TRANSCRIPT
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“NATO on the Line: The Views of Four Former SACEURs”

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Good afternoon, everybody. My name is John Hamre. And I’m delighted to welcome all of you today for what’s going to be a very interesting conversation. We’re very privileged to have today sixteen stars that are joining us, four remarkable leaders that have been four-star generals. And all of them share a common experience. And that is they were all supreme allied commanders of NATO.

You know, people often ask me, do you miss being at DOD? And I say, I don’t miss it, but I miss the people intensely. And each one of these four individuals were mentors to me – serious, real mentors to me. And I admire them deeply. I’ve watched their leadership through the years. They are really great leaders. And now they are offering, in their different ways, their advice to help us through a perilous time. This is a very important time for NATO and a very important time for the United States. And so I – we’re delighted that they’re willing to be with us this afternoon. I can hardly wait to hear their comments.

Let me turn to Seth Jones. Seth is going to be moderating the program this afternoon and leading the conversation. And I want to be sitting here taking notes. But let me just say thanks to the four of you for joining us today. We’re really excited to hear you. Thank you.

Thanks for the introduction, Dr. Hamre. And thanks to all four of you for participating today. And we’re going to get to audience questions a little later, but I’m going to start with General Breedlove and then we’ll have a broader discussion of a range of issues regarding Russia’s operations, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the broader situation in Ukraine, NATO, implications for the EU, and a range of other issues. But let me just start with you, General Breedlove, to get your assessment as we sit today of what is – what are, to the degree that you can gauge them, Vladimir Putin’s political and military objectives in Ukraine?

Well, first of all, Seth, Dr. Hamre, thanks for having me. And these are my mentors as well, so I’m honored to be on the screen with them. And I don’t think you can talk about where we believe Mr. Putin and Russia’s objectives are without starting with what he saw as the great shame of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and then a lifetime of service now in his country of trying to reestablish what he sees as the proper place for Russia in this world.

And skipping a lot of what happened after the fall of the wall forward to where we are today, and actually what happened during my time as the SACEUR in ‘14 with the first two invasions of Ukraine, I think some of the driving factors are often talked about. So it’s not really that new. One, we remember his diatribe and his long paper about Ukraine is Russia, and Russia is Ukraine, and the Ukraine, not the country of Ukraine, is a part of
Russia. These are Russian people, not Ukrainian people. And he set about correcting that in a certain degree.

But I would like to offer my opinion in that while we are now completely concerned and taken by what’s happening in Ukraine, in my opinion it’s much bigger than Ukraine. If we examine the two documents that Mr. Putin handed us and said: Sign these or we’ll use other measures. Well, we now understand those other measures are because we didn’t accept those two documents. But I know these gentlemen and others have examined those two documents. And if you look in there, it’s way bigger than Ukraine, what he’s driving for today. I think it is rewriting the security infrastructure of Eastern Europe. It’s about reestablishing a sphere of influence that includes border states that are now a part of NATO and others. It’s about resetting the stage to a place where Russia can, once again, exert its influence in all of those border states, have its government in all of those border states, and to move the force in NATO back to those – you’ve heard him ask about late 1990s locations and numbers.

And in the midst of all of that, of course, is less NATO in his near abroad, but I think an implied big message is less United States in his near abroad. And so I believe that’s really where we are today, although I would add at this point – and I’m sure that I’ll be challenged in this observation – but at this point this war has not gone well, and I think he sees his reputation and the country of Russia’s reputation and stature in this world very much at risk and under attack.

And so I would add to the list of the previous things in saying that we are now entering into a phase where, I believe, he’s added a new objective and that is scramble to reassert some measure of success and dominance to maintain the good offices, if you will, of the Russian state.

Dr. Jones: If I can just follow up with General Clark – and we’ll, obviously, get the views of everybody here – but, General Clark, just curious, from your perspective right now, how you see – we’ve had almost three weeks of warfare to see the Russians operate. We’ve all, collectively, watched them over the years in the air and a little bit of the maritime campaign in Syria and irregular actions in Eastern Ukraine. But this is among the first examples we’ve seen of Russian maneuver forces’ ground campaign.

So what’s your assessment, General Clark, about how the Russians have operated over the last three weeks?

General Wesley K. Clark: Yeah. They look great on paper, and if you look at the massing of forces and the way they were structured, you would have thought they would have swept through Ukraine in a few days and overrun the capital and so forth. But it didn’t happen.
So we’ve seen a lot of problems. You know, problem number one is at the bottom. The Russians really don’t believe in training at the individual soldier or crew level. They produce some pretty good-quality equipment on the ground force side but the people that use it aren’t motivated. They’re not trained. They’re not exercised. We know that the key to winning battles is at the individual level. A soldier has got to be competent on the tank or the Bradley fighting vehicle. He’s got to be motivated. He’s got to know what he’s doing. None of that appears to have happened in this case.

Then, above that level, what you’ve seen is some pretty poor coordination in terms of air-ground operations. Where is this great air force? They’re not doing much for the ground campaign, and we know they’ve got many, many aircraft. What are they doing? I hear they’re trying to strike cell towers.

Well, OK. You can take out a bunch of cell towers and maybe cut down their communications. But they haven’t made, really, that much of an impact that we can see on the battlefield other than the latest strike from within Russia with these long-range cruise missiles against the NATO training site at Yavoriv.

And then the question is then what about the logistics piece and what’s happened to them, and their engineering piece? You know, the Russians were great engineers in World War II. They filled ditches. They built bridges. They went through terrible situations. This force couldn’t move the hundred or so miles out of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone into Kyiv. They stayed on a single road. When they tried to get off the tanks sunk in the mud. Did they not know what the terrain was going to be like, and why didn’t that impact their planning? And then how do they refuel? How do they get the ammunition?

