations with Russia showcases Beijing’s willingness to take substantial risk, and that Xi Jinping likely has a pessimistic view of China’s relations with the West. Xi could also have a larger appetite for military adventurism, particularly in the Indo-Pacific.” You caveat that by saying we don’t know what Xi Jinping knew, when he knew it. We don’t know what was spoken during that February 4th meeting versus Xi and Putin.

But nonetheless, I wonder if you could unpack that statement. How do you see events in Ukraine impacting Beijing’s own thinking about the use of force in the
In terms of the sentence you just quoted, my personal thinking is that there seems to be more and more evidence suggesting that Xi may have not known. So for example, how slow China has been to evacuate its citizens and the switching guidance that China has provided for its citizens. First saying, ‘please show the Chinese flag’, and then saying, ‘please don’t show the Chinese flag’. And now how some of China’s citizens have been targeted; I think there are at least reports of at least one Chinese citizen being killed in Ukraine.

So when I look at what’s happening in Ukraine, my main concern is that increasing linkages between Ukraine and Taiwan is increasing the perception that Taiwan will be next. And there, of course, are a number of reasons why this is a good parallel, but I want to actually spend the bulk of my time discussing why there are potential lessons learned China could take from Ukraine that would actually discourage China from taking a significant adventure against Taiwan and also some of the factors that may constrain China from using force against Taiwan in the near future.

So let me quickly point out what folks have been saying are the parallels, and this includes the fact that both Taiwan and Ukraine face more powerful and aggressive neighbors; as you mentioned, Jude, the growing China-Russia ties, but also concerns that the Russian invasion in Ukraine could encourage China to do the same against Taiwan or at least increase aggression against Taiwan. Some of the main reasons that folks cite as why this could happen in the near term are that China may see the United States and Europe preoccupied in Ukraine and that could provide space for China to escalate against Taiwan. I think theoretically that is possible, but that is not at least what we’re seeing now. There’s very little indication that dynamics – that as dynamics in Ukraine are escalating that the United States or the West is decreasing its attention in Taiwan. In fact, our colleague Mike Green is currently a part of the former senior defense delegation in Taiwan right now; that only shows how much the United States, as well as international community, is focusing on Taiwan. And the growing linkages that are being talked about with Ukraine and Taiwan means that there is now even greater scrutiny on PLA operations against Taiwan than any other time.

I do want to focus on some of the potential lessons learned China could take from Ukraine, and I know it’s still very early to assess these lessons learned but I think there are three lessons learned that could actually give China more pause when thinking about any major use of military force, particularly with respect to Taiwan. The first is looking at assessments of international unity and support for what’s happened in Ukraine. So right now we’re seeing growing NATO
international unity and support against Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. China’s CCTV and main news outlets have been reporting, for example, the major shift in Germany’s position on Ukraine, including reversing previous limits to providing arms to Ukraine, as well as now Germany’s change in agreeing to exclude Russian banks from SWIFT. So this occurs despite Germany’s high reliance on Russian energy. Chinese commentators have further noted that this support, both broadly across Europe but also with respect to Germany, is likely to come at quite some cost for European countries, as well as the United States.

So when you put this in the context of how China looks at its periphery, one of the main arguments that Chinese analysts have made is, as China’s military and – sorry, economic and political power has grown, many analysts believe that growing economic reliance on China should constrain the options of other countries to side with the United States or side against China. But what we’re seeing in Ukraine is the opposite. Right? We’re not seeing that European reliance on Russian energy is causing Europe to stay on the sidelines. In fact, what we’re seeing is that Europe is becoming more unified. This should at least introduce some uncertainty when China thinks about how countries position themselves during peacetime versus how countries position making change in a crisis or a conflict.

The second potential lesson learned I want to point out is related to the role of intelligence and information in shaping conflicts. So what’s been quite unique in this conflict has been how much the United States has used intelligence to shape the environment, even prior to the outbreak of conflict. We’ve seen an unprecedented rate of declassification of U.S. intelligence to share that early on with not only U.S. allies and partners but, in this case, also China, regarding Russian intentions but also military activities targeted at Ukraine. In many ways, this fast sharing of intelligence has allowed the United States to build a coalition to oppose Russian aggression even before it began. It allowed us to provide arms as well as support to the Ukrainian forces. So if you contrast this with Chinese assessments of Ukraine, we don’t know for sure how Beijing assessed this but we do seem to see from the public messaging that Beijing didn’t believe that Russia was going to go into Ukraine, and even after, on the eve of Russia’s – beginning of its “special military operation” in Ukraine, there were still many in Beijing saying that Russia would not go into Kiev. Right? So it seems like, at least publicly, many Chinese assessments were wrong.

So when China looks at this, it should at least question, you know, how good is U.S. intelligence, and when it comes to its periphery, China should at least question, to what extent does U.S. intelligence have – to what extent does U.S. intelligence also have this level of fidelity with respect to Chinese military intentions and capabilities? And if China were to engage in a similar large-scale operation, could China successfully hide its preparations for it? Or is what is playing out in Ukraine showing that China may not be able to hide it anywhere as close to what it thinks it could do?
A third potential lesson learned is the difficulties of a rapid invasion of any other region or territory. So, in many ways, the Russian land invasion of Ukraine is a much simpler military goal or task than a Chinese amphibious invasion of Taiwan, which is separated from mainland China from – with the Taiwan Strait, which is a hundred-mile body of water. The Russian military also has significantly more experience, at least recently, in conflicts than the PLA. So what we’re seeing in Ukraine is that there’s an early flow – significant flow of arms to Ukraine from NATO and Europe, as well the United States, and during the conflict there was significant resistance from Ukraine against the Russian force.

At the same time, we’re also seeing that right now, as of now, Russian troops are facing logistical challenges. There are shortages of food and fuel, and some Russian troops are already losing morale. It hasn’t even been that long since the beginning of the Russian invasion. We’re seeing that the Russian attempt to execute a rapid invasion and to minimize civilian casualties is much harder than what Moscow envisioned.

