Hi. I’m Emily Harding, deputy director and senior fellow of the CSIS International Security Program. I am thrilled to welcome you all to this very timely Smart Women, Smart Power discussion on Russia’s operations in Ukraine, with Assistant Secretary of Defense Celeste Wallander.

We have all watched Russia’s brutal and unprovoked invasion unfold with a mix of horror and resolve. Ukraine’s defense of its land has proven that determination and bravery, and a little help from friends, can stop in his tracks a bully who aims for nothing short of renewed empire. Women have played a critical role in all aspects of this conflict. Women picked up rifles alongside their brothers and husbands. Women protected families through shelling and made arduous journeys to safety. The first lady of Ukraine has been a constant and steady voice for her people to the outside world.

We are here today with another woman who is playing a critical role in this conflict. Celeste Wallander serves as the assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs. This is just her latest position in a long career of government service. During the Obama administration, she was special assistant to the president and senior director for Russia, Central Asia on the National Security Council. She served as deputy assistant secretary of defense for Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia. And then immediately before rejoining government this time around, she served as the president and CEO of the U.S.-Russia Foundation. We are thrilled to have her here today.

Before we pass the podium to Assistant Secretary Wallander for opening remarks, we would like to thank our sponsors at Citi. Because of their generous support, we get the opportunity to amplify the voices of changemakers leading the way in such areas as defense, security, business, and innovation. With that, I would like to welcome Citi’s Director of Government Affairs Kristin Solheim for opening remarks.
we are all excited to hear about what she – her take on this. So I’m happy to turn the mic over to Dr. Wallander for her opening remarks.

Celeste Wallander: Thank you. Thank you so much to CSIS and to Citibank for inviting me to speak.

This is a homecoming for me. I served as a senior director for the – senior fellow for the Russia Eurasia Program at CSIS from 2001 to 2006. And I had the privilege then of working with colleagues and friends who themselves had served in government and who were leading scholars and experts in the think tank and academic communities. And it was through that experience that I learned the vital importance of our community writ large, the expertise, the support, the insight, and the work forward that we all have to contribute to. So it is my very great pleasure to be here to talk with you today about the current crisis of Russia’s invasion in Ukraine. And I hope that I am able to do all my friends and colleagues proud for all of the support and all that I’ve learned from so many of you over the years.

Ms. Harding: Thank you. Well, I cannot tell you how much we appreciate you taking a few minutes out of your busy schedule to be here with us today. And we are proud, proud to see so many CSIS alums out in the world and doing phenomenal things. I wanted to start off by talking a little bit about your background and your history. You've had this tremendous career working all around Washington. What initially inspired you to get involved in international affairs? Why defense and foreign policy?

Ms. Wallander: So it goes all the way back to college, as so many of these stories go. I originally thought I would major in classics. I was interested in being a professor of Roman military history. I was always interested in defense and security, but it was a little more ancient. But then I realized that I was also interested in understanding the current world around me, and so I shifted to studying crises and conflicts and that was kind of the pivot to international relations versus history, although I still every now and then pick up a book of Latin poetry and try to remember the Latin I learned back in college.

Ms. Harding: You've got to exercise that other part of your brain sometimes, right?

Ms. Wallander: (Laughs.) And then when I was in graduate school I went to Yale and I started out sort of as a generalist interested in conflict crises – understanding crisis escalation, war, when do crises escalate to war, when do they de-escalate? When do countries choose to use military forces versus hold back? And it was right at that time that Gorbachev came to power, and so it seemed like a good idea to learn something about the Soviet Union if I was going to be a security expert.

Ms. Harding: (Laughs.) Yep.
Ms. Wallander: And so I took a course on the Soviet Union at a time when suddenly it was a really fascinating turning point in history, and so once again I re-pivoted and was fortunate to have fellowship support to learn Russian, Russian history, Russian economics, Russian military, and that’s how I ended up on the path of being a Soviet expert. And then when I started my first job as a professor at Harvard, that was in 1989, so I quickly became a Russia-Eurasia expert instead of a Soviet expert. So the lesson to everyone is you should plan, but flexibility is the key to the ability to have a really meaningful and hopefully constructive career.