Look, we expected the Russians would close in on Kyiv. They’ve got plenty of range in most of their artillery systems to hit the city right now. In 2015 in Debaltseve when the Ukrainians were in the defense and I went and visited them, there were 600 rounds per tube was what they were firing. You don’t have any Russian artillery that’s fired 600 rounds per tube. There may be 600 rounds per day for the whole Russian force out there around Kyiv.

So that says they’ve got significant logistics problems. Command and control, logistics, individual training, air-ground coordination, target identification – all the earmark skills that you would expect a modern, mechanized force to have, they don’t.

Dr. Jones: General Jones, I wanted to turn to you to see if, well, first of all, if you had any additional comments on the Russian campaign but also to turn that around and to get your assessment, in part, at how much of the Russian challenges
have been some of the actions that the Ukrainians have taken and not just, obviously, the Ukrainian military but also of Ukrainians in general rising up, those that were IT professionals or cab drivers just a few weeks ago and deciding to fight the Russians. So what’s your perspective from the Ukrainian side?

General James L. Jones:

Well, thank you, and it’s an honor to be here with my colleagues.

And John, thank you very much for asking us to participate.

I think one of the stunning stories and it goes back, I think, to all of our careers, back to Vietnam as well, where if we had had in Vietnam or Afghanistan or wherever else we’ve been in combat and if we had the fighting spirit that the Ukrainians have shown in those conflicts, I think the outcome would have been completely different. So I am full of admiration for what the Ukrainian people have done and I think the world is silently in awe of the courage that the president has – their president has displayed and the way they’ve been able to rally and create a formidable opposition that, properly supported by those of us who care about freedom and the eventual success of the Ukrainian effort – if we support them with the tools that they need, this thing could work out rather badly for Vladimir Putin.

I want to underscore one thing that Phil Breedlove said and it goes back to my time as national security adviser when Vladimir Putin was the prime minister at the time and then we took – President Obama took a first trip to Moscow and as a courtesy we had a breakfast arranged with then-Prime Minister Putin and without any prompting at all, for about an hour, he explained his view of the world of – world affairs since 1945 and one of the things that he pointed out, aside from the fact that he thought that the greatest catastrophe on the planet was the dissolution of the Soviet empire, but the second thing he said was that NATO was the archenemy of Russia and always will be in his mind, and he actually believes, I think deep in his mind, that there was an agreement that NATO would never expand into Warsaw Pact countries and so that has motivated him for these many, many years because he believes, wrongly I think – I’ve never found any evidence that there was anything in writing or any agreement, gentlemen’s agreement, as he said, that NATO would not expand. But those are the things that animate him, to underscore Phil Breedlove’s position. But on the Ukrainian side, if they can be supplied with the equipment that they need – you know, better antiaircraft missile systems, anti-ship missiles, counter batteries, strike drones, electronic warfare capability, things like that that they can use immediately, they could make this very, very unpleasant for the Russian forces because, as General Clark pointed out, they are not as agile and mobile as we thought they were and there are obvious – command-and-control systems leave something to be desired, and it goes to show that their
training in terms of combined arms is not up to what we thought it could have been.

Dr. Jones: Yeah, I think that’s been obvious. And if I can just continue this discussion with General Ralston and just bring up this issue of what types of assistance can be provided by the West to the Ukrainians, obviously there continue to be a flow of weapons systems like Javelins and Stingers, NLAWs from the British. But General Ralston, as you’ve noted, there also is a debate about MiGs. These are the Polish MiGs. A little bit of a dust-up between the U.S. and the Poles. What’s your sense about what types of equipment systems and platforms should and can be provided to the Ukrainians by the U.S. and other Western countries? And what in particular also is your view of the broader MiG discussion?

General Joseph W. Ralston: Sure. Thank you very much. And again, I’m honored to be here with my colleagues today. And I agree very much with the comments that they’ve made. One general comment before I address the MiG issue. As awful as this is for the Ukrainians, this is about more than Ukraine. This is about Putin’s distaste for NATO and trying to disrupt NATO operations.

And one of the things I have to admit that I was surprised that he went with a full-scale invasion, because his strategic interest was to split NATO. And I said, if he has a full-scale invasion that’s going to bring NATO together. NATO is more united, stronger today than it has been in decades. And I think we ought to be taking a more robust posture of helping the Ukrainians in any way that we can.

Let me talk about the MiGs for a moment. The MiG-29 issue has taken on more of a symbolic issue than it is a real-world issue. And what I mean by that, let’s go back to the history of these MiG-29s. These MiG-29s originally were owned by East Germany. And in 1990, when you had German reunification, 90 percent of the East German military was deemed unfit or Stasi ties or whatever, and they had to take something politically from the East German military. And they elected to take a MiG-29 regiment at Laage Airfield in former East Germany.

Twelve years later, 2002, the Germans asked me if I would like to go fly one of their MiG-29s. And I said, sure. And so flew into Laage. Spent a day with the MiG-29 regiment. Flew the MiG-29. They put me in a front seat. They put some poor instructor pilot in the back seat. We went out and had a great flight. But what I remember most about that day was the Germans complaining about how difficult it was to maintain those airplanes because all the spare parts had to originate in Moscow.