Even if Russia takes Kyiv, there remains a possibility that Ukrainian forces could form an insurgent force to challenge Moscow’s hold and influence longer term. So when you look at this from China’s perspective and put it in the context of Taiwan, given that in time it will be a more difficult problem set – I’m sorry – a Taiwan invasion will be much more difficult and that the PLA has much less recent military experience than Russia, this should, actually, give China a significant pause as well as significant requestioning of its military plans for Taiwan.

I know I’m running a little bit over. But let me also quickly point out three other constraining factors on how China might think about use of potential military force – large-scale force – in the near term.

The first factor has been discussed quite a bit in the media and that’s the upcoming 20th Party Congress and how Xi Jinping likely does not want to take major risks prior to that, and any major conflict or major military operation will incur significant risks. I’m not going to elaborate on that.

The second factor, which, I think, has not been discussed as much relates to China’s growing relationship with Russia and what we’re seeing now, which is China trying to distance itself from the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

So despite the fact that China still wants to maintain and, in some ways, deepen its ties with Russia, China does not want to be associated with the Russian aggression in Ukraine and has taken great pains to try to create some distance, particularly on the military side. But if China was to engage in a major military operation anywhere in the Indo-Pacific, it will be perceived by the international
community as China creating a second-front war to help Russia, regardless of what causes China to use military force.

So, I think, in that respect, there will – China will be somewhat cautious in trying to, at least, start a conflict or use major military force while the Ukraine crisis is ongoing.

The third major constraining factor is that we’re seeing the rise in prices of key commodities such as oil, gas, and food. They are soaring now, and China has been for some time trying to build up more of a reserve on these commodities to sustain its economic growth but also to maintain social stability. These same commodities are what are needed to fuel a war, right.

So if you think about a conflict or major military operation now, China would then be diverting these key resources that are critical to its domestic populations’ economy to a wartime effort. Right now, that doesn’t seem to be the best situation for China to do that now. But maybe if China can wait the Ukraine conflict out, it’s possible that Chinese analysts could assess that it would be in a better position later on to engage in more military operations.

So I know I’ve run over so let me wrap up here. Thank you, Jude.

Mr. Blanchette: Great. Thanks, Bonny. Those are really, really excellent comments, and as you were speaking I was thinking another known unknown for Beijing would be the role of leadership, and I think here about the remarkable performance of President Zelensky and his courage. It’s very – it’s very arguable that statements by Zelensky, the sort of – the courage and heroism he has shown, arguably, tip the balance in terms of EU sanctions just over the matter of a couple days.

And the second – you know, the second, to me, lesson here is I think Beijing – you know, there’s an argument that Beijing thought this would be a good case study to explore how the West doesn’t work and how divided it is.

But, actually, I think what we’re seeing is now the reverse is going to be happening where this is now a case study for the West in how a unified strong response is possible. And so I think this is really going to, in the long term, blow up in Beijing’s – blow up in Beijing’s face. So, but again, a lot of this remains to be seen and will depend on how things play out over – as you say, over the next sort of hours, days, weeks, and months.

Rick, let me turn to you, if I can. And if I can also quote from a recent commentary that you penned which I thought was really excellent in thinking about the role of India here, you wrote, quote: “India has managed to maintain close relations with Russia while dramatically improving strategic ties with the United States. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has made this position hard to maintain.” I wonder if you could, likewise, unpack that statement and give us a
sense of what the discussion in New Delhi is right now. You know, they’re abstaining from or they have abstained from the votes at the U.N. Security Council, so on the surface it would seem like the non-aligned position of India is holding firm. But how do you see this playing out in the days, weeks, and months ahead?

Richard Rossow: Non-alignment certainly still remains the name of the game in Delhi, with the exception of most anything we put on the table vis-à-vis China. India avoiding taking a hard line on Russia, you know, it’s not terribly surprising.

I think, you know, when you see a lot of the pressure that the world’s been trying to mount on India – you know, for instance, calls for supporting democracy – India’s very proud of its own democracy, but also has always assiduously avoided, you know, trying to become the sword of democracy in trying to press it on others, with the exception of when it fits in, you know, narrow self-interest. You know, for instance, recent elections in Maldives and Sri Lanka when it looks like, you know, pro-China governments would remain in office, India supported opposition parties in those nations to make sure that democratic elections were held and brought forward parties that were – that were certainly more pro-India and pro-West, although Sri Lanka has had no elections since then that went the other way. So supporting democracy when it suits it, but not as an ultimatum for every country around the world at all times.

India’s position on the Ukraine invasion has also evolved incrementally even in the days since the invasion began – you know, originally calling for a ceasefire; now, you know, the language a little more forward-leaning and talking about making sure that territorial integrity is maintained. And you may see it evolve further. But it’s not an easy choice, for the reasons that I’ll kind of lay out here. And all this about India’s disinterest in taking a hard line, of course, is all the more visible, as you readily point out. Sitting – having one of the rotating seats on the U.N. Security Council, you can’t sort of hide behind others’ actions. (Laughs.) It’s become very visible. And by some of, you know, what I read and some of the things I’m getting in my Twitter feed, you almost would expect that Indian troops were actually joining Russian troops in the invasion or something, which of course is pretty far from the truth.

But why is this a hard choice for India? You know, it’ll directly impact India’s own national security in a couple of important ways. But first, you know, let me talk about what you’re going to hear. You’ll hear about India talking about its long historical ties with Russia. At a long time during the Cold War, when the United States had very little relationship with India to speak of, the Soviet Union, you know, was really the main provider of a lot of assistance – not just defense technology, but engineering colleges, things like that; importing a lot of Indian goods, including movies, at times that, you know, the rupee wasn’t convertible with the rest of the world. So the Soviet Union, you know, really was an important friend to India for a long time. But historical ties, look, as global
situations change, those are relatively easy to snap if they don’t have modern importance.