Ms. Harding: Yeah, that’s great advice. That’s phenomenal advice because you never really know where world events are going to take you. But I have to ask, do you find the study of the classics relevant to today’s conflicts? Do you look back for those same old lessons?

Ms. Wallander: I think certainly understanding political military relations, understanding military planning, understanding the rise and fall of empires, all of these are themes that we’re seeing play out today, maybe in a different form, different technology, but many of those issues are perennial and are worth our attention and understanding.

Ms. Harding: Yeah, sadly conflict has changed a lot but also not that much over thousands of years.

So to today’s conflict, let’s talk a little bit about Russia and Ukraine. You’ve been a Soviet watcher and a Russia watcher for years now. I’d love to hear your thoughts on Moscow’s overall strategy here. One of my favorite Twitter accounts is Darth Putin; he calls himself a master strategist. What do you think of how Putin has done so far with this war?

Ms. Wallander: So what we are seeing play out is exactly the vulnerability of authoritarian regimes, which is authoritarian regimes create incentives to not tell the boss the truth, to – the authoritarian regimes do not have the – sometimes troublesome but always constructive feedback mechanisms of democracies. You can’t make good decisions if you don’t have good information, and you can’t have good information if you don’t have a variety of views and the ability to question yourself, reassess, course correct, and listen to a hopefully well educated, well informed leadership team. And what Putin has created over the last 20 years in Russia is a rigid, brittle structure in which only the like-minded succeed, in which he has surrounded himself by people who think the way he does, and anyone who ever was willing to sort of stick their head up and say, maybe that’s a good idea, found themselves, you know, at best fired, at worst with possible other outcomes. And so that’s what we’re seeing is a leadership that didn’t listen to alternative views, that really just
did what the boss wanted, and that's the resulting mire that Russia unfortunately finds itself in.

Ms. Harding: That's absolutely true. I mean, I was a long-time member of our intelligence community and we held very strong to the values that we were going to speak

truth to power, right. Even if it was a message that the leader didn't want to hear, you had to provide the truth to avoid strategic blunders just like the ones you're talking about.

I love your comment about how it’s sometimes troublesome but stronger approach of democracies are a project here run by Suzanne Spaulding who has done a lot of work on reinforcing that kind of civic education about why democracy is so important and why, even though it is troublesome sometimes, it’s so critical to be exchanging viewpoints and to be doing it in a fair way that results in a process we can all agree on. And you’re right. I mean, Russia doesn’t have that.

How do you see Europe responding to the way that Putin has conducted this war?

Ms. Wallander: Europe has almost more at stake than any other set of countries or country than Ukraine in this conflict because what Russia has done is shattered the foundations, or sought to shatter the foundations – or sought to shatter the foundations of European security.

It’s also global security, but it’s being played out in the European region. Europe, with the end of the Cold War, took, you know, a great sigh of relief. It wasn’t the Cold War anymore. It wasn’t this bipolar confrontation playing itself out on the European continent.

After a century of World War I, World War II, and then, the Cold War, Europe was ready for that kind of historic change towards cooperative security, towards a Russia that would seek all the benefits of integration, of pluralism, of economic competition, investment, and they weren’t wrong. But I think Europe was so - many European countries were so invested in that better future that they had trouble seeing the warning signs over the last two decades – not least the invasion – the Russian invasion in 2014 of Crimea and the Donbas.

And so, there was a little bit of still hoping that Russia would get off of this dangerous track, but Putin managed to, you know, shred any doubt that that was not the path of a Putinist Russia, and Europe had to take it seriously. And Europe, very much to its credit, really has taken it seriously and played a
leadership role on the global scene in calling Russia to account and holding Russia to account.

Ms. Harding: Absolutely. One of our audience members asked the question, did you see this coming, which is not at all a fair question. But I think the actual fair question is, what did the U.S. get right in trying to look at the lead-up to this potential invasion? And then, immediately in the aftermath of the invasion, what do you think was the critical moment when Europe really did step up to the plate?