And even in 2002, the German relationship with Russia was pretty good. But even in that circumstance, when they needed a new part for the MiG, they
had – the German Air Force had to go to the German MOD, who had to go to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who had to go to the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, down to the MOD, and down the food chain to get the spare part. And you can imagine how frustrating that was to maintain the airplanes.

That’s why Germany decided a few years ago to sell those airplanes to Poland. And I think Poland paid two euros an airplane for them. And people at the time said they overpaid. So the Poles now got these MiG-29s, that they couldn’t maintain. And when this recent situation happened, I think Poland saw an opportunity. It says, we’ll give these 29s up and get F-16s as a replacement, which makes sense if you were looking at it from a narrow Polish point of view.

My point is, I suspect that less than half of these airplanes are flyable. And they’re not going to be flyable very long without spare parts. And Moscow is not going to be interested in sending spare parts to Ukrainian MiG-29s. So what could you do that would be positive? One of the things, the best use of those MiG-29s are as spare parts. They ought to cannibalize the MiG-29s, take them apart right now, and ship the parts to Ukraine. And Ukraine could use those parts on their own MiG-29s. I think we have been far too timid on the support that we are giving to the Ukrainians. And if we don’t stand up to Putin, it’s going to get worse. This is not going to stop with Ukraine. It’s going to go on to other NATO countries – to the NATO countries, I mean. And so that’s a problem.

Dr. Jones: General Breedlove, if I could turn it over to you for a two-finger right now. I was actually going to ask you when you’re done with that, maybe this is what you were going to jump in on, is – are we being too timid, as General Ralston just outlined?

Gen. Breedlove: Thanks. I’d love to – love to jump on that as well because I agree.

I wanted to go back on a two-finger on the prep of Ukraine because I think it’s a very interesting story. Six of us went over about 10 days before the war started, and we were able to talk with everybody from the President down to even the opposition parties in the Rada, and what we got from that visit was quite telling.

At the time, if you remember, there was a lot of criticism of President Zelensky because he wasn’t doing some of these big muscle movements about calling up the reserves and starting the sort of training earlier on the frontier units, the regional units, et cetera, et cetera. But one thing President Zelensky said to our group was, you and the West have been so myopically focused on the buildup of the Russian forces on the borders because that –
and he used the word – that’s the sexy thing, and what you haven’t paid attention to is what’s going on inside our country.

And he had two lines of argument there. One is that in his country the war had already started. There were terrorist activities. There was sabotage. There were cyberattacks. There were all manner of those things that the Russians write about in their active measures war that were already going on, and we weren’t paying attention to that. But what it is clear to us now that we also weren’t paying attention to was the Ukrainian military was preparing, and I think two examples – quick examples.

So, when the Chechen BTR battalion came in the northeast part of the country, it wandered up to what the army would call a well-formed L ambush, and basically, they hit a pre-surveyed point and artillery opened up on that Chechen battalion and essentially eliminated it. And this was a part of this pretty amazing – what I think we would describe as defense in-depth that Ukraine had been doing in that time, and the world was not paying attention. And their preparations that were under the radar are now paying off in a huge way.

The other example I love, because I’m a civil engineer, is when that big, long convoy was mired in mud already, they had pre-charged levees along the river, and they flooded the area on top of the mud and made it even better mud. Those two pictures, I think, are telling of brand-new tanks with mud over the top of the train – the tracks, and they look like pillboxes in the mud. And those tanks are never coming out of those holes. They’re a monument there until after the war.

And so, while I want to – while we – we were a bit critical of President Zelensky before on some items, I believe that – I believe him now, and that is we weren’t really paying attention to what this army was really doing. And we’re seeing now the – the benefits of this immense preparation of defense in depth.

Can we let General Clark talk next and then I’ll get to timidity because I see him with a two-finger?

Dr. Jones: Yes. Yes. Yeah –

Gen. Breedlove: He’s going to grade my paper.

Dr. Jones: Yeah, let’s go to General Clark.

Gen. Clark: Well, first of all I’m – I’m sorry I neglected to say this, but I’m honored to be on this panel, too, with Jim and Joe and Phil and especially John Hamre, who is – you know, I’ve known for 30 years now.
But – the – look, the Ukrainians are doing an amazing job in this defense, but I want to pick up on what Joe Ralston said. I don’t think we’re doing enough. I think we’ve been parsimonious with them for years. We have slowed. We have delayed the assistance. We have diminished. We – we have not respected them for what they are. This is the toughest opponent Russia will ever have to face.

I was there in 2014 and 2015 when the war started. I watched them put their units together. I watched them fight. I listened to the – the morale. I talked to their generals. These people are incredibly motivated and incredibly competent. (Audio break) – Russia could have to face, but we haven’t respected that. We need to be taking greater risk.

And I’m going to go from something Phil said earlier, and also what Joe has said. We’ve been excessively timid in this. We don’t know what red lines are. Of course, we don’t want Word World War III, but can we do more? Absolutely.

I keep getting reports of things that are in the pipeline, oh, but there’s a lawyer somewhere, this is hung up there, this is hung up there. And I hear the reports of all this that’s going in, but when I talk to people in Ukraine they don’t have it. So where is it? Is it in Poland? Is it still stuck up in the Washington bureaucracy? How’s it going to get in there?

And we’ve got a very narrow window if we don’t provide additional assistance very quickly to keep the corridors of reinforcement or resupply open into Kyiv. How narrow a window? Is it three days, a week, two weeks? We don’t know. But one thing we know is that long bureaucratic discussions in public about are you going to give them this or are you going to give them that, this country says yes that country says no, NATO says absolutely not, all that does is diminish the prospect that Vladimir Putin’s going to have a very hard time.