The second thing that you’ll hear in India, which is the rhetoric that certainly Russia’s been trying to promote – and you do hear it echoed in Delhi – is Ukraine’s dalliance with NATO and NATO’s press – you know, a lot of that rhetoric that we basically caused this for ourselves by trying to press a lot of Eastern European countries to shift West. And so, you know, we know that these countries wanted to go West because they were worried about things like invasion.

So, you know, those are the two things that you hear: historical ties, and Ukraine’s dalliance with the West and with NATO. But there’s a lot more concrete reasons, two in particular, where India has to balance, you know, the promotion of democracy in other countries versus its own national security.

This historical ties with the Soviet Union meant that today India’s military is comprised heavily of Russian equipment and they rely on Russian spares – not just new acquisitions, but Russian spares. A number I saw recently, about $2 billion a year is what India spends simply in spares for the military equipment that India has right now. India has actually lost territory to China in the last couple of years and also attempted to defend Bhutan’s territory by major territorial grabs by China, and India’s ability to maintain, you know, a defensive posture and military readiness today is, unfortunately, very reliant on Russian equipment and Russian imports of spares to keep things moving and operational. So India’s own national security today, at a time that you actually have had soldiers dying in the line of combat with China – mostly rocks and sticks and bad weather and things like that, but they’re at the front lines – is unfortunately heavily reliant on Russian equipment. And that is hard for Indian policymakers to ignore, for obvious reasons.

Second, you know, think of the moment that the invasion was launched and who was sitting with President Putin in Russia. It was the prime minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan. And the other thing that India really is concerned about, would Russia potentially open up the kitty on sharing advanced defense technology to India’s major rival, Pakistan, with which they’ve fought three wars? That is a real threat to India. And if India feels that maintaining a decent relationship with Moscow gives them a bit of say in potentially being able to slow or block potential exported technologies to the country with which India, you know, continues to have every couple of years real military flare ups. Pakistan has no hope of ever gaining a numerical advantage but, you know, Russian could help them gain a technological advantage in terms of a military confrontation.

So, you know, both China and Pakistan are two incredibly important considerations for India. And, you know, again unfortunately – and I think India would certainly prefer that they made different options earlier and had different
choices right now – but their ability to maintain, you know, military posture versus these two, you know, relies very heavily on Russia. Now, that being said, you can make a good case as to why India has so far maintained a position that is certainly less hardline that we’d like. But India may face real repercussions for this. One thing in particular is really kind of burning down the highway towards us right now, the potential application of U.S. sanctions against India for buying Russian military equipment, in this instance particularly the S-400 Triumph missile defense system.

News reports indicate that India’s already received the first of the missile defense kits and that Ministry of Defense officials have told media that it could be April by the time that they’re first setup. And as we saw with Turkey, you know, once they become operational or being tested, that may be the point at which sanctions under the Countering American Adversaries Through Sanctions Act would have to be introduced. There is a narrow waiver provision. And, you know, I think by and large when you see U.S.-India relations and minister meetings and head of state meetings, you know, it kind of showed there was some intent not to blow up the relationship through the applications of sanctions.

But, you know, now with this additional complexity of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and the fact that sanctions are being compounded not relaxed, giving out waivers? It just seems a little bit more difficult than it would have been, you know, just a couple of months ago. So we do have a very, very specific threat that I think kind of sits on the horizon. So India has self-interested reasons – protection of its own national security against its two great rivals – as to why it wants to maintain a decent relationship. But there’s one major threat, which is the application of U.S. sanctions, which could really derail what has been, as you pointed out in the opening, a promising change in trajectory in U.S.-India relations.

I’ll leave it at that. Thanks, Jude.

Mr. Blanchette: Great. Wonderful. Thanks, Rick. Really great remarks. And I want to put some – once we get to the back of the conversation, I want to circle back around and ask you about how over the longer-term trajectory a potential deepening of relations between Moscow and Beijing might affect New Delhi’s calculations over the long term.

But let me now turn it over to Charlie. I wanted to ask how events are reverberating through allies in the Indo-Pacific. So can you give us an overview, making an arc from Tokyo all the way to Canberra, and let us know, you know, first – I guess, first question is just what are the immediate responses, and what are some of the immediate discussions that you’re hearing about?
Charles Edel: Yeah, absolutely. Thanks, Jude. And thanks for pulling together what has been a really terrific conversation so far. I’ve learned a lot from both Bonnie and Rick here.

Look, there have been major geopolitical implications to Russia’s unprovoked invasion of Ukraine. And we’re seeing drastic shifts in multiple countries’ national security. This is obviously more profound in Europe than it is in Asia to date, but it’s important to note that there’s significant movement there as well. But look, I know you’d like to kind of arc from Tokyo down to Canberra and hit everything in between. But actually, I’d like to start in Europe, just a really quick overview, because everyone in the region is watching what is happening there, as Bonny was talking about.

And look what’s happened just over the last couple days, right? Germany, a revolution in international security thinking. Defense over 2 percent of their GDP, pledging more than 100 billion euros. Finland and Sweden moving towards NATO quickly. The Ukraine has applied to join the EU. Switzerland, of all nations, has frozen the assets of Russia. Russia is being disconnected financially, diplomatically, and politically from the international system as the EU gets stronger by the moment. And I think that’s the context in which every nation is assessing its own moves.

When we shift our view out to the Indo-Pacific, it’s a much more varied picture. We’ve seen really lukewarm statements by ASEAN. We heard Rick’s comments about the bind, the strategic dilemma that India finds itself in. But when we begin to shift the focus to formal allies of the United States, we can see more active measures being taken, in almost sending order from South Korea, to Japan, to Australia. So I thought I might sketch some of what we’re seeing in each of those countries, at least before turning the conversation to where the conversation should probably be moving to.

