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Senator Chris Van Hollen: Well, thank you, Heather, for that very warm introduction. More importantly, thank you for your leadership here at CSIS. And I want to thank CSIS and the Center for Polish-Russian Dialogue and Understanding for inviting me to speak with you today about U.S. policy toward Russia. And thank all of you for joining us.

Thirty years ago, long before I ever thought of running for elected office myself, back when I ran in 1990 for the Maryland House of Delegates. But before that, I served on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff. And in that capacity, I traveled to Poland with former Senator Paul Simon, senator from Illinois, where we met with Lech Wałęsa, who was then the leader of the Solidarity Movement. That meeting took place just months before historic elections that brought an end to the Communist rule in Poland and paved the way for the end of the Berlin Wall and the dismantlement of the Iron Curtain.

The world looked very different then. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, the victory of Western liberal democratic ideals seemed to be total. Some even heralded the moment as, quote, “the end of history.” But as we know, history did not end. In fact, it often returns again in a different shape. Today Russia once again represents one of the most serious threats to U.S. national security interests. Its aggressive use of military power, including the annexation of Crimea and the incursion into Ukraine has challenged the post-Cold War status quo in Europe. Vladimir Putin has also leveraged Russia’s trade and energy ties with countries like Turkey to effectively exploit cracks within the NATO alliance. And for the first time in decades, has positioned Russia as an important player in the Middle East and North Africa.

At the same time, under President Putin Russia has weaponized new technologies to interfere in democratic elections in the United States and in Western Europe. So, the challenge facing the United States and President Trump when he took office in January 2017 was to define and implement a comprehensive American strategy to confront all aspects of this threat – military, political, economic, cyber, and others. Unfortunately, in my view, President Trump has not meaningfully challenged Russia’s malign conduct. In fact, the opposite has been true. He had repeatedly deferred to President Putin. At the Helsinki summit, he publicly sided Putin against our own intelligence agencies regarding Russian interference in the 2016 elections.

For two years now, he has refused to apply the full array of sanctions mandated by the CAATSA law that was passed with a big bipartisan majority in 2017. And his recent decision to withdraw U.S. forces from northeast Syria and betray our Syrian Kurdish allies in the fight against ISIS has further solidified Putin’s role as the kingmaker in that area. The imagine of a Russian flag flying over a former U.S. special forces base in the Syrian border town of Kobane is one that neither our friends or adversaries will soon forget.

The good news is that at least in the early part of this administration the Congress, on a bipartisan basis, pushed back against President Trump and some of his moves on this area. However, the bad news is that pushback,

that bipartisan pushback, has weakened in recent months. So, let me outline what I think our strategy toward Russia should be. First, we need to put our own house in order by shoring up the NATO alliance and strengthening our other partners to deter Russian aggression. Second, we need to work with our allies and partners to use our economic and political leverage to confront malign Russian conduct. Third, as we confront malign conduct, we should also seek areas of mutually beneficial cooperation, especially regarding nuclear arms control.

So, let me cover those three areas, beginning with shoring up the NATO alliance and strengthening our partners. The current National Defense Strategy rightly describes Russia as a, quote, “revisionist power” that seeks to, quote, “shatter the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and change European and Middle East security and economic structures to its favor.” That’s from the National Defense Strategy. That was formulated by former Secretary of Defense Mattis. And it emphasizes the need to bolster our alliances and partnerships to counter Russia. In fact, the strategy references alliances and partnerships 30 times within that document.

And while President Trump has disparaged the NATO alliance, and sometimes questioned its mission, the National Defense Strategy outlined by Secretary Mattis enjoys widespread bipartisan support on Capitol Hill. And Congress has played an important role in pushing back on the assaults we’ve seen on the NATO alliance. A couple of examples, in 2018 the Senate reconstituted what’s known as the Senate NATO Observer Group, of which I’m a member. That was designed to send a signal that Congress cares about the NATO alliance. For the first time ever in its history, the Congress invited a NATO secretary general to address a joint session of Congress. And most importantly, Congress has used its constitutional power of the purse to provide the resources necessary to support our national-security objectives.

We have provided comprehensive security assistance to our European allies and partners, including through the European Deterrence Initiative and other bilateral programs. That initiative plays a critical role in countering Russian aggression. It funds U.S. troop deployments in Europe, training and exercises with allies, and the pre-positioning of U.S. military assets in European countries, and it improves U.S. bases and builds partner capacities.

So that was a congressional initiative. However, as you may have seen in the news, a substantial part of that assistance has been redirected by the president to unrelated purposes. Specifically, the president cut \$770 million from the European Deterrence Initiative to pay for a border wall with Mexico.