Ms. Wallander: So, I think what the United States did get right was a significant portion of the U.S. national security leadership – inside and outside of government – did learn the lessons from 2014-2015. Also, you know, I would point to Russia’s military operations in Syria, support of Assad, the growth of Wagner, private military companies – and they’re pernicious – even you know, more than pernicious – destructive effects of places across Africa.

And so, there was a general awareness that I think in the national security leadership that Putinism was not on a path towards cooperation and stability and a constructive relationship with the United States. But then, the real key was the skills of our intelligence community, which had continued to follow Russian actions; had continued to invest in capabilities and understanding to be able to warn the civilian leadership of our national security enterprise when the evidence was mounting about Russian intentions to launch the invasion.

And then, the political leadership in this country was brave to declassify and share so much of that intelligence because there was a tendency in so many circles to think – no, it really can’t be that bad; it can’t be that bad, which is understandable. You know, we all were – we’ve all been through COVID. We’ve all been through different energy crises. We’ve all worried about the global economy.

But when presented with the evidence, especially in Europe, leaders faced the reality and were ready when Russia did launch the invasion to act, and the ground had been laid for the kinds of things that it took us months to arrange in 2014 – effective sanctions, effective political cooperation in international fora like the U.N. The groundwork had been laid, and so, the response was really quite immediate.

Ms. Harding: Right. This is, I guess, the downside to Putin continually choosing the wrong path as he went down the road in the last few years.

Looking very big picture, there was a debate, before Ukraine in particular, in the United States foreign policy circles about, do we stay in Europe? Do we
pivot to China? Do we focus our limited resources, and time, and effort on the Pacific? What do we do about Europe?

That debate, I think, simultaneously quieted down and then also shifted dramatically during the invasion of Ukraine. How would you view this balance of resources, and can we do both? Should we be doing both? How would you – looking at the planet, how would you divide and conquer what the U.S. has to do on a daily basis?

Ms. Wallander: Well, back to the advantage of democracy, is that we are able to be clear-eyed in the face of reality and facts, and the reality is that, in the global security environment, the United States is – and our allies and partners across the world are confronted by both a rising and dangerous China, and a declining and dangerous Russia.

And so the United States doesn’t really have a choice but to cope with both challenges – the pacing challenge of China and the acute threat of Russia. And so that is challenging. Our advantages are, however, we do have a global network of allies and partners. So we’re not in this alone. We continue to have a strong, flexible economy that is – has all the advantages of global access, a competitive and highly capable private sector, and the quality of our educational system and the quality of our leadership, along with that of allies and partners.

And the other advantage, I think, is that we often point to – and it is concerning that sometimes China and Russia – Xi’s China and Putin’s Russia – seem to be aligned. That’s because they – I think they’re more tactically aligned that strategically aligned, but that’s a long debate. But what it is due to is because many of their interests align because they’re both seeking to undermine the global order that has been built up since the mid-20th century, that benefits the United States and our allies and partners.

And so many of the actions we need to take to protect that global order, to protect rule of law at home and abroad, to protect freedom of navigation – all of these which are really key to pushing back against Russia – are similarly the kinds of reinforcing capabilities and relationships we need to cope with this pacing challenge of China. So there is an overlap. And in successfully dealing with the Russian threat in Europe right now, we are simultaneously sending a signal to the global community of how to deal with a dangerous China as well.

Ms. Harding: Absolutely. The strength of those alliances and the resilience in the face of mis- and disinformation and various regimes trying to undermine
democracy as an institution, I think we have learned a lot as a country in the last few years about how to go about this. We still have more to learn, to be sure.

Let’s talk a little bit about the situation on the ground in Ukraine. I don’t know if you’re a Game of Thrones fan, but winter is coming. And I think we’re all a little bit concerned about what’s going to happen on the battlefield and then also within Europe. What do you think that Ukraine needs to accomplish in the next few weeks. I mean, they’ve clearly had stunning gains on the battlefield. What’s next for them? And where would you like to see them get before winter really sets in?