So, look, in South Korea – South Korea was initially cautious about joining any international sanctions in the days leading up to the invasion, saying that they were leaving various options open and would only join international sanctions if and when Russia launched the invasion. They also said that the country wasn’t considering military support or sending any troops or equipment. And as if to underscore that, the Blue Hose, the presidential office in South Korea, said that Russia has been an important partner to South Korea on its North Korean policy.

But, look, that was before and this is now. And after the invasion, Seoul drew a line. It tightened its export controls against Russia. It banned shipments of strategic items. And it joined Western countries in moves to block Russian banks from SWIFT international payment systems. At the same time, though, Russia – sorry – South Korea has sought certain exemptions from the sanctions, particularly ones that would affect its large exporters, like Samsung. And I would
note that all this comes in the middle of a heated presidential election that is set to take place in one week’s time in Seoul.

In Japan, the reaction has been more robust. Prime Minister Kishida said Japan needs to show its resolve not to allow any changes to the status quo by force. Territorial integrity is really important. He’s obviously talking about Russia, but he also very obviously has other countries in mind when he says this. And he joined together with the EU and the G-7 countries to impose sanctions, including on ship exports, on some, but not all, Russian banks, on Russian military-led organizations, and on general-purpose products to Russia. Now, Kishida told reporters that Japan would also move to sanction Belarus after they have greenlighted the potential move of nuclear weapons onto their territory.

The context for this is that defense spending is just over 1 percent in Japan. Kishida’s party has called for an increase to 2 percent, which is a radical turn in Japanese politics. But the assumption had been that Kishida wouldn’t be too forward-leaning on defense until after the upper house elections in July. And I would note that Ukraine has certainly injected much more urgency into the debate. And you can look no further than former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who appeared on Japanese television this past weekend and said that Japan should undertake – or, at least consider a nuclear sharing agreement with the U.S., similar to NATO. That’s a revolution. I would also note that the prime minister, the actual prime minister, dismissed this idea.

Look, shifting to Australia, first, the Australian prime minister has continued to make very forthright comments. President Putin, he said, Foreign Minister Lavrov, the defense minister, are directly responsible for Russia’s unprovoked and unlawful invasion of Ukraine. He’s also continued to take on China very directly. What he said was, you don’t go and throw a lifeline to Russia in the middle of a period when they’re invading another country. This is simply unacceptable.

And this was a reference to the recently signed Russian-Chinese agreement that Bonny and you had talked about. But also, as part of a broader compact to strengthen their relations, China quietly agreed to lift restrictions on Russian wheat and barley right before this happened. I would note that this is not something that’s owned just by the government. The opposition party, Labor – and, note, there is an election in Australia coming up quite soon – has made a similar set of robust comments. Australia went ahead and joined Western initiatives, including sanctioning Russian central banks, restricting golden passports, moving to kick them out of SWIFT. And things are moving quickly.

So, on Monday night, we know that Australia just announced that it would provide 70 million Australian dollars in lethal military aid to support the defense of Ukraine, which includes missiles and other weapons as well.
So that’s kind of the roundup around the allies, but it says nothing yet about where we might be headed.

Mr. Blanchette: Charlie, can I just quickly follow up on that? One of the things it seems we’re doing is we’ve both realized how linear projections are unhelpful, given the role of contingency, right? So we’ve just seen this pretty remarkable shift from — as you say, all the way from Berlin and then stretching thorough the Indo-Pacific. I’m curious if you could just think out loud about are we overestimating how enduring some of the shifts we’re now seeing in terms of language and defense posture are? Let’s assume — and this would be — this would be a hopeful case — tensions die down very rapidly, negotiations occur. I don’t think this is likely, but let’s just for the sake of argument, negotiations occur, there is some sort of negotiated ceasefire, and we see the tensions end sooner than later. Do we see an unwinding of some of the language and rhetoric we’re seeing coming out across the Indo-Pacific or do you see these really — these are enduring shifts regardless of how events play out in Ukraine?

Mr. Edel: Well, it depends — OK, so let’s take your assumption, Jude, that this, God willing, ends tomorrow, right? You have a full Russian pullout. I mean, one, we’ll note that this is a(n) implausible suggestion, as you yourself noted. But if this were to happen relatively quickly, you know, whether or not countries would kind of unwind where they have been going in the Indo-Pacific, I think the question really depends on which countries we’re talking about.

I think that kind of partners and fence-sitters might very well say, OK, that’s far away and that didn’t happen. But considering the movement that you’ve already seen in advance of this by America’s closest allies – Japan; Australia; India not an ally, but kind of movement that we’ve seen on the Quad; also with AUKUS – I actually think that this – the timeline of what happens in Ukraine has no effect on what’s happening. And in fact, what has already happened in Ukraine I actually think turbocharges efforts that are underway.

You know, Bonny made a couple really interesting points about lessons learned. I’ve been thinking about this, too, right? It is, obviously, premature to render judgments about kind of the efficacy of what has happened in Ukraine and in Europe, but I don’t think it’s premature to begin speculating about what this model of surprising solidarity, surprisingly robust solidarity actually means in other parts of the world and more specifically in the Indo-Pacific. And I actually think that what we’ve seen is the fuzzy outline, the hazy outline of a template that now needs to be built upon, needs to be sharpened further, and needs to be oriented towards the Indo-Pacific.

You know, Bonny talked about – again, I actually think you’re already seeing elements of this, right? So countering Russian moves in disinformation, staying ahead of the intelligence flow, that has a very clear application in the Indo-Pacific, particularly when we’re talking about, you know, Beijing’s use and
mobilization of military and paramilitary units, its endemic interference in other countries’ domestic affairs, and its flagrant violations of international law. I think that this is, you know, the spark that might turbocharge U.S. and others on that.