I’m not going to get in the debate about the merits of the wall, but transferring those funds is unacceptable. And we are working right now in a conference committee of the National Defense Authorization bill, which is a conversation that was going into late hours last night, to prevent these kinds of transfers from happening.

While we're on the topic of funds duly appropriated by the Congress, I should mention the drama that is playing out right now on Capitol Hill. Yesterday our ambassador to the European Union, Gordon Sondland, confirmed his understanding that the president had orchestrated a scheme to withhold nearly 400 million (dollars) in security assistance to Ukraine in order to get Ukrainian leaders to interfere in our upcoming U.S. election.

As former U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Marie Yovanovitch said in her testimony before the House Intelligence Committee, the president's conduct, quote, "undermines the U.S., exposes our friends, and widens the playing field for autocrats like President Putin," unquote. That's our former ambassador to the Ukraine, who, as the son of a Foreign Service officer, I must say she and others have made me extremely proud in standing up and telling the truth, whatever the consequences may be.

Today we expect to hear testimony from Fiona Hill, another well-regarded, well-respected expert on Russia, who is expected to say that the fictionalized account of Ukrainian interference in the 2016 election only emboldens Moscow.

We also know that Secretary Pompeo, upon arrival at the recent NATO meeting, was greeted with a lot of skepticism about the U.S. constancy and consistency with regard to NATO; President Macron saying recently that the NATO alliance – we are experiencing the brain death of NATO and saying that the United States has turned its back on us, unquote.

So, we've got a lot of work to do on a bipartisan basis to shore up our alliances and make clear our commitment to our partners. So that's – in putting our own house in order in terms of defense. But in addition to shoring up our alliances, we should pool our economic and political leverage to counter Russians' malign activity. Economic sanctions are a blunt and often imperfect instrument, but they can, especially when our partners are unified, play an important role.

The United States and the European Union first imposed sanctions on Russia in 2014 in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea. And I'd argue that those sanctions against Russia have had some success. While Russia has not returned Crimea or withdrawn from Ukraine, those sanctions have helped discourage, over the years, a further escalation of Russian aggression in the region, which was one of the principal objectives.

The European Union and the United States had to make clear that there would be a price to pay for those aggressive actions. And in one of the few moments of meaningful bipartisan pushback to the Trump administration, in 2017 the Congress passed the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, CAATSA, in response to Russia's interference in the 2016 elections, as well as its actions in Ukraine and Syria.

Republicans in Congress overwhelmingly supported this legislation. It passed over the objections of the Trump administration with a huge veto-proof majority. As a result, the president essentially was forced to sign it or essentially experience an early overturning of a veto. However, since the

Congress passed the CAATSA law, the administration has failed to impose many of the sanctions against Russia for interference in the 2016 election.

Which gets me to my next point, which is when it comes to sanctions we, in my view, need to look at how we can better design sanctions policy so that we can better deter future bad behavior rather than just punish bad conduct after the fact. The United States almost always responds with sanctions after crises are already underway so they're unable to deter adversaries' bad actions in the first place, making sanctions less effective.

That's why in early 2018 I teamed up with Senator Rubio. We introduced the bipartisan DETER Act, which is designed to deter Russian interference in future U.S. elections, so we don't have a repeat of 2016. Yes, the United States should strengthen its election systems and we need to make sure that they are hardened on a local basis. Yes, we need to make sure foreign money is not coming in to pay for campaign ads. But in my view, the best defense is a good offense. And the DETER Act says upfront very clearly: Russia or another country, if we catch you interfering in the next elections – if our director of national intelligence concludes that Russia's interfered in future elections – there will be automatic – automatic, swift, and very painful sanctions not just on a few oligarchs, but on big sectors of the Russian economy – banking, energy, and other areas.

The hope, of course, like nuclear deterrence, is that these sanctions are never used – that you create enough of a penalty upfront to deter the action in the first place. Right now, Putin's interference in American elections is cost-free. In fact, he benefits from creating division and people questioning the integrity of our elections. So, you need to make it clear upfront that there will be a price to pay and it will be automatic. It won't be, OK, Congress is going to spend a couple months trying to figure out how to respond. If you want deterrence, you need to have a credible upfront, automatic threat, and that's what the DETER Act is all about.

Unfortunately, as we speak, Senator Mitch McConnell, the Republican leader in the Senate, has blocked action on that. We are trying to put that provision in the national defense authorization bill. As I said, those conversations were going on last night.