I agree with what Jim Jones says. If this is done right, this is it. If you want to stop the third world war, the place to stop it is on the ground in Ukraine.

Dr. Jones: Just to follow up –

Gen. Breedlove: So, Seth?

Dr. Jones: Yeah. Go ahead, General Breedlove. And then – and then I wanted to bring in General Jones on this.

Gen. Breedlove: So I was going to go ahead and start the timid discussion. Do you want to carry on? OK.
So I’m not very popular for the words I use. I don’t use the words “timid” or “timidity.” I’ve been talking about what I think is a very passive deterrent stance that we took going into this conflict. And it’s very easy to see because you can just look back at the newsreels and all the times that multiple layers of leaders in the West are saying if he does this then we’ll do that, if he does this then we’ll do that, or if he does this we will add these on. And those are all passive in nature, and what they do is they cede to the enemy the initiative. In other words, Putin acts first and then we react to that.

That is ceding the initiative to the enemy, which, to all three of the – my fellow SACEURs, we didn’t grow up planning and training to allow the enemy to take the initiative. We wanted to have the initiative in our actions. A fighter pilot says the best defense is to have a missile in the air. And so we don’t want to give the enemy the initiative and we don’t want to use passive deterrence. On the flipside, Mr. Putin was doing what he calls active measures.

So passive deterrence versus active measures, what we did was we did not deter Mr. Putin from going into Ukraine. He looked at what the West was lining up. Our leaders told us that we explained to him what was going to happen if he invaded. He measured all that up and he went in anyway. So our passive deterrence stature did not deter Mr. Putin, again.

And so I think that we need to be thinking much more now – as General Clark said, we have a window. And if we let that window pass, I think our ability to make significant change will pass. And we need now to seize the initiative back and begin an active phase of deterrence and see if that can change the outcome of this war.

Dr. Jones: So if I can bring in General Jones, your perspective is an interesting one here, too, because not only did you serve as SACEUR and as commandant of the Marine Corps, but also as national security adviser. We’ve heard a lot about what we can’t do in the U.S., not a lot about what we can do. So from your perspective, what can we or should we do along those lines?

Gen. Jones: Well, I think at the very least what’s happening on the ground from a – beyond a combat situation is the humanitarian – the humanitarian disaster that’s unfolding with civilians being attacked and air marked. I believe that an active – an active measure that we don’t have to consult with Mr. Putin on is some sort of humanitarian airlift. Some people have used the Berlin Airlift as a model, but we could – you know, you could – we could and should, in my view, address the humanitarian side with a military airlift capability that would be escorted by fighters with the advertised position that we’re not looking to engage the Russians in air-to-air combat, but if fired upon we’ll retaliate. But there’s a humanitarian need and a degree of suffering right
now among the Ukrainians that needs to be addressed. And if Vladimir Putin wants to oppose that, that just adds another nail in the coffin of his reputation.

Dr. Jones: Let me – let me turn to General Ralston about – and open it up to General Clark and Breedlove, if you wanted to add to that. Your thoughts on the pros and cons of an airlift, even one that was focused predominantly on aiding for humanitarian purposes the Ukrainians, but that would involve aircraft or helicopters moving into Ukraine – NATO helicopters. Your thoughts on that?

Gen. Ralston: I certainly think that we have the capability to do an airlift for humanitarian reasons and other reasons as well. We know how to do that. We've got the C-17s to do it. We've got the air cover to make sure that they are not attacked when they’re doing it. And that's something that I think we certainly could do and need to be looking at.

Gen. Breedlove: If I could two-finger that. That has been suggested by some pretty learned people. And, as you know, I've drawn some fire for proposing a humanitarian no-fly zone. But the – it would be completely compatible with the airlift that you described, Seth. And I think it would be best maybe modified, as General Ralston said, maybe the starting point of such an airlift and such a no-fly would be attached to the airlift, as General Ralston sort of described. And that gives us the best chance at not ending up in a bellicose situation.

So I just think that there's compatible things that could be done. And may I offer that east of the Dnieper River right now it's pretty hot. It's getting hotter in the West. If we don't do something like that in the West now, we're probably going to lose the opportunity to do it in the future. Over.

Gen. Clark: Yeah. I agree with Joe and Phil and Jim. I like this humanitarian airlift idea. But I also want to say this, that when Phil proposed the no-fly zone, and I and a lot of people have supported this in principle, we didn't mean to get into the sort of legal eagle entanglements with the Pentagon. Of course, the lawyers will tell you this is the definition of a – that's not what is meant. What we mean is this airspace belongs to Ukraine. It does not belong to Russia. It is not occupied wingtip to wingtip by Russian aircraft. And much of it is open most of the time. And there's no reason why we can't, at the invitation of the government of Ukraine, use that airspace for humanitarian purposes, to establish a safe zone, to establish an air corridor, to prevent the isolation of Kyiv.

I will say this about the humanitarian concept. I mean, Ukraine's a very big country and there's a lot of people in that country who are going to be in humanitarian distress very quickly. So it's not just a matter of landing it in Kyiv. It's a matter of Mariupol. It's a matter of Kharkiv. It's a matter of Zaporizhzhia. It's a matter of Dnipro and Vinnytsia and all these countries.
And I think as time goes on the Biden administration will become – I think there’s a crossover point, and I think we’re reaching it, where they’re going to become more assertive in pushing back this. And I hope they will, because I think, you know, we’ve got just a few days here before this locks down. And if it locks down, it’s going to be very difficult to change it.