I would note, too, the punitive sanctions that we saw, these take a long time to coordinate. And if I were sitting in Canberra, in Tokyo, and Seoul, and elsewhere, I would be getting out my pencils, sharpening them, and beginning to make a list of which ones would bite, which ones kind of get you up the escalation ladder from there.

You can also think that with the cutoff or the potential cutoff of critical materials like energy, like gas that Russia has threatened and actually impacted Europe with, you can bet that there’s going to be a turbocharge now to begin to stockpile critical materials.

The other two ones that I’d just note here is that we have seen the West rushing to give defensive weapons to the Ukrainians themselves. You know, we’ve beginning to talk about which supply lines will they take in there. Well, when we talk about Taiwan – frankly, when we talk about the Philippines or Vietnam – the question is, how much can these efforts be accelerated within those countries and how much can other countries help them get those weapons now?

And then the final point I would just make is you’ve seen the allies kind of rushing to shore up NATO’s flank. That’s what President Biden talked about in the State of the Union. You’ve seen multiple countries – Spain, Europe, the Baltics – everyone going in there – right? – to make sure that this doesn’t spill over. Well, we’ve been talking about initiatives by the United States to diversify its posture and get more forces into the region for a long time. It strikes me as now would be the time to begin moving on that, and frankly, for Japan and Australia also to begin to accelerate their efforts – Australia into the Northern Territories, Japan across the southern islands at this point.

Mr. Blanchette: Thanks, Charlie. Those are great points, and just, as I was listening to you give that really good analysis, it is just striking that I think you could find commentaries from just two weeks – no, sorry – a week ago saying that really Putin and Xi Jinping had won the post-Cold War, and just in a matter of a short week how wrongheaded those commentaries seem. And this is one of those unanticipated, just remarkable resiliency and cohesion amongst I think the United States, Europe, and allies across the world that I agree: I think, irrespective – and as you say, you know, God willing, we see a wind-down of the tensions soon. Something very important has just shifted in the international order that will endure, and one of them – another unanticipated, for me, which I think will endure beyond – certainly beyond the tensions in Ukraine is thinking about China and risk calculations.
To Bonny’s point: While I agree, there should be – Bonny laid out the lessons Xi Jinping should be learning. I think one of the things I now can’t say in good conscience, which I would have up until, let’s say, a week ago, is the risk calculations which Putin should have been factoring in when thinking about why an invasion did not make sense clearly weren’t enough to deter him from invading. So I think my normal cool risk calculation for why an invasion does not make any sense for Xi Jinping, I think I now have to pause on that because we have just seen a leader who, up until a week ago, we thought was a shrewd master strategist playing 3-D chess and for who decades had been playing a poor hand very, very well, suddenly showed that being isolated after two years of COVID, alone in the tower keep with a very small circle of advisers, with a set of grievances against the West, with a deep-seated conspiratorial historical narrative about territory on his periphery, and a view towards a nation state which he believed did not have any right to exist, there are some very, very eerie parallels in thinking about China. So I don’t think this happens tomorrow, but I do think this – we all have to recalibrate our analytical framework here, you know, in light of events that we’ve just seen. But that being said, I think, you know – I think Bonny’s important set of lessons learned should be, from just even a regime-preservation standpoint, should be how Xi Jinping is filtering this. I just have deep concerns about how much of this – his ability to filter – and Bonny, I want to come back to that in a minute.

But let me now just – and we’re doing well on time so I think I’ve got space to get through a quick lightning round here of questions I have to ask and then we’ll open it up. We’ve got some really great questions coming in.

But Charlie, you had quickly referenced the Quad. Let me go around the horn and ask about impacts on the Quad here. There’s been a bubbling discussion for a while about, do we need an Indo-Pacific NATO? I’m just curious about some of the long-term repercussions here and maybe tying this to thinking about China and China’s ambitions and potential risk appetite.

Let me go Bonny, Rick, and then back to you, Charlie. How do you see this events that are playing out right now reverberating or affecting discussions in the Quad in the near term, but really importantly, does this augur a potential direction change or renewed sense of purpose for the Quad, one that we were already seeing building in intensity just over the past couple of years?

I think I guess if I was to place myself in Beijing’s shoes, Beijing probably should be more concerned that the Quad may have more of a military dimension moving forward. As Rick highlighted, one of the major shifts we should see is India recalibrating its position, and Beijing is well aware that in the past one of the major hurdles was the Quad moving forward, particularly having more of a military dimension, has been the limits, for example, coming from India’s end. So as Beijing watches the dynamics, if I was in Beijing, I would be quite concerned with where the Quad could go.
Let me just follow up really, really quickly on your point about the lessons learned, the comparisons between Ukraine and Taiwan. So I think one major difference that hasn’t been – maybe has not been highlighted as well in some of our previous discussion was it was clear to both the Russians and the Chinese – maybe I’m saying clear now that we’re looking back – but I think we did message that we are not – when I say we I mean the United States and NATO – are not sending forces into Ukraine.

That’s not what China is assuming in Taiwan. China is assuming and all of its planning is assuming that the United States will intervene. So that creates a different calculation on Beijing’s end, right, because from Ukraine’s perspective, the main punishment is on the economic and political side.

But from Taiwan, it will be not only the economic and political punishment but it will also be the direct military intervention. That should have a significant – that should really – if the assessment that Beijing takes from Ukraine is that the political and economic punishment by itself is already quite significant, you factor in the military intervention it should be even a more deterrent for how Beijing looks at Taiwan.

Mr. Blanchette: Yeah. Great, great point.

Rick, over to you.

Mr. Rossow: Well, a couple of things. You know, I think that the Quad’s gathering is for a different reason than Russia, and so if you have a summit, you have a program and events, a head of state summit that’s expected in just a couple of months, I don’t expect this is going to cloud the waters to any dramatic effect.