So even though we currently have a very adversarial relationship with Russia, there are still areas of mutual interest that demand engagement and cooperation. In my view, chief among those are lowering the risks of nuclear conflict and preventing a costly and destabilizing arms race.

Even during the height of the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union understood it was in our mutual interest to ensure that our strategic competition did not spiral out of control. And today this longstanding area of mutual interest is shrinking as this administration seems intent on tearing down the arms control regime that has benefited U.S. national security interests and that of our European allies, and I would argue that of Russia, for almost half a century.

I mentioned over 30 years ago I was a staff member on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. One of the things I worked on was the ratification of the INF Treaty, the treaty that had been negotiated between Gorbachev and Reagan. And the breakdown of the INF Treaty 30 years later will create more – a more unstable security situation in Europe. Russia is to blame for deploying some of the missiles that were banned by the INF Treaty, but in my view the Trump administration's decision to withdraw without a feasible plan for what comes next made a bad situation even worse.

Russia can now build up its ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles free of any legal and political repercussions and take full advantage of its very large landmass for deployments. On the other hand, the United States is years away from having operational INF systems. And deploying them to Europe will be a politically divisive issue for NATO. Again, thinking back over 30 years ago I recall all of the divisions created by the deployment of the Pershing II missiles.

Now, the end of the INF Treaty and growing strategic instability has also cast doubt on the future of New START, which is now the last remaining arms control agreement constraining the United States and Russian nuclear forces. In my view, extension of New START should be a national security priority. Together with maintaining a strong nuclear deterrent, arms control is a tool for containing the military capabilities of our adversaries. First, renewing the treaty till 2026 means capping Russian strategic nuclear forces, and therefore preventing it from deploying more delivery vehicles and warheads, which it will be poised to do as it nears completion of its current modernization program.

Second, New START limits and – the limits of New START and the transparency measures give us the stability and predictability we need to modernize our own nuclear forces in a steady way, which is a long and expensive process that we're only now embarking on. Third, New START provides important verification and monitoring regimes that not only deters Russian cheating, but also gives us valuable insight into the operations, composition, and location of Russia's nuclear forces. And that transparency on both sides, in my view, strengthens stability by reducing uncertainty. That's why I've teamed up with Senator Young of Indiana to introduce bipartisan legislation urging the administration to extend New START as a way of advancing our strategic interests. Unfortunately, we do not see an administration at this time moving in that direction.

So, in conclusion, the current administration has it backwards, in my view. It has refused to seek cooperation where it makes the most sense to protect our interests, like nuclear arms control. But it has refused to challenge Russia where it matters most, like protecting our elections, and our democracy, and making it clear that we will support our allies and partners against Russian aggression. At the start of this administration I think the Congress did play an important bipartisan role as a counterweight. Unfortunately, that bipartisan counterweight in Congress seems to be diminishing by the way, and many of these issues will only be resolved through the 2020 presidential elections.

I'll just end by saying, as the son of a foreign service officer, nothing has pained me more than to see the assault that has occurred on many of our professional diplomats. But nothing has made me prouder than the fact that they've stood up as professionals, both in their jobs and in telling the truth. And the challenge for the next secretary of state will be to restore morale and make it clear to our foreign service officers that we have full confidence in their abilities to represent our country. Thank you all very much for being here, and I look forward to the discussion. (Applause.)

Heather A. Conley: (Off mic) – comprehensive remarks. And I think it always is a great way to start a longer discussion that we're going to have today, and great framing.

I want to first say, I think one of the most important things that deters Russia is our bipartisanship. When we are divided, that is where they can amplify that division. So, I really thank you for always reaching across the aisle – whether that's Senator Rubio, Senator Young, Senator Graham, and other legislation – to say we have to do this together.

Senator Chris Van Hollen: Yes, I agree with you.

Heather A. Conley: So, as a bipartisan institution, we have to celebrate bipartisanship.

Senator Chris Van Hollen: Yes.

Heather A. Conley: So, thank you very, very much.

What I thought I'd do in the meantime is turn to our audience, is walk through a little of your three points. And what I'd like to first do is focus on malign influence. And you have been particularly focused on election interference. Obviously, that is really our frontline defense of our democracy. Can I ask you sort of your sense of how we're preparing for 2020? I see a government that is trying to organize itself, work collaboratively with the states. In part the legislation would require the director of national intelligence, I understand, to give you an assessment of that.

Senator Chris Van Hollen: Yeah.

Heather A. Conley: Maybe you want to grade 2018, the midterm elections. But help us. What are you thinking about? What are you concerned about? What are you happy about as you're seeing, you know, us evolve in this space?