Ms. Wallander: So, first, I’ll say that, you know, Ukraine gets to choose its priorities, how it defends itself, what its military strategies, and tactics, and priorities are. What I think we’re seeing is, first of all, yes, this stunning success in the Kharkiv area of the forward line of conflict. And we’re seeing some really key strategic successes by Ukrainian forces in the Donetsk-Luhansk region, in particular the recent taking back of the town and the railhead of Lyman, which is going to significantly affect Russia’s ability to supply, resupply, and move forces all along that forward line of conflict.

Ukraine’s goal is to push back the Russian bridgehead on the Russian bank of the Dnieper in Kherson. And that will be both a major defeat for Russia because it means – it pushes back even more Russia’s ambition to take Odessa, which was one of the stated objectives earlier this year. It becomes that much harder. And it gives Ukraine a much better defensive position to ride out what probably will be a tamping down of the hot fighting over the winter. So Ukraine seems to be on track to achieve in all three of those objectives right now. But it does require – and I want to highlight – continued security assistance from the United States, from the international community.

And that’s why the United States continues on pace to support Ukraine. Through presidential drawdown the Congress just passed a continuing resolution which continues to provide resources for that sustained capability to Ukraine, and a longer-term capability so Ukraine can build a defensive capability that will be a deterrent – an effective deterrent to a Putin who decides he might want to start something again later after, you know, a winter pause. So with congressional support we not only have PDA funding, we now have another challenge of Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative funding, which allows us to do procurement and longer-term planning for Ukraine’s ongoing defensive capabilities.
Ms. Harding: That’s great. That continued pipeline of support, so critical.

On the other side of support, though – the rebuilding, the humanitarian assistance, the – you know, let’s look – let’s look to the future when this conflict is over and it’s time for Ukraine to start to rebuild. Scholarship says that the earlier you can start that planning, the better; and even though it feels premature when there’s still active fighting going on on the ground, that is, in fact, the time to start. What are your thoughts on how we should be shaping postwar rebuilding in Ukraine? How can we provide assistance? How do the Ukrainians want to approach this?

Ms. Wallander: I wouldn’t say it’s premature. I think that, in fact, the United States and the international community have been providing Ukraine with financial and humanitarian assistance throughout – not reconstruction assistance, because it is a hot war, but – certainly, a lot of the headlines are focused on the security assistance, but there has been sustained financial, budgetary, and humanitarian assistance throughout.

I know that the United States has begun to think about what kind of reconstruction support there is. We’re going to have to also leverage the international community, World Bank, IMF. The European Union has been very forward-leaning in thinking about where it can contribute. So I think the main message is that it’s not the United States alone; it is, actually, these international institutions. And I think the Europeans have a strong commitment to supporting Ukraine.

I don’t have the specific plans, but there is already thinking along these lines. And we – and we’ve done this before and we can do it again in Ukraine.

Ms. Harding: Yeah. Sad but true.

What about lessons from the war for us in the U.S. in any future conflicts that we might fight? What do you think that our defense establishment has learned from this kind of conflict?

Ms. Wallander: Well, those assessments are underway, so I don’t want to prejudge their outcome. But I’ll point to a couple of my takeaways.

One is the value of alliances. And in particular, you know, our bedrock foundation alliance globally is NATO. And NATO, not just in Europe, but NATO has been a security partner, was in Afghanistan. NATO is leading a training mission for Iraqi security forces so that Iraqi security forces are able to continue effective counter-ISIS operations in Iraq. So NATO has actually been a globally ally and partner to the United States. So the – we don’t – it’s
not just that you can’t do it alone; you don’t – we don’t have to do it alone. And we’ve seen the importance, also, of American alliances and partnerships in Asia now. I won’t speak too much to that since I don’t have responsibility for it, but you’ve seen effective coordination and cooperation in Asia as well. And sort of a trans-Europe INDOPACOM alliance or association with AUKUS, the development of an Australia-U.K.-U.S. alignment in order to provide security in the Indo-Pacific as well as in Europe. So that’s lesson number one for the United States, is to invest in and value those alliances.