The Quad does sometimes, you know, consider itself sort of this grouping of democracies. But also I do think that rhetoric, too, is likely to die down over time. If this is the organization that is going to be the counterweight to China, there are so many countries across the Indo-Pacific that are, certainly, not going to fit into this narrow box of a perfect democracy.

So I do think, over time, too, that you’re going to see that rhetoric die down because, you know, Bangladesh hasn’t had a democratic election and it’s one of the most populous countries on Earth. Even Singapore, to some extent. Myanmar, if they ever pull out of the – you know, this military autocracy.

There’s a lot of swing states that are not democracies. So I suspect that rhetoric which, you know, right now could be a little bit painful from India’s intransigence on the invasion, I think, will die down.
But the main threat, you know, is the disruption in the U.S.-India leg. If U.S.-India relations rupture because of, you know, concerns about India’s, you know, lack of a stiffer position or the introduction of CAATSA sanctions, if there’s a disrupt in U.S.-India then, you know, that, I think, could be the most dangerous thing for the Quad.

So, the Quad in itself stands on its own, it’s got a different mission, a different orientation. But if the bilateral relationship with the United States does suffer, then that could be – you know, I think, would, potentially, cause some issues with the Quad.

Mr. Blanchette: Thanks, Rick.

Charlie, any thoughts?

Mr. Edel: Yeah. I find a Rick’s comments very compelling, very provocative, very concerning about, you know, the CAATSA sanctions that might come down the line and how this affects where India goes on the Quad, because that’s an unknown.

I would just say a couple things about the Quad. So, first of all, there’s public Quad and there’s private Quad. Public Quad is about an affirmative positive vision for the region that others want to buy into that is, clearly, meant to counter China’s Belt and Road Initiative and that is meant to lift up the region and help connect it. That’s not going to change.

Private Quad is about countering China by the world’s largest and most powerful maritime democracies. That’s not going to change either. The critique that you’ve seen occasionally popping up of the Quad is that all the affirmative messaging, all the positive goodies that are, potentially, being doled out across Southeast Asia and the Pacific, don’t do a lot to deter China. They may or may not have an effect on Southeast Asia and the Pacific Island States in their orientation if more of them come online. But it doesn’t do much by way of the deterrence equation.

And so the private conversations don’t have a military component publicly. But we’ve seen hints, right, that there is more to be done on MSI and maritime security work together. It strikes me that what we have seen over the past week is going to bring even more increased urgency on those conversations in private. It wouldn’t surprise me at all if you saw some of these private conversations, particularly on the military strategic dimensions, beginning to become more prominent if there’s a leaders summit in late May between the countries’ leaders up in Tokyo.

The other thing, though, that I would say, which is interesting, is that the United States, Australia, Japan, and India, that all in their own ways are going to hit the
gas on what this means for them in the region. The question is, will this be done separately or can these be linked efforts geographically also in terms of interoperability?

And, you know, the last thing I would just say is I think it is – the leaders of each of the Quad nations are fully cognizant that this is not one hand clapping. This is action/reaction. So Russia has invaded Ukraine. Now Russia and China are watching, as Bonny has laid out, what the reaction of the West will be, how long it will hold, and if it will get more severe. The bet, I think, from Russia and China previously – and I group them together here – is that whatever the Western nations decide, it will be insufficient, it will be unpalatable to their publics, and it will be unsustainable. That’s their bet, I think, on how Western cohesion will hold. And I think that the leaders of the quad nations, which will be taking the lead on this, are going to work their darndest to see if they can prove that wrong.

Mr. Blanchette:

Well, let me – we’re at the – we got about 15 minutes left, and we’ve got just really fantastic questions here. So I’m going to try to group some of these together. So one bucket seems to be about the broader U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy in light of what some are now framing as a two-front competition, now that Russia has made this extraordinarily aggressive gambit in Ukraine. So let me sort of throw this out.

You know, maybe, Bonny, start with you, if you don’t mind. How do you think – what are the repercussions of this going to be on Indo-Pacific as a priority for the United States? You’ve seen this debate. Some are saying we need an Asia first policy, that we really need to be minimizing what some are perceiving as a potential distraction from a focus on China. Others, and I think, you know, our colleague Mike Green has taken the position that you can’t – you can’t make a clear delineation between the two, because what happens in one theater has an important effect on the other. But just as a diagnostic analysis, what do you think the practical effect of this crisis in Ukraine will be for America’s ability to, quote, you know, walk and chew gum at the same time? And I would love follow up from anyone else who wants to dive in.

Ms. Lin:

I would just add that Charlie has also written and commented quite a bit on the Indo-Pacific strategy, and what implications are after the Ukraine crisis. I’ll try to leave more time for Charlie to share his thoughts. But my position is, not surprisingly, aligned very much with Mike’s. So I don’t think, for example, us taking the strong position that we have in Ukraine is any way distracting from our ability to message in the Pacific region. As you – as we’ve discussed earlier, right, many of our allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific are watching what we’re going in Ukraine, taking lessons learned on U.S. resolve, U.S. willingness to defend a partner, as well as them looking at how the international community is working together to counter aggression by Russia.
So if you look at—whether you’re talking about Taiwan or another conflict in the Indo-Pacific, there will be similar expectation that the international community—so, not just those in the Indo-Pacific but also Europeans—will be coming together, for example, to the defense of Taiwan, or whatever other crisis or conflict you might see in the Indo-Pacific. I would also note that right now, at least, it does not seem like that our—it does not seem like that we are at a—we’re strained in terms of our ability to focus on both regions. But as Charlie has noted again and again, we’re still seeing this conflict play out. And if it escalates beyond Ukraine, right, to the Baltics or elsewhere, that might require significant more U.S. and NATO military involvement, which could then longer term pose some difficulties in terms of at least DOD’s attention on the Indo-Pacific. But right now, I think it’s still very much watch and see. And I’m not seeing the United States having to choose between Europe versus Indo-Pacific.

Mr. Blanchette: Charlie, thoughts? Can we walk and chew gum at the same time?