Senator Chris Van Hollen: So, I think there's mixed news here. I think the good news is that states in most cases have taken the threat seriously and are working to try to strengthen their systems against cyberattacks. We know from the very comprehensive review of 2016, first by U.S. intelligence agencies then by the Senate Intelligence Committee on a bipartisan basis, that every single state – all 50 states – last time experienced some level of efforts of Russia to interfere. Again, there was a whole scale. So, the states have taken that seriously.

There are still states that have not implemented a paper ballot record, which is really important because if you have any doubt about the electronic results – if you question whether they have been manipulated in any way through interference – that paper backup is important. I want to make it clear there is no evidence of Russia actually changing results in 2016. But you could imagine people developing the capability to do that, and a paper backup system is really important.

It's also true that there's lots of legislation that's been introduced with respect to how we deal with social media. We really should pass that. We have not gotten a lot of that legislation passed. I'm a cosponsor of much of it. Amy Klobuchar and others have been very involved in that. The social media companies I will say, in my view, having not, you know, addressed this issue in 2016, have taken some very important steps to address it in the upcoming elections.

All that being said, I see all that as defense. As I said in my remarks, there's a big missing piece here, which is instead of just trying to fight – you know, defend yourself with incoming interference, the best strategy is to – is to deter it in the first place. And the only way to do that is to make it clear upfront that the penalties that are paid are not worth the benefits of interference.

So how does Russia benefit now from interfering, or any country that interferes? Well, it creates division within the country. Obviously, if they interfere on behalf of a particular candidate, they – you know, that can impact the outcome of an election. And so right now there's – there are only perceived benefits by Russia and Putin to interfering in our elections, and in Europe as well. We just, you know, were talking about it in the U.K. right now with respect to Brexit and other issues.

So that is why you need to state upfront that there is a price to pay, and it will be automatic, and it's not going to be months and months while Congress, you know, struggles to figure out what the result will be. That is the purpose of the DETER Act. And it's very troubling that we have not gotten it passed yet. We are working right – hard right now to include it in the – in defense authorization bill.

And I think more broadly when it comes to sanctions, which as I said aren't a perfect tool, we need to think about them more strategically in the way I'm talking about because it is often difficult to reverse behavior after the fact because of sanctions. You can, obviously, increase the pain countries experience. I mean, the 2014 sanctions because of Russia's annexation of Crimea I think were required. But as we think about them going forward, I think we should give more thought to making it clear upfront what kind of conduct will trigger sanctions. You can't – obviously, you can't foresee every contingency, but certainly protecting our democracy is one that we can foresee, so, yeah.

Heather A. Conley:

Absolutely. And if I can just pull a little bit more on the, you know, how do we more strategically think about sanctions, again, I think the challenge for us as we look at the policy, sanctions are tools –

Senator Chris Van Hollen: Yeah.

Heather A. Conley: – that work towards a policy. And because there's not clarity on the policy, the sanctions – the tool becomes, in fact – the hammer becomes the policy in many ways.

Senator Chris Van Hollen: Yeah.

Heather A. Conley: But one idea that we had in longstanding research that we've been conducting at CSIS is looking at very specifically malign economic influence. And I know the Senate Banking Committee has been thinking about, again, greater transparency on ultimate beneficial ownership – these shell companies, letterbox companies, where in some ways the malign influence – and Russia is not the only actor; they just use it very well – using Western bank accounts, Western banks, to enhance their economic influence, whether that is purchasing of political parties or influential voices or social media and things like that.

How do we get at sort of the economics and help, if I may use the drain-the-Kremlin's-inner-circle swamp, that are using so much of the Western system? Any thoughts on how we can do that?

Senator Chris Van Hollen: Yes. I'm glad you raised that, because the Banking Committee is looking closely, has been looking closely; moving too slowly, in my view, on what you referred to rightly as beneficial ownership, trying to figure out who the real owner of a company is so that we can really enforce – better enforce our anti-money-laundering laws, because we know a lot of U.S. companies have been used as conduits for Russian oligarchs and others to dump their ill-gotten gains. So, we are working on that legislation.

As you indicated, when it comes to sort of economic issues and malign actions, there are other actors as well. I mean, we didn't talk about the other major country that's identified in the National Defense Strategy, which is China. China has obviously had a very aggressive campaign over the years to essentially hijack a lot of U.S. technology. The Congress did last – earlier this year pass an upgrade to what we call the CFIUS legislation, which deals with the review of proposed foreign investments in strategic assets to the United States or near defense installations, other things like that, in order to better screen the nature of certain foreign investments.