Second is the importance of our defense industrial base. One of the things we have been able to do that Russia is struggling with is we’ve been able to keep this steady supply of support to Ukraine and to ourselves and to allies and partners even as the Russian defense industrial base is really struggling just to supply Russia itself. So we need to – as defense and security community understand, it’s not just the forces you have; it’s the ability of your defense industrial base and your economy to sustain your defense enterprise and that of your allies and partners going forward. And we’ve really worked closely on that in the last few months in DOD, led by our Deputy Secretary of Defense Kath Hicks. That’s lesson number two.

And lesson number three, I think, is that my own takeaway is that we do have new technologies. We’ve seen how UAS have been used and deployed in this conflict. We see how UAS capabilities are proliferating in the Middle East and affect security in the Middle East. But it’s not – back to it’s not an either/or because we’ve also seen that the availability of, you know, classic conventional military capabilities – armor, artillery, air-defense capabilities – have been key to this particular conflict. The balance might be different in different potential conflicts globally, but the United States really needs to be investing in new technologies and investing in modernization but have that sort of 360 approach to defense requirements if we’re going to have global responsibilities with our allies and partners.

Ms. Harding: This is the part where I would love to start geeking out about defense acquisition reform, but we will not go there. (Laughs.) It’s just so critical to the way that we proceed in these conflicts. And we have such exquisite capabilities, and then trying to keep the buckets full and keep moving forward with our capabilities and sharing with our partners. That’s the end of my soapbox about that, though.

We are, of course, very proud of Deputy Secretary Kath Hicks, who also is a CSIS alum and is doing tremendous things over at the Pentagon.
You raised NATO, which is a perfect pivot to where I wanted to go next. Could you talk a little bit about the Madrid summit and what needs to be prioritized in terms of following up on some of the conclusions there?

Ms. Wallander: So I think the most – my most important takeaway from the Madrid summit is we have a strategic concept that addresses the current security environment; recognizes Russia as a threat to European security that, unfortunately, it has exposed itself to; but also puts European allies on the record as raising concerns about China’s global role and how European security is global – is embedded in global security, and then, therefore, how challenges to global security impact Europe and a commitment on the part of NATO allies to take that seriously.

The methods, at least currently, that Russia and China use are different in sort of spreading malign influence. China, it is through commercial access, through technology in ways that Russia is not quite as adept at, shall we say. But Europe is vulnerable to that kind of malign influence and is now fully, you know, awake to that. And I think that was a significant achievement to have a strategic concept purpose – fit for purpose in 2022.

The second achievement, I think, is the clear commitment that the 2 percent Wales pledge is a floor, not a ceiling. And what we are seeing in all of our multilateral and bilateral engagements, the United States in our conversations with allies, is they are going as appropriate beyond the 2 percent floor to do that kind of resupply, that investment in their defense industrial base, seeking to modernize resupply, but also to look at advanced training, really taking seriously the importance of training of personnel. Again, we’re seeing the effects of Russia's sort of Potemkin image of a very capable military. It just highlights the importance of taking seriously all the elements of an effective military. And that takes money, and we’re seeing that commitment across Europe.

And the third is really taking seriously now the commitments about posture for effective deterrence through defense. I think the old debate about is it deterrence by tripwire or deterrence by denial is behind us now. It’s clear that what you need is an effective, credible defensive capability in order to deter an adversary, in this case Russia. What that credible defense looks like varies by areas in Europe. It includes not just ground forces; it includes air defense, it includes maritime domain. So it is multidimensional.

But allies are really digging into what that looks like in their national capabilities, but also building on this extraordinary achievement of the last year in creating eight NATO battle groups across the eight eastern flank countries. And each of these is multinational. They are led by a framework
nation. I could rattle off the names if you want, but other people can look. But each and every one of those eight battle groups is actually staffed and contributed to by different NATO countries, so it lends political credibility in addition to the important military credibility that Moscow needs to take seriously.

Ms. Harding: Yeah. I mean, nobody has been a better salesman for NATO’s capabilities than Vladimir Putin this past year. (Laughs.) And the strength of NATO, I think, probably surprised Moscow a little bit, that NATO stepped up the way that it did.