I hear this discussion about, oh, we can have an insurrection and we can fight guerrilla warfare and so forth. But this is not Afghanistan. These people are living in apartment buildings. (Laughs.) I mean, it’s not a tribal society. You might have 10 million people who flee. You’re going to have 30-some-odd-million people there who have to live, and they have to survive, and they have to accommodate. And so Putin’s objectives, as you all said, are much larger than Ukraine. This is a place with the fighting spirit of the Ukrainians to draw a line and hold it and roll it back. So we just have to think about this.

And I like, you know, starting with the humanitarian side, starting with the United Nations. Something I learned from Richard Holbrooke 25 years ago is: Stop the killing. Stop the killing, let the diplomats argue. Just stop the killing. We should be hearing the United Nations every single day on this and we’re not.

Dr. Jones:

So it sounds like all four of you do support some variation of humanitarian assistance which involves U.S. and/or NATO assets being used in Ukraine. I wanted to go to General Jones. You know, one of the pushbacks of this is going to be – and we heard the president talk about this – this could, quote, lead to World War III, so how do you respond, General Jones, to concerns that some have raised about how the Russians would respond and what escalation, then, might look like?

Gen. Jones:

Well, you’re never going to know for sure but we cannot continue to be intimidated at every turn by saying, well, this is what we won’t do. I think Phil Breedlove was correct when he said, you know, we need to think about what we want to do and communicate that up, you know, and make sure that people don’t misunderstand our intentions. And I think the humanitarian situation, which is catastrophic and getting worse, is a perfect entrée point for doing something that’s positive and that virtually everybody in the world would support and probably say, what took you so long? And if Vladimir Putin misunderstands that and he’s going to interfere with a humanitarian effort – and by the way, that can be verified to see what’s on those airplanes. I mean, there’s all kinds of ways to do that. We did that in Bosnia; in the Balkans, you know, we satisfied the concerns of the warring factions that this was, in fact, humanitarian airlift and we can put that – we know how to do that very, very well. He would not – I don’t think he would – Mr. Putin would be wise to get in the way of such an effort.
Dr. Jones: 

Thanks. I wondered if anyone else, either General Breedlove or Ralston, you wanted to comment any more on this discussion, and then after that, we'll move on.

Gen. Ralston: 

Nothing else from –

Dr. Jones: 

Nope? OK. What I'd like to do is just to turn to General Ralston. It's a related question and then I do want to get to broader issues of NATO and Europe moving forward. But General Ralston, we've seen the Russians target sites close to the Polish border and we've heard the Russians indicate they're willing to strike targets in western Ukraine; we've seen them do that over the past few days. Just from your perspective, how concerned – just setting this humanitarian assistance discussion aside – how concerned are you with the steady flow of weapons and support and even individuals flowing across the – particularly the Polish border but other NATO countries on the western Ukrainian border – that this could escalate? How concerned are you that the Russians might hit targets in NATO, for example – I mean, I think there are some organizations that are even starting to look at this in terms of war games – and where that would head?

Gen. Ralston: 

Yeah, let me go back to something I said earlier. I think, as bad as this is for Ukraine, this is a bigger issue and I am concerned that Putin once he gets past Ukraine, whatever that means, he's not going to stop there, and, you know, pretty soon he's going to want a corridor through Lithuania to Kaliningrad and the way that we step up to that is we need to go back to things that we were doing in the '70s and the '80s. When I was a squadron commander in 1979-1980, we routinely – I had a base in Germany that my squadron went to every year so that the airmen would know where they were going to sleep, where were they going to eat, where are the fuel trucks, where are the bomb dumps? The Army had the Reforger exercises where we had major muscle movements into NATO whenever we needed it, and I, for one, would be interested in putting American forces and NATO forces up on the front lines today because we've got to be ready; we have to be prepared for that.

Dr. Jones: 

General Breedlove, I see you shaking or nodding your head in agreement. What is your sense right now on what additional steps NATO can take for deterrence, particularly Russian activity in NATO countries, whether it’s pushing additional platforms and systems in along NATO's western perimeter, western front – or sorry, eastern front – or whether it’s adding additional forces in as well? What additional steps should NATO take – should the U.S. and NATO take?

Gen. Breedlove: 

Well, the first thing I would say about NATO is they have begun stepping up and that’s good, but it is oriented towards defending NATO. And what I would ask our leaders to maybe consider stop doing is leading so many of
their statements and paragraphs with “we’ll defend every inch of NATO.” I
think that’s a good message but it is said so many times I think that the
message to the Ukrainian people, the Ukrainian soldiers, is that we’re not
going to defend you. And while we are helping them and we are happy that
our government and other governments are helping by way of resupply and
so forth, we have, in fact, decided to let Ukraine stand alone, and the
repeated message of we’ll defend every inch of NATO I think is a bit hurtful
to the morale of the Ukrainians.

But here I do believe that what General Ralston has said, and others, is
incredibly important. If you remember – we go back to those two documents
I mentioned when I said it’s bigger than Ukraine. In those documents, Mr.
Putin wants force moved back, out of the forward area, and by the actions
that NATO is taking, which I think are good and appropriate and I hope for
more, Mr. Putin is seeing that he’s getting exactly what he didn’t want by
taking the actions he’s taken. And so continued reinforcement of the forward
area, bringing capabilities forward that if he makes a bad decision puts us in
a position to be ready I think are right and appropriate. I just think we need
to adjust our messaging on how we talk about this publicly.

Dr. Jones: Yeah, General Ralston, do you want to come in on this?