It also tightened up our Arms Export Control Act to make sure that we are not exporting very sensitive technology overseas. That's not to say that, you know, companies shouldn't be able to export, you know, advanced technology, but we should take a very close look at it to see if it can be exploited in a way that hurts our national-security interests.

So beneficial ownership, strengthening CFIUS; these are some of the things, some of the tools, that we're looking at.

Heather A. Conley: Before I leave the bucket of malign influence, I'm going to be a bit of a contrarian. And so, some of the criticism I've heard about the DETER Act –

so what happens if that very strong message isn't enough? The U.S. government's Director of National Intelligence says, yes, there was, in fact, interference. And this legislation comes into effect, which is absolutely really stinging sanctions. Concerns about that this is raising this to a level where we're not entirely sure how Russia will respond or whether our companies are ready for this type of, you know, worst-case scenario. That's some of the criticism I have heard.

Senator Chris Van Hollen: So two things. One, look, in my view, if we have real material interference in our elections, we need to have a very strong response. I mean, if you think about our whole system, the integrity of our democracy relies on people having confidence in the outcome. And if people begin to question the confidence of the outcome of the U.S. election, it undermines the core of our democracy.

So, number one, you know, my view is this is an overriding U.S. national-security interest. It's about who we are. So that's the first.

Second, I understand, you know, the tension. The challenge with sanctions – excuse me. The challenge with deterrence is, of course, you're more likely to deter, the higher the penalty. You know, we have mutual-assured destruction as a sort of deterrent strategy for a long time in the nuclear realm. And so, on the one hand, you want to make sure the costs are very high. On the other hand, therefore, you want to make sure the trigger is not too low.

So one of the things we struggled with in the DETER Act a little bit is how you define interference, right, because, you know, obviously someone going in and electronically changing the results is like huge interference, but there are also things that, you know, were done by – you know, with respect to social media. And so, we're trying to calibrate what the trigger would be.

I will also say, because of the concerns that have been raised, we have actually – we reduced some of the sanctions impact. If you look at the most recent version of the bill, we've scaled back some of those sanctions and we've also not made all of them automatic. They're now subject to national security waivers which again, in my view, reduces the deterrent benefit of it, but it addresses the issue that you raised, if deterrence fails, in this case, maybe making sure you better calibrate the response. Again, there's – I mean, I think everyone can see – there's obviously a balancing there between maximizing the deterrent aspect but minimizing the sort of negative blowback if deterrence fails.

Heather A. Conley: Before I leave the subject, I just – I can't let rest – President Putin was quoted yesterday as saying, quote, "Thank God no one is accusing us," meaning Russia, "of interfering in the U.S. elections anymore. Now they are accusing Ukraine." We can fully put that to bed with your full remarks, but I want to give you just another opportunity to go ahead –

Senator Chris Van Hollen: Yeah. So, let's just put this to bed. This is nonsense theory. This is a conspiracy theory. There's absolutely zero basis for this. And I think Fiona Hill, who of course worked in this administration in the National Security

Council, is expected today just to put the nail in the coffin. Now, this doesn't mean these conspiracy theories don't keep going on. I mean, they keep going on all over the place, including from some on Capitol Hill. But this is a nonsense theory.

And just to underscore the point, we all know the following: Number one, all of our U.S. intelligence agencies, even after they were led by people appointed by this president, reiterated and underscored the fact that Russia had interfered in the 2016 elections. Second, the bipartisan – the Senate Intelligence Committee report reached the same conclusion. And third, just within the last two weeks our intelligence community, again, led by people appointed by this president, have warned that they expect Russia to interfere in our elections again, along with some other countries they mentioned, but Russia being the leading prospect for interference.

So, this – these are, again, all of our intelligence agencies plus the FBI and others, they're telling us that this will happen again if we don't do more to deter. So, when you're getting that kind of a warning it is gross negligence and worse for the United States Congress and this administration not to pass something like the DETER Act, however we end up, you know, balancing those equities.

Heather A. Conley: When you travel on congressional delegations and visit other European Union capitals, are – how can we strengthen transatlantic cooperation? Whether that's on sanctions, whether that's on the malign influence? Europe is so critical. They are the frontlines for this. Love your ideas on how we can strengthen that cooperation, and maybe we can incorporate some of that conversation as we discuss it today.

Senator Chris Van Hollen: Sure. Well, I mean – I mean, the first is to really keep open lines of communication. And as I mentioned, I think Congress in the last three years has reopened some of the previous vehicles it had. I mean, the NATO Observer Group being one. We had a record large congressional delegation to the Munich conference this year – the largest ever, bipartisan. You know, Senator –

Heather A. Conley: Maybe that delegation could go to Kyiv after Munich. Is that an idea?