Things have gotten a little hotter rhetorically lately, though. Putin has used the word(s) “nuclear weapons” more than once and there have been some fiery speeches out of Moscow. How do you think that NATO should respond to that kind of saber-rattling?

Ms. Wallander: Well, I think first – and what we’ve seen – is NATO clearly denouncing such irresponsible language. Russia is a major nuclear power. It is a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. It has legal responsibilities under the New START Treaty. And as a major power with a substantial nuclear capability – nuclear-weapons capability – it sets the tone for the global community, along with other major nuclear powers, in responsible stewardship of a nuclear capability. And that does not include saber-rattling and threatening small, weaker, non-nuclear countries on its borders, specifically Ukraine but more generally, you know, the sort of lack of responsibility in thinking about the effects of this facile reliance on nuclear threats is really concerning, and not commensurate with Russia’s – what it likes to think is its global stature. It really is really unfortunate. And I think that the international community has called Russia out in that regard, and that’s been the right first step.

The second step for NATO, though, is to make sure that we have that credible deterrent message capability – political unity, military capability – including NATO’s role as a nuclear alliance, to make clear that NATO takes seriously its Article 5 commitment to one another as an alliance. And I think that the United States and NATO allies have done a good job in response to that kind of irresponsible saber-rattling.

Ms. Harding: Yeah, agreed. Well, we are here with Smart Women, Smart Power. So I want to talk a little bit about women’s role in national security affairs. To the extent that you think it’s made a difference in your career, can you think of any times when your view as a woman in, perhaps, a roomful of men or perhaps a roomful of women or perhaps a balanced room, was having a conversation about national security affairs, and your viewpoint made a
difference? You brought something different to the table than perhaps the other people at the table. Anything come to mind?

Ms. Wallander: So I’ll preface my answer by saying I think that one of the – this is going to sound a little strange, maybe – but as women, we often learn that our voices get drowned out. We often learn that, you know, people like to talk in meetings. And I feel like one of the things I learned early on from having been a professor, from having been an analyst, and from being a woman who sometimes got talked over, is that I learned the value of listening.

And I think that often when I think of moments when I’ve been able to be effective in a meeting, it’s not because I was the first person speaking. It was because other people jumped in and spoke a lot, and I could listen and try and hear different views and different arguments, and do the best I could to think: What does my leadership need to understand? And how can I present that dearly?

And in 2014, I had that opportunity multiple times. President Obama was a really good listener. And he always was very – in my experience – was very careful to not just listen to those around the table who immediately offered their thoughts, but to take the moment to then ask others in the room – including those of us in the Sit Room in the back seats – what our views were, and what we thought, and how we could contribute. And on a number of occasions in 2014, as the first Russian invasion of Ukraine played out, I think that I was able to offer some thoughts that, you know, were, I think, useful to the leadership.

So I’m not telling women to be quiet. But I’m saying, think about the advantage you have sometimes by letting other people talk a lot first, and take a moment to marshal your thoughts to listen to others, to gain from that, and then be ready to make a contribution.

Ms. Harding: Right. It’s not the first person talking. It’s somebody who contributes something critical at a critical moment. I think that’s great advice. The leaders who do take the opportunity to reach to the back bench and to also be sure that everybody at the table has had their say I think are some of the best outcomes in those meetings. I remember similar experiences in government. Not with President Obama, but I have heard that before, that he was a tremendously good listener.

A couple of our other audience questions. General advice for women in the national security space. The listening piece I think is really good one. Any others for our junior staffers who are here in the audience or who might be listening online and just starting out their careers in national security?
Ms. Wallander: Oh, a few things. One is, you will have that really good moment when you do get shouted down, or talked over, or interrupted. And pick your battles. Sometimes you push back. Sometimes let it play out and come back. But don’t let it grind you down. It’ll happen, and the most important thing is figure out what your coping mechanism is and how to come back and fight another day. That’s sort of very tactical advice.