Gen. Ralston: Yeah, just one other point that I wanted to make. There are things that we
should be doing that, for whatever reason, bureaucratically we haven’t.
Poland for almost a year has been asking for Abrams tanks that they want to
buy from the United States. Our government has screwed around with this
thing for months and not a single tank has moved, and so that’s inexcusable.
Here is Poland wanting combat capability. We have the capability to give to
them and we just, bureaucratically, can’t get through it, so I, for one, say we
ought to start moving out on things like that.

Dr. Jones: Yeah. General Clark and then I’ve got a follow-up question whenever you’re
done with your two-finger.

Gen. Clark: So I think – I agree with what all my colleagues have said, but I think Mr.
Putin thinks he’s found a hole in NATO’s deterrence, and this is illustrated in
his exercises like Zapad 2013, which is the – his definition of deterrence is he
can do what he wants and he deters us from intervening. So this doesn’t
protect NATO any more than it protects Ukraine. He could do a grab for the
Suwalki Gap and the Baltic states before we could do anything. We’d be
asking the same questions: Is this really worth nuclear war, if he threatens
nuclear war? Are we going to really do this? If you have a U.S. company up
there, a U.S. battalion and he says, don’t worry, you’ll get your battalion back;
we’re not going to do anything with them but, you know, this is my country,
this part of the Soviet Union. What’s the answer to that? Because we’ve
coasted on the idea of deterrence for a long time. We couldn’t wait to get rid
of our tactical nuclear weapons. I remember all of us in the Army hated it. You had these emergency action messages and you were awake at 2:00 in the morning and people were scurrying around and yeah, that was a real pain in the neck, and I remember Colin Powell in 1990 saying how happy he was to get rid of them. Couldn’t wait. Get rid of it. But Russia didn’t get rid of it. So we know in the Cold War that to have effective deterrence you not only had to have forward presence, but you had to have coupling between the nuclear program, between the tactical theater and the strategic. We don’t have that coupling today. Now, we do have some F-16s that are capable of delivering a nuclear warhead. I’ll leave it to Joe and Phil to say how would they do against the SA-400s that are there in Belarus and could they – is it a real deterrent? And so I think – you know, this is about Ukraine not only in the sense he wants more terrain but it’s about Ukraine in the sense of how much can I get away with? What is deterrence today? If it – if you can frighten the United States off and cause them to back off and draw a redline, oh, we’re going to defend this but not over there, what protects Taiwan? What really protects Estonia? So I think we have to ask those questions. I’m not questioning the president’s determination to defend every inch – (audio break) – and what we need to do to buttress that credibility so there’s no possible way that Mr. Putin could misunderstand it.

Dr. Jones: So, General Jones, I wonder if I could just pick up this issue of deterrence with you to get your perspective on how we should think about deterrence in Europe going forward, and what are the implications in particular for U.S. posture moving forward in Europe? We know the National Defense Strategy, the version that’s being rewritten right now, had increasingly focused on the Indo-Pacific and China. But obviously we’re in a different – slightly different position today. So what does deterrence look like to you in Europe?

Gen. Jones: Well, I think that, first of all, that NATO deserves a lot of credit for what they’ve done in a relatively short period of time. The United States over the last couple of administrations has sent a message that has been interpreted by our would-be adversaries, like Russia and China, some messages that indicate that we might not be as dedicated to certain regions of the world as we once were. Western, you know, Europe being one, the Arabian Peninsula being another. The concept of the pivot towards Asia certain resonated around the world in ways that were not in our best interest.

But the – but one thing that might come out of all of this from a deterrence standpoint is a more determined and more capable NATO. I know they’re working on a lot of graduated response plans. I think, if I understand correctly, there’s eight battle groups that are deployed in Eastern Europe with an ability to reinforce them and a commitment to reinforce them as necessary. Now, those are not – those are battalion-sized battlegroups, if I understand correctly. And they are not the dominant force that you would
need if you got into a conflict with Russia. But it’s better than what we’ve had.

And the defense of Europe is no longer in East Germany. The defense of Europe starts in the Baltic states and the Black Sea – and the Black Sea states. And when you go there today, if you talk to the people in Central and Eastern Europe, you get a completely – until recently – you got a completely different view than the Western Europeans would projects. It’s good to see NATO coming together. It’s good to see that there’s cooperation among allies, even among some of our Western allies like Germany and France have come into the fold in a supportive way.

So I think the fact that Mr. Putin probably misdiagnosed the situation with regard to NATO and some of our European allies, the exact opposite of what he’d hoped for is what one of the results that could happen. And that is a rejuvenated NATO with more commitments to its capabilities, more troop presence in the areas where they’re needed. And that in effect would be a very powerful deterrence, if that’s what happened.

Dr. Jones: Well, let me pick up on this and go to General Breedlove, which is – and then I’ll go to General Ralston – which is there’s been a bit of movement. The Germans have agreed to boost their defense spending. They’ve announced purchase of additional F-35s. What is your sense about steps in Europe right now on increasing spending, focusing on additional capabilities? Some of this sounds good, but is it enough? Where would you like to see European countries, European militaries, go?

Gen. Breedlove: Sure, I’ll go first. So we need to celebrate what they’re doing. I agree with General Jones. Some really good things are happening not only in what they’re doing with troop movements and the forward formations, but we now have a host of nations that are looking at an increase in defense spending. And the German one is demonstrative. And they’re already making announcements about purchases, as you said, the JSF and others, inside of those announcements. But also, look at now the open debate about the possibility of maybe Finland joining NATO, or even, you know, the remoter possibility but at least conversations in Sweden as well. And so there are a lot of very positive things, I think, happening between us and our high-end partners that should be celebrated and encouraged.