Senator Chris Van Hollen: That's a – that is – we should talk about that.

Heather A. Conley: OK, that's an idea.

Senator Chris Van Hollen: We should talk about going to Kyiv. So, but I think – and there are other forums, obviously, CSCE and others. But I do think it's a question of communication. But, you know, it will only work to strengthen our unity if everyone's on the same page on these issues. I do think coordinating sanctions is really important. Obviously, Europe also has an interest in preventing, deterring, dealing with Russian interference in their elections. Also addressing various energy security issues in addition to military security issues.

Heather A. Conley: So, before I unleash our audience, that's going to have, I'm sure, lots of great questions, I want to turn to some of the regional implications of Russia's policy. And under the heading of nature abhors a vacuum, we are continuing to see very strong Russian-Turkish cooperation. You mentioned in the energy sphere, with TurkStream. And I know you've been particularly concerned about Turkey's major Russian military purchase of the S-400s. But we're seeing in the decision on northern Syrian this growing rapprochement.

Senator Chris Van Hollen: Yes.

Heather A. Conley: Turkey is such a strategically important country to the – to NATO –

Senator Chris Van Hollen: Yes.

Heather A. Conley: – to the transatlantic space. It has been a very challenging ally. It has always been a very challenging ally. But maybe this time feels a little different to me, that we are really in jeopardy of having Turkey move out of a Euro-Atlantic sphere –

Senator Chris Van Hollen: Yes.

Heather A. Conley: – on its own volition and perhaps through lots of mistakes that both the EU and the U.S. have made. I'd love your thoughts on the Russia-Turkey dynamic. You've been a very strong voice in that space.

Senator Chris Van Hollen: Yes. And you have a very good program here on Turkey.

Heather A. Conley: Thank you very much.

Senator Chris Van Hollen: We were just talking to Bulent Aliriza – I don't know if he's here – and others.

Heather A. Conley: I think he's over in that corner over there. Thank you.

Senator Chris Van Hollen: So, let me state at the beginning that my view is that historically Turkey has been a very important NATO partner and that the United States would like to see Turkey remain in NATO. But Turkey's actions seem to be testing whether it wants to be in NATO. And my view is that as it does things like purchase the S-400, we can't go cowering in the corner and saying, oh, we got to let you do this, otherwise you're going to really leave NATO.

I mean, look, NATO was first established, as everybody knows, to counter the then-Soviet Union. And NATO still, obviously, is an important military alliance to counter aggression. So how does it make sense for a major NATO partner to purchase an advanced Russian air defense system where our military experts have testified repeatedly would put at risk NATO pilots and NATO national security? And so, the Congress – and I was – I pushed this hard; it was my amendment, along with Lindsey Graham, a number of years ago. We said, based on the testimony of our own military experts, we will not provide the F-35 to Turkey, which we planned to do as a NATO ally. But we won't provide it if you're going to get the S-400 because it's pretty clear

it would put at risk that technology. And so, we did take that step, and you know, we are disengaging from Turkey's co-production of part of the F-35. Turkey's still proceeding with the S-400. They've taken delivery of the S-400.

Congress also passed sanctions as part of the – you know, we passed the CAATSA sanctions, which trigger other penalties for a country that takes an advanced major, you know, weapons delivery from Russia. And so that's why many of us have been pushing this administration and this president to do something, because failure to do something, again – (laughs) – sends the wrong signal.

So, while all this is going on, Turkey then decides to attack our Syrian Kurdish allies. Now, this is – this is largely, unfortunately, our own doing. This is an own goal because we know that a phone call took place between, you know, Erdoğan and Trump, and after both parties hung up the United States withdrew some of its – the special forces in this particular region along the Syrian-Turkish border that, you know, was a deterrent to Russian forces going across. And you know, we got off the phone, they got off the phone, you know, President Trump tweets that we're withdrawing our forces, and, obviously, Erdoğan said, green light, going in – and in the process betrayed our key partner in the fight against ISIS, a partner that has lost over 11,000 soldiers.

And so, what signal does that send, not just in the region but around the world? It says that the United States will throw an ally that's been on the cutting edge of our fight against ISIS under the bus, and in the process give Russia even more influence in Syria.

Now, obviously, Russia already was a major player in Syria. But they did not have a footprint in northeastern Syria, and the U.S. – that's about one-third of the territory of Syria. It's the area that the Syrian Kurds, the SDF, have helped clear at least physically of ISIS. And now all of a sudden, you've got our Kurdish – Syrian Kurdish allies who are having to seek protection from Russia and from Assad.