Mr. Edel: I certainly hope we can. I think the rest of the world hopes we can as well. So, look, I think these calls that the United States should either restrain itself and its military posture, or that the United States should only focus on the Indo-Pacific, this past week has shown that neither of those two propositions are tenable in realistic foreign policy. That is not how the world works, and that’s not how the United States is going to structure its orientation towards the region.

The question is, I think the administration has really acted nimbly in working to corral and harness a lot of Indo-Pacific nations to amplify cohesion on what is occurring in Ukraine. Now the question becomes, can they do this in reverse? As everyone is focused on Ukraine, can they get Indo-Pacific nations working more closely together, and eventually pull the Europeans there? I think the answer is yes, because we have seen over and over again—Bonny’s already hit this point—that if you kind of pull up your aggregate totals of what the West has versus what China has, it’s actually not a competition. But getting that alignment is so challenging to do.

So I would say the things that really need to be looked for here are whether or not resources are more forthcoming than they have been on the good-guys side of the equation here. And frankly, as these choices become more painful for democratic nations, whether or not we’re able to endure a little bit more pain and a little bit less of the good resources that we would otherwise choose for ourselves.

Mr. Blanchette: Thanks, Charlie. Yeah, and I think it’s clear—I mean, first of all, I think the administration has just done a—just an absolutely superb job. And I think especially if we’re looking at the—I think a lot of people were expecting maybe an Afghanistan, you know, 2.0. But I think it’s just remarkable how well they’ve done here, both nimble, I think, working—helping other countries be out in the lead, while at the same time coordinating. The other thing too, I think the events of the past week have completely demolished the Asia-first argument.
And as Bonny laid out, Beijing is watching events occur right now with great intensity. And we would have made our lives far more difficult in the Indo-Pacific if we had simply turned our back. And here’s the other thing, I don’t see how you can have allies-first position on China or competition with China as you turn your back on your allies in Europe and say: This is your problem. Oh, but we’d like you to show up in the Indo-Pacific when we need you in the coming years.

Mr. Rossow:

Jude, I think too, I mean, on that point, and kind of reflecting a bit of what Charlie said, you know, the sort of muscle and the things that we need to do in the two different theaters are very different. You know, and there’s not going to be a competition in a lot of areas for those resources. It feels sometimes to me like grass is always greener. The Europe folks say this attention to Europe, or the attention to the Indo-Pacific. You know, we’re losing ground. And a lot of us that engage in the Indo-Pacific say the same thing. Like, why is there still so much senior-level attention on the old fights in Europe? Russia’s a declining threat, blah, blah, blah. Of course, you know, really at the end of the day it’s our friends in Latin America and Africa that get the short end of the stick, you know, for the most part, on these things, which continue to get ignored as the bigger threats are in other markets.

But if you think about, you know, Russia. If we really want to pinch Russia, it is blocking their ability to control markets through energy exports, which is something China is not necessarily going to be able to dominate. It is ground warfare with a lot of the neighbors there, land power. You know, it is also defense experts to countries like India where if, you know, the United States can improve our ability to replace as the supplier of choice, then that reduces Russia’s ability to influence some of those players that are in the middle. But with China, you’re talking about sea power. You’re talking about the ability to dominate critical technologies, the production and send, you know, to neighboring countries, regional infrastructure.

So the toolkit for the most part, you know, on the main threats that are presented by Russia and China are also very different. So at least – if they were all doing the exact same stuff, and both were major energy producers, and both were supplying defense tech to a lot of our somewhat friendly nations, then the challenges, I think, would be a lot more stark. You know, you do have some things like information warfare where you got to be able to counter for both, but a lot of the big areas and the big grasps they got on other countries, you know, there is a little bit diversification. Which I think is going to help us spread out a little bit.

Mr. Blanchette:

Rick, next question is coming right back to you. There is a large group of questions here I think probably responding to your compelling analysis on where India stands on some of the –
Mr. Rossow: Not compelling enough, I guess, huh? So let me have it.

Mr. Blanchette: No, I think – I think – the questions that are coming in are basically saying, well, what can the U.S. and other countries in the West do to alleviate this tension between, you know, India-Russia and then India and the United States/the West. So are there things the United States can do to plug the gap – whether that’s arms sales, you know, parts, supplies? What’s your view on this?

Mr. Rossow: Well, you know, I think so far – I mean, the prove points are India abstaining from, you know, fairly meaningless votes in the U.N. Security Council, right? Not sanctions. They haven’t stopped, you know, physical moves against Russia. So, so far, fine. Give them a pass. I don’t think that we should hold India, you know, to some higher standard, as long as they remain in the game on the other threat where we think India’s a big player. If they do, you know, cross that line, and they begin blocking specific moves vis-à-vis Russia, you know, votes on sanctions, things like that, things escalate, you know, considerably. But I think for now, you know, we got to play the long game. We got to understand that ultimately, you know, for India, too, this is a stark moment, even if they’re not going to start waving their arms and saying: This is the day we break from Russia. You know, you’re unlikely to have anything quite so stark. But that – you know, that change from zero buys of U.S. military equipment to 20 billion, which has happened just in the last 15 years, and diversifying to France and Israel and other countries, you know, I’d be really shocked if we don’t look back on this day, you know, 10 years from now and say that it didn’t trigger a much faster acceleration of the shift away.

And I think we got to be prepared to play the long game. You know, the relationship with India on security means is not about Russia. It never has been. As long as they don’t block actions – and if you consider an empty U.N. Security Council vote on language that Russia’s going to ignore anyways or veto, they haven’t stopped the move. And so, I think, you know, give them a pass unless they start actively blocking specific measures that would directly harm Russia and impinge its ability to conduct this war. Play the long game. I think it’s still a pretty good bet. But it’s going to take a lot of work, including dodging the sanctions bullet that’s heading directly at us.