And I think that you’re going to see a lot of nations making some change. And then the one thing I would also say is NATO has done – all the way back to the Wales conference and then the Warsaw conference – we focused on readiness. And there were some good changes to readiness, but not great changes to readiness. And now we’re beginning to see some great changes to readiness. But we got to keep a focus on that. Readiness is more than just new kits. I don’t want to get in trouble with all of our industry partners, but
readiness is also about investing in training. Just like General Clark said, the Russians weren’t training at the appropriate levels and in the appropriate ways. We need to examine ourselves. We have some formations that had really extended readiness periods, so extended so as not to be relevant in a fast-moving fight. And we need to shrink those readiness expectations as far as response times and invest some money as well there.

Dr. Jones: General Ralston, I wondered if you wanted to come in on this broader question about – with the flurry of new European defense actions, what kinds of implications are there for NATO? And what role do you see NATO playing in sustaining the momentum over time?

Gen. Ralston: Yeah. First of all, I’d like to say what you’ve mentioned and what Phil mentioned about the Germans is absolutely stunning to me, the turnaround that the German government has made. And I applaud that, and I am very hopeful that they are waking up to what the real threat is. And I think that’s true throughout many of our allies there. We, the U.S., need to be doing more. And I talked about the Reforger-type exercises and things. You know, it’s not very long ago we had over 300,000 American forces in Europe. Today, you know, it’s down less than 100,000 that we’ve got. We need to be there training every day with our allies. That’s one of the things that we do very well, and we need to be doing more of it.

You mentioned, or Phil mentioned, Finland and Sweden. Let me make a couple of comments there. Whether Finland and Sweden join NATO is appropriately a decision for the citizens of Finland and Sweden. NATO has never recruited other countries. NATO has said, if you desire to be a member of NATO there are five criteria you have to meet. You have to be a functioning democracy. You have to be a free market economy. To be in control of your military. No border disputes with your neighbors. And be willing to accept NATO doctrine and procedures if you become a member of NATO. And then after all of that, every member of NATO has to agree that that country could become a member of NATO.

So I’m not recruiting for NATO. NATO is not recruiting. But both Finland and Sweden are very serious about their defense. Finland has shared a long border with Russia for a long time. And they are very serious about it. That’s why they purchased the F-35 not long ago to do it. So that’s something that we need to be paying attention to. Again, that is a decision for the citizens of Finland and Sweden. But I think if they decided to – that they wanted to become a member of NATO, I think most people would agree that they certainly have met the criteria.

Dr. Jones: So we’re almost out of time, but I did want to make sure we at least touched on the European Union, for General Clark, just to get a sense, General Clark from you, about, you know, the French and the Germans still talk about a
defense role for the European Union in addition to a foreign policy and an economic role. Do you – how do you see that moving forward? We’ve talked entirely about NATO here. There are some differences across Europe. Obviously, the European Union does not have the U.K. anymore, with Brexit. So what do you see for the future of the European Union on the defense side? And what does that relationship look like with NATO moving forward?

Gen. Clark: I think it’s hard for the Europeans to give up on this concept of a European defense. And it’s been talked about ever since, you know, when I was a NATO commander. And it’s never been really developed. There’s a lot of pledges. There’s a lot of majors and lieutenant colonels and colonels who don’t have other jobs – (audio break) – has shown is that they’ve got to rely on NATO and the United States. So I think this is a real plus for NATO in the way it’s been handled.

Dr. Jones: General Breedlove, want to get your perspective. You got a two-finger on it.

Gen. Breedlove: A very quick two-finger. My opinion sometimes is not well accepted on this, but I’m not afraid in any way, shape or form of the growth of a European army, because the vast preponderance of the nations in the EU are also in the NATO. And any improvements they make to their military to be the part of the EU military will also apply to NATO missions. So I’m not worried about it, with one exception. And all of these other gentlemen have heard this. And that is, what we don’t need to do is build redundant structures. It’s easy for me to say because I’m a four-star, I can pick on us. But we don’t need new four-star headquarters, and flags, and bases, and all that. What we need is improvements in the forces.

And when NATO and EU work together, as they did off the coast of Somalia and as they are today in Bosnia-Herzegovina, it’s a wonderful thing. You marry the strengths of the EU to the strengths of NATO, and these missions work really well. So I worry less about the conversations of an EU army, until we start seeing them trying to buy capabilities that NATO already has in spades. And then that would be worrisome.

Gen. Jones: Yeah, the danger is that could happen, Phil, as you know. It’s easy to build a new headquarters and put flags in front of it with no capability. So I think it’s very – I think this crisis will highlight the fact that you really do have one European force. And that’s NATO. The United States can opt in and out of future missions, but it’s one force. You have one force that can be used, and it’s commonly trained, and commonly equipped, without redundant headquarters.

Dr. Jones: Well, that would be the efficient way to do it.

Gen. Jones: Yes, it would.
Dr. Jones: General Jones, I wanted to just stay with you just for a second and to get your perspective – this is more of a White House perspective, of where – what you the U.S.’s objectives now should be with the Russians stuck in Ukraine, they’re moving forward, it looks like, a little bit faster in the south. But they’re grinding away right now. We have ongoing political discussions. What would – what would you advise should be our main objectives from a U.S. standpoint?

Gen. Jones: Well, I think – I think the United States has lost a good measure of its former influence in different parts of the world. And I think that we have to do whatever we can to regain that, and – regain that reputation and also that respect that goes with it. We’ve just – we have just had too many conflicting messages that show we’re – have nations conclude that we’re disengaged in one part of the world or the other. We need to fix that. And Ukraine and this crisis is a good place to start.