And again, just in closing with respect to Turkey, going after ISIS has never been Turkey's primary objective. Their objectives have been in the following order: go after – in Syria – go after the Syrian Kurds; number two, go after Assad; and only third was going after ISIS a priority. In fact, they allowed – they turned a blind eye to lots of ISIS fighters transiting Turkey for a year.

So, anyway, this is a major blunder. And unfortunately, this is our own goal. This is a place where Russia is gaining increased leverage because of a mistake, a big strategic mistake, made by the president.

Heather A. Conley:

Thank you.

All right. Let's turn – we have some time for questions. What I'd like to do is bundle a few. We have microphones.

Jill, I'm going to start with you; if you could please introduce yourself and ask very crisp questions, because we want to get as many as we can before the senator has to go back to the Capitol.

Jill Dougherty:

OK, thank you very much. Jill Dougherty with the Wilson Center and also with Georgetown University.

With this current situation about Ukraine, how do you assess how this is going to affect President Zelensky's ability to do one of the primary things that he wants to do, which is settle Donbass? Thank you.

Senator Chris Van Hollen:

Yeah.

Heather A. Conley:

Well, and I just – if I may add to that – Jill, thank you – that we have on December 9th a meeting of the Normandy Format, which, of course, is the presidents of Ukraine, Russia, the chancellor of Germany and the president of France. And I have to say, I'm not sure what the outcome will be on that meeting. So, we'd welcome your thoughts.

Senator Chris Van Hollen:

So yes. And let me just say the good news, of course, is that ultimately the assistance did get delivered. It turns out it was kind of after the whistle was blown on everything that was happening. I remember being in the Senate Appropriations Committee late in September when the monies had not been released. And, you know, on a bipartisan basis, senators were calling for the release of that money. So that is the good news.

The bad news, of course, is what it showed, as we heard from testimony from our former ambassador and others, was that the priority of the administration – I should say the priority of the president – was essentially to use this military leverage and the leverage of an official visit to the White House not to strengthen Ukraine, not to strengthen U.S. national-security interests, but for these personal political goals the president has.

That sends a – that sends a very, very bad signal. Now that it's been exposed, you know, maybe people have to work overtime to show that we're focused on strategic interests.

In terms of how it will affect Zelensky, I – you know, as you know, he's taken some, I think, reasonable steps to try to engage with Russia. I think, you know, we need to make sure he knows that we have his back as he does this, because you do not want him to feel that he's got to enter into any kind of agreement that would allow, you know, for example, Russian troops to remain in Ukraine. I mean, that should be an absolute red line.

How you organize elections in the region is really important that they be true elections and not simply engineered by Putin. I – you know, I understand Macron's interest in trying, you know, through the – you know, at the upcoming December meeting to try to, you know, work more closely – Germany, France, Ukraine and Russia – to try to resolve issues. We should – you know, our goal needs to be to implement and enforce the Minsk Agreements.

But again, this is why it's really important that we not send contradictory signals. And there's no doubt – I mean, just in conclusion, there's no doubt that what's happened – you know, this ridiculous blaming of Ukraine for interfering in the 2016 elections, withholding of assistance and a White House visit for totally unrelated demands – clearly undermines our position and strengthens Putin. But hopefully we – hopefully, now that it's been exposed, we can maybe try to salvage something.

Heather A. Conley: And I think there's an important transatlantic link to that, because if, in fact, after the Normandy meeting in Paris, if there is some positive steps – and the EU, certainly under President Macron's leadership, tries to begin to ease sanctions and then we get out of sync between the U.S. and the EU, we just need that strong unity to make sure, again, on sanctions we are – we are lockstep with one another, for sure.

Senator Chris Van Hollen: No, that's right. I mean, again, the sanctions – as you know, the original sanctions were put place because of the annexation of Crimea. Then there have been additional sanctions because of Ukraine interference in our elections. So, you're right, calibrating that together will be important.

Heather A. Conley: I think we have a chance to take – great. We'll take the two questions here, if I can bundle two. And we're right there. Thank you so much.

Mindy Reiser: Hi. Thank you very much. I'm Mindy Reiser. I'm vice president of an NGO called Global Peace Services.

I'd like to ask you about the toolbox. And you talked about shared interests. Well, the current administration is an obstacle here, but in terms of climate change obviously Russia has an interest there. In terms of public health, epidemic spread, what can we do there? And what do you think the Congress can do to encourage at least some people in the administration to support these kind of outreach efforts?

Heather A. Conley: OK, if you could just pass it to –

Questioner: OK. I'm a European intel analyst and a former diplomat.