More strategic advice is from my experiences don’t – which I shared – which is, don’t think that you have to have one path to your objective. Think about your path as being – you know, think of what your objective is, but there are many ways to get to your objective. So you might start out focusing on one topic. That is useful. And then suddenly you discover there’s an opportunity to learn something new or serve on a different team than the one you kind of anticipated. Always take advantage of whatever opportunity is in front of you because what you’ll find is, as long as it moves you towards the objective, that’s kind of how it actually works successfully, rather than beating your head on sort of the immediate next thing you think you have to do.

The other is, in my experience, and I think this is one of the reasons why the women I know who are successful are so successful, comes back to that be your own – be an expert. Have your own expertise. But combine that with being the person that everyone wants on your team because of your experience, because of your knowledge and your expertise, because you are the smartest person that topic, but also because you’re the person who can get things done. You’re the one who can work with others. That’s what leads to the next opportunity.

Having a reputation for being a solo player, for not playing well with others – I know there’s an image in Washington that, you know, driving towards success is the way to do that. Maybe that works for – you know, there are cases where maybe that works, but in my experience, and my mentors, and my examples – people like Kath Hicks, Michelle Flournoy – are the people who build teams and look for the people who could contribute to teams. And it’s something I’d tried to do myself in my own career.

Ms. Harding: Yeah. I think being nice is a truly undervalued trait in Washington. (Laughs.) And being helpful. That kind of strategy where you’re just pushing forward towards the goal no matter what is a – maybe a strategy for short-term success, but certainly not a strategy for long-term success. The people who were the teammates and also the experts, I think you’re right, are the ones who tend to get asked again, and again, and again to serve, as you have been through your career.
You were the senior director on the NSC under Obama. I was a director on the NSC a long, long time ago. And I remember moments walking into a room where I was supposed to be running the meeting, chairing the meeting. An IPC or a PCC, or whatever it was. And people looking at me like: Who are you? And why you the one that's sitting at the head of the table and running this meeting. I was very young at the time. What was your strategy for times when you had to be the person sitting at the head of the table, and you had to be the one wrangling that interagency community towards a goal? How do you think that you approached that task?

Ms. Wallander: Well, I’ve certainly walked into rooms, and still do, where, you know, this – (laughter) – it’s sort of, where’s your boss?

Ms. Harding: Yeah, right?

Ms. Wallander: No, I’m my boss, actually. I’m the principal in this meeting. It’s OK. (Laughter.) So don’t – that’s another piece of advice for women. Don’t think it ever completely goes away. It kind of doesn’t, so learn how to cope. Learn what your coping mechanisms are with that moment.

You know, I think, coming back to the listening, is being prepared. Spend as much time preparing for a meeting as you expect to spend in a meeting. That’s hard to do at the NSC, because, yeah, who has that kind of time? So maybe spend at least 50 percent of the time of the meeting, before the meeting, preparing. Know the personalities. Do your homework. Know what the views of the interagency representatives are going to be. Know who you can call on and count on to be constructive when there’s kind of a – when it’s one of those meetings that’s kind of spinning out of control. Know who you can count on to kind of get back on track, because it’s hard to do it all by yourself.

So I think preparation. Not just going in and being a commanding presence. You have to kind of do that too, but really doing your homework to be able to run a meeting. And then just the experience. You can’t be taught experience. You have to live it. But you can do things in the first couple of iterations of meetings like that to set yourself up to be able to conduct a meeting with good grace, good humor, but also having the expertise and, through the expertise, building the authority.

Ms. Harding: Mmm hmm. Yeah. That’s absolutely right. The humor piece, this is my coping mechanism. I laugh about it. There was one meeting where I walked in to run the meeting and it was me and then a bunch of guys in uniform. And one of them leaned over to me and was like, hey, do you know when the director is coming in to run this meeting? And I said, yeah, I do, actually. She’s right here. And I walked up and sat down at the head of the table. And
the, you know, jaws just dropped because, who the heck are you? But, you know, it went well. It was a good meeting.

The person in the national security space who I think I have seen be the best at this preparation piece that you’re talking about is Avril Haines. She’s – I mean, she’s a machine. But I’ve never seen anybody walk into a meeting better prepared, and then also be phenomenal at reaching out to that back row and to ask what you think. I had the privilege of briefing her a few times when I was working with her at the agency and, I mean, there’s just nobody like her.