Mr. Blanchette: Questions coming in about where China – where China goes from here. There seems to be movements from Beijing now attempting, I think – and recognizing that its strategy is completely incoherent, it’s now starting to move to position itself as potential peacemaker. We saw this in the Xi Jinping-Putin readout of their call last Friday, where Xi Jinping says you should – you should negotiate and Putin says we’re willing to negotiate, and then subsequent comments coming out of the MFA and Wang Yi.
So let me— you know, Bonny, let me direct this one to you. Beijing’s role as potential peacemaker here, make strategic sense? I very much get it. How credible is this going to be? And does this augur a more—a shift in Beijing’s overall posture here to try to navigate through the rest of this crisis?

Ms. Lin: So I’m not sure how credible it is because Beijing so far has not been willing on the record to lay any blame on Russia at all, right? Even though Beijing is now characterizing the—what’s happening in Ukraine as a conflict, no longer just a special military operation, we have not seen any political statements blaming Russia for it. All the statements have been equal responsibility in moving this forward and for negotiations, but to date we haven’t seen Beijing at least publicly assign sufficient blame.

In terms of functioning as a peacemaker, I think what we would need to see is what is happening on the economic side because I would—I would guess many folks would see Beijing as not necessarily playing a neutral role if at the same time Beijing’s advocating for negotiations Beijing is still providing economic support for Russia. So Charlie mentioned Beijing’s lifting of restrictions on wheat recently. There are now some reports from Bloomberg coming in in terms of at least two major Chinese banks potentially limiting purchases of Russian commodities using dollar-denominated transfers, but it’s unclear what’s happening on the U.N. side. And even then, it might just only be a short-term, temporary decrease in terms of Beijing’s efforts on the economic side. So we’ll need to watch that.

And militarily, we do see some distancing between Beijing and Russia in terms of Beijing being relatively clear in saying that it is not providing any military arms to Russia. In the near term, we’ll probably see even more caution on Beijing’s end and probably not very much military-to-military engagements from both sides.

But I guess I don’t see Beijing really playing a credible neutral third-party role as a peacemaker.

Mr. Blanchette: We just have a couple minutes left, so I want to do something completely unfair to the three of you and ask you to summarize long-term implications of the Russia-China relationship for your own region in 25 seconds or less. But, no, honestly, we’ve just got a few minutes left, but this is another thread of questions which is coming in, is I think both—where does China-Russia relations go from here? Maybe, Bonny, you can give some thoughts on that. But then I think also, for your own region of interest and area of interest, how does a potential longer-term Moscow-Beijing relationship shift dynamics? You know, Charlie in the Indo-Pacific, India—Rick in India, and then Bonny maybe, you know, thinking about issues like Taiwan. So let me go Charlie, Rick, and then we’ll end with Bonny.
Mr. Edel: So two quick 25-second-or-less comments.

So, one, the Russia-China relationship depends on what happens over the next weeks/months. If it is shown to Beijing by the actions that Russia continues to take that it’s not in their interest to embrace Russia as tightly as they have, that will shift things in ways that we haven’t seen to this point. Second, I think this drives Russia even further into China’s camp because they will be even more isolated than they have been.

The final point here is just you had asked Bonny what Beijing’s calculus is, but there’s a whole other question here about what Washington’s calculations are. And there was some fantastic reporting in The New York Times by Ed Wong that there was an argument made by senior administration officials to bring China in as the peacemaker and they shared intelligence with the Chinese about where the Russians were massing. And then there was further intelligence that the Chinese turned it around and brought it straight to Vladimir Putin. I think the bar for engaging China as a good-faith actor just got significantly higher from Washington’s perspective.

Mr. Blanchette: Rick?

Mr. Rossow: I think for U.S.-India, you know, we may – this may be the trigger for a big rupture. I still think we’re going to make it through this potential application of sanctions, but the – I think the percentages on this worsened considerably. If we make it past that, then I think it’s going to be relatively good things. I think this will cause Delhi to start to accelerate the shift away from Russia as the major supplier of military equipment.

And also, you know, this, I think, real spike in hydrocarbon prices that you’re seeing globally is also going to double down on India’s interest in kind of meeting some of these lofty targets they set on climate change and renewable energy, which again is really among the top priorities of the Biden administration. So don’t discount that. You know, this could actually accelerate, I think, you know, one of the – one of the tier-one perspectives of the Biden administration.

Mr. Blanchette: Bonny, final words.

Ms. Lin: I agree with Charlie that one dynamic that we’ll likely see is Russia leaning more towards China. But China, I believe, has a little bit more flexibility in how it will respond, and I think that’s where it’s really important for U.S. policy to make sure that we’re not pushing China more closer to Russia. So to the extent we can be – I don’t know whether there’s more balance in our thinking about China-Russia, not just lumping them into one group all the time, that would help prevent – at least to some extent limit further strengthening of the China-Russia axis.
Mr. Blanchette: Yeah. Although I have to say, a strengthened China-Russia axis is galvanizing some important side effects that I wouldn’t mind seeing a few more of, to be honest.

Thank you, everybody. This has just been really an excellent conversation, and I think we may want to do this every day for the next six months given the – (laughter) – given the pace of – given the pace of change. But honestly, I think we should revisit this because, as we’ve seen just how quickly events on the ground are shifting these big, just extraordinarily important geostrategic shifts across the world right now, I think everyone is aware that this is one of those seismic events that we’ll be unpacking for years if not decades to come. So this is a first draft of history here, and couldn’t have done it with three better analysts and colleagues.

Thank you, everyone, for joining us. I have to also really thank the CSIS team who puts these events together and makes these look like we know what we’re doing when, in fact, there’s just a lot of behind-the-scenes work from our colleagues who help organize this, just do the really fantastic graphics, get this out seamlessly. So we couldn’t – we couldn’t do this without them.

So thanks, everyone. Have a – have a great day. And please stay safe. Goodbye.