Last year Putin announced that they were developing a basically large torpedo, nuclear-powered and nuclear-armed, that could roam the seas and be brought into any harbor at will. I expected us to stand up and say, nah-uh, that's not going to happen. Isn't it time for us to say, no, it's not going to happen, if it happens, we will sanction the following things, and if we find one of these things at sea, we will destroy it, even at peacetime? Isn't it time to make a forward position on that particular weapon?

Senator Chris Van Hollen: So, let me take both of those questions. First, in terms of looking for areas of mutually beneficial cooperation, I agree that we should explore those areas. We did that even throughout the Cold War period. I will say that continued interference in our elections just makes all of that really difficult, right? I mean, that is – you know, we understand sort of competition around the world, and we – you know, but interfering in our elections, again, it just makes some of these other areas of cooperation more difficult.

As I said, there are areas where we obviously have mutually interest. Climate change you mentioned, health issues, and obviously nuclear – in my view – nuclear arms control, which gets me to the other issue.

So, I think, you know, there's no doubt that, you know, Russia is developing some of these other weapon systems. I think they've acknowledged that not that system but some of their other systems that they've been developing actually do fall under the New START constraints. And I think it's, again, really important that we extend New START. It's a five-year agreement. And then we can also use that time to address some of these other systems that Russia is developing and planning to deploy. My understanding of the nuclear-powered cruise missile is that it's still a long ways away. I think they experienced some setbacks in their program recently with the explosion.

That's not to say we – this – in my view, this is actually why we should be engaging Russia in these talks, you know? If you're not successful at including that in, you know, a future nuclear arms agreement, or arms control agreement, then you can look at some of these other approaches that you're talking about. But the first step is to see if we can reach an agreement, as we have been able to do in the past even at the height of the Cold War, to constrain some of these. Because, you know, it's not in their interest for the United States to then develop its own counter-systems. I mean, it's costly to both sides in terms of dollars and instability.

So, this is why this is an area of mutual interest, you know, for Russia, and the United States, and for our NATO partners, and for the whole world, that we – that we contain that competition in a way that doesn't create instability. So, I'm very – I'm focused as well on the development of this new system. I think it is years out. And I think the first thing to do is get back to the negotiating table when it comes to arms control. I mean, as I said, I think, you know, essentially legally walking away from the INF agreement and not engaging on New START negotiations is to our – it's a – it undermines our own strategic interest.

- Heather A. Conley: I would even add space to that, the space-based weapons also.
- Senator Chris Van Hollen: Yeah, true. That's very true.
- Heather A. Conley: And China has to be part of that conversation as well.
- Senator Chris Van Hollen: Yeah. So, China – look, in my view – and we didn't talk about China today, of course –
- Heather A. Conley: Yeah. Love to have you back and we'll talk about China.
- Senator Chris Van Hollen: But there's obviously a lot to talk about there. In my – so China currently, their nuclear arsenal is one-tenth the size of the United States and Russia. That is, in my view, not a good reason not to extend New START for five years.

During that period, yeah, we should begin to engage China more on these – in these discussions. You know, China was also used as an excuse for, you know, legally walking away from the INF Treaty. But I can tell you, just like it's difficult to – will be difficult to get some of our partners in Europe to deploy, you know, INF missiles there, South Korea and Japan have already made it quite clear that they are not interested in deploying INF missiles right now. And so, we're talking about Guam.

Anyway, I – so China is a big part of this going forward, but it is – it is right now being used, in my view, as an excuse by some not to pursue our strategic nuclear arms control interest with Russia.

Heather A. Conley: Senator, thank you so much. Thank you, number one, for spending your time with us this morning.

Senator Chris Van Hollen: Sure.

Heather A. Conley: We know the schedule is crazy. For your comprehensive remarks, for your leadership in this entire space – whether it's malign influence, whether it's on arms control, the Turkey relationship – we thank you.

Thank you for your support for the men and women who serve our country every day –

Senator Chris Van Hollen: Thank you.

Heather A. Conley: – whether that's in the military or in the Foreign Service or our great civil service. We thank you for that shout-out. I think they needed that shout-out this week.

Senator Chris Van Hollen: Thank you.

Heather A. Conley: And before I ask my audience to warmly thank you, I just want to give one programming note. We are going to go into a coffee break, change the setup here, and come back, and that'll allow us to get Senator Van Hollen back to his office. But, with your warm applause, please join me in thanking Senator Van Hollen.

Senator Chris Van Hollen: (Laughs.) Thank you. Thanks. (Applause.) Thank you very much. (Applause.)

(END)