The – you know, I would say that in the Ukraine – and we’ve covered this a little bit earlier, but it bears repeating – that the humanitarian catastrophe is of such a high order that that could be a good place to start. And it will require using military capabilities to, you know, stop the – stop the carnage a little bit and take care of the people. But if we – if we organize that and the family of nations that are our friends and allies agreed with it, I think that’s a – that’s a good place to start while at the same time making sure that on the – on the borders that Vladimir Putin does not misunderstand the fact that we will respond if he goes too far. You know, what’s happened in Ukraine is going to be a course study in war colleges for a long time in terms of miscommunications and how words do matter in the political circles because they lead to things like this if people don’t understand intent.

But I think we can – I think we can turn this around, but I worry that in this country – in our country right now there are too – even though we appear to be united in a bipartisan way for the first time in a long time – and that’s a good thing – but we have – we have sent conflicting messages about our national intent, whether it’s in Africa where China’s running all over the place, whether it’s in Asia, whether it’s on the Arabian Peninsula, or in our own hemisphere. We have got to regain the leadership of democracies and freedom-loving people because the opposition – whether it’s China, whether it’s North Korea, whether it’s Iran and Russia – are forming a – seem to be forming a bloc to cause us difficulties for the foreseeable rest of the century if we’re not careful.

But the United States can regain our footing. It’s not going to be easy. I think we need to be more agile. We need to make decisions more rapidly. I think our State Department needs to be much more effective in terms of its communications with our friends and allies. And we need to be more
involved on a – almost on a daily basis in the goings-on in different parts of
the world if we’re going to achieve that.

**Dr. Jones:** General Clark and then – and then General Ralston and then General
Breedlove, just in succession. General Clark, let me just start with you, and
we’re wrapping up. Your thoughts on U.S. objectives, starting with Ukraine?
You can broaden them if you want. It’s certainly not out of the question that
the Russians push for not just Crimea and the Donbas areas like Luhansk and
Donetsk, which they already control at least de facto, but maybe to connect
those areas along the Black Sea, or to continue to carve out some areas of
Ukraine. What should our objectives in the U.S. be here and even more
broadly?

**Gen. Clark:** Well, first objective is to preserve NATO. Second objective is to deter China.
Third objective is to do as much as we can to push back the Russian effort in
Ukraine as a way of achieving one and two.

Now, how far we push it back. So we’re going to have negotiations. This is a
talk-fight-fight-talk situation for a long time, but the results of it are going to
be decided by what happens on the ground. So we need to be taking
additional risks to provide additional support to Ukraine. We can’t be
indifferent. It’s not a black-and-white thing. It’s a – it is something that has to
be worked on a daily basis, keeping Ukraine in the fight.

I hear discussions of, well, you know, the real objective is to save NATO, and
if we can do something for Ukraine that’s OK. It’s not that simple, because
doing something for Ukraine is essential to deterring China and saving
NATO. You can’t just hide behind a NATO redline.

So it’s all three. It’s strengthen NATO, deter China, and do as much as you can
in Ukraine.

The crossover point here is: Do we do so much that we threaten Vladimir
Putin’s continuance in leadership? Can we do that? Do we risk that? I don’t
have enough information from the inside to know this. But I do know this,
that I am told that there are responsible officials in Russia that, were he to
push a nuclear button, they would make sure it didn’t happen. Now, is that
fanciful thinking or is it true? I don’t know. But Putin’s gambled his whole
future on this. He is not a stabilizing factor in Europe. If this is settled by
negotiation, he’ll be back for another bite of the apple. He is not going to be
satisfied with stabilizing. So we have to recognize that and not sell ourselves
short. We have a possibility for something much more than a ceasefire here.
We have a chance for a substantial success against Vladimir Putin that could
throw him off his high horse for a long time. We should try to get that.
Dr. Jones: General Ralston, over to you and then General Breedlove. Any other comments on U.S. interests and objectives?

Gen. Ralston: Yeah. First of all, back to something that General Jones said and I absolutely agreed: words are important. And I use as an example the unintended message that the United States sent with the word “pivot” to Asia. We're bigger than that. When we say we're going to pivot to Asia, that implies turning our back on Europe and on the Middle East. And Putin took advantage of that. And I, for one, would ban the word “pivot,” but – because of the unintended messages that it sends. We're bigger than that. We can handle Asia. We can handle Europe. We can do the Middle East. And so we need to be very careful how we state those kinds of things.

Dr. Jones: Thanks.

Gen. Breedlove: Just very quickly, I think we all understand and we hope that the rest of the world understands that Ukraine is a sovereign nation and is entitled to its own sovereign decisions. That also includes, I think, that people trying to be friends in the West should not be meddling too deeply into the decisions of a sovereign nation. Ukraine has a magnificent leader who’s leading his nation in a tough fight, and I think we should support him in the decisions that he and his nation make.

And I would also sort of add to that that I would hope that we would find the ways that would allow Mr. Zelensky – President Zelensky to make those decisions in a sovereign way and not to look at his situation and say, I'm fighting alone, and then make a decision that gives up his sovereignty. So I'd just say we need to find those ways to be much more active in our support of Mr. Zelensky and the fight for the – for his nation.

Dr. Jones: Well, thank you very much, all of you – General Clark, General Jones, General Ralston, General Breedlove, and Dr. Hamre. Really appreciate everyone taking a few minutes today to talk about this incredibly important issue. Thanks again for your thoughts, and we really appreciate it. Have a great day.