Ms. Wallander: I very much agree. She really – she does exemplify that preparation but also that thoughtfulness. She’s another person who’s a great listener. And then she makes her decisions and she goes forward but you really feel like she’s listened, she’s thought it through. And then the other good thing about a leader like that is that then even if maybe it wasn’t your recommendation that a leader like that adopts, you at least feel like, OK, but I can support this because I know it was the right process, I know all the different views were heard, she’s the decision-maker, we’ll support her. I think that contributes, then, to the team going together. I said one of the things about leadership: Leadership isn’t about marching down the road all by yourself; leadership is about building a team and bringing the team with you. And I think that kind of a leader really is effective in that regard, for the reasons you suggest.

Ms. Harding: Absolutely. One final question for you. You have had, as we’ve said, this wonderful career throughout Washington and you now find yourself sitting in the Pentagon in a role absolutely critical to the prosecution of a war that is, you know, authoritarianism versus democracy and is this historic threat we’ve had out of the Soviet Union and now Russia and historical allies in Europe. How do you think that your career has taught you important lessons to get you to a point where you’re poised to succeed in this position now? What do you think your lessons learned have been through the years that got you to where you are right now?

Ms. Wallander: Well, the first one is that that dissertation that I wrote when I was at Yale was a study of Soviet military intervention in international crises, explicitly trying to understand when the Soviet Union used military force and when it chose not to, when it was deterred from choosing military force. So yes.

Ms. Harding: (Laughs.) Foreshadowing. (Laughs.)

Ms. Wallander: So right. Nothing you ever do is wasted. You never know when it will come back. So having invested in the expertise and the knowledge and having been part of a community of experts who I learned from I think has given me a deep bench of people I can call on as well. I have called on people and
asked them to come in and help me to think through what’s going on, you know, how should we understand what Putin is doing. So having that network to be able to be in a job, which can be lonely because suddenly you’re doing it yourself, but having that network of people and having spent a long time listening to them, understanding, helps you to be more thoughtful and more ready for surprises and crises.

But the other is, I think that inside and outside of government – again, having been part of whether it was research teams when I was a professor or project teams when I was at CSIS and then having had the opportunity to serve in government, made me, I think, better – maybe not perfectly – better attuned to the idea of equities and how just because someone disagrees with you in a meeting doesn't mean that they're, like, your opponent just because – it’s because they have a different set of responsibilities and priorities and you have to work with them in order to craft something you can bring to the leadership that is actually going to be supported across the board. And those relationships and that experience aren’t something you can create during an international crisis; it’s something you have to have built beforehand and then you can rely upon it.

So a lot of the people that February, you know – well, actually it was February 23rd when the missiles started hitting Kiev; we saw local time it was the 24th, but for us it was late in the evening on February 23rd. The next morning, when we all had to convene and start developing what our response was going to be, how we understood what the U.S. role would be, what kind of security assistance could we provide to the Ukrainians immediately, those were not the first time that I was in a meeting with people, whether it was with the White House or within DOD or across DOD components. And so I think that, again, investing in your experience, your relationships, your understanding of how other parts of the U.S. government work, not just your little piece of it but the other parts, allows you then to turn on a dime and be effective in a moment of crisis.

Ms. Harding: Yeah, those moments are sadly not few and far between.

I want to thank you so much for taking time out of your schedule to be here with us today, to come home to CSIS, and spend a few minutes talking to our audience, both here and also online. I know it's inspiring for folks who are just starting out in their career to hear how you’ve navigated some of these obstacles and how you’ve gotten to where you are today. And I mean, you know, I’m not exactly a youngster but it’s also inspiring for me to listen to you talk about the way that you’ve gone about having the success that you’ve had and defending the United States the way that you have as well, so I really appreciate your time and coming to see us today.
And to our audience out on the interwebs, thank you so much for coming as well and spending about 45 minutes with us. We have plenty more, both on Smart Women, Smart Power and on the conflict in Russia-Ukraine. If you want to mess around on our website, there’s all kinds of fun things to find. Thank you so much.

(END)