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Brookings Cafeteria Podcast:
Is Russia a threat?
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DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, a podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews. Russia is the world's largest nation in terms of size, has extensive mineral and energy resources, possesses the largest stockpile of nuclear weapons in the world, and has a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, along with the United States, Great Britain, France, and China. Russia's leader, Vladimir Putin, has been either Prime Minister or President of Russia since 1999, and during that time his country has reasserted itself in its region and on the global stage, including seizing Crimea, from Ukraine, continued support for rebels in Eastern Ukraine, and allying with Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria. And over the course of the U.S. presidential election, and in the early days of the Trump Administration, we have seen many news accounts of Russia's involvement in our politics.

To help us understand Russia and the policy challenges facing the new administration and U.S. allies, I'm joined in the studio today by Steven Pifer. He is the director of the Arms Control and Non-Proliferation Initiative here at Brookings, and a senior fellow with both our Center for 21st Century Security and Intelligence, and the Center on the United States and Europe. He spent more than 25 years in the U.S. State Department, including service as an Ambassador to Ukraine. His newest book, *The Eagle and the Trident: U.S.-Ukraine Relations in Turbulent Times,* will be published by the Brookings Institution Press later this year.

Stay tuned in this podcast to hear from Molly Reynolds on what's happening in Congress. With constituent town halls, repealing or replacing Obamacare, the federal budget, and more, Congress has a lot on its plate. It's the fifth week of the Trump

administration's first 100 days. To get the latest analysis and commentary from Brookings experts, visit the Brookings Now blog at brookings.edu/brookingsnow. And finally, news and events are coming at us quickly these days, so we launched the new 5 on 45 podcast that offers rapid analysis from Brookings experts on what the Trump administration and Congress are doing. Visit brookings.edu/5on45 – and those are numerals – to learn more and subscribe. Steve, welcome once again to the Brookings Cafeteria.

PIFER: Thanks for having me.

DEWS: I did the math, and your last appearance on this show was in October 2013, 40 months ago. You were my fifth guest. We talked about arms control, Russia, and Ukraine, and boy, has a lot happened since then.

PIFER In each one of those areas, yes.

DEWS: So, I also want listeners to understand that as we're taping this, there is a lot of breaking news about former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn, and about Russia, and we're not going to talk about that. We'll leave that to other shows, we have a new show called 5 on 45 that offers experts' rapid analysis. I want to use this time to talk about some of the bigger issues, some of the policy challenges. But there is some breaking news I know that you just brought up that we'll talk about here in a minute. But first, let me ask you, Steve, kind of a big question. Is Russia really a threat to U.S. interests?

PIFER: I think when you look at Russia today, say in contrast to five to seven years ago, Russia is at least a challenge and perhaps a threat to U.S. interests in a way that we didn't see it for most of the period from 1991 up until the mid-2000s. And you've

seen it, I think, in several ways. First of all, you've seen a Russia military buildup, both in terms of nuclear and conventional weapons, but also Russian readiness to use force – the seizure of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014, followed by Russian instigation of and support for armed separatism in the Donbass in Eastern Ukraine, including with the provision of regular units from the Russian army. And that's changed things, I mean, that's basically violated the fundamental rule of European security going back to the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, which is you do not use military force to change borders or to take territory. And so that understandably has countries near to Russia, in the Baltic States and Poland, more concerned. Now, I don't think it's a high probability that you'd see some kind of Russian action against a Baltic state, but I wouldn't say the probability is zero, and five years ago we would've said that probability was zero, so I think that's one area of concern.

A second area of concern about Russia is this notion of cyberwarfare, where many analysts say, in fact, Russia is engaging in a form of conflict with the United States and the West even today. The most striking example, of course, was Russian interference in our election back in 2016. There seems to be little doubt that the Russians used cyber-tactics to get information and then worked to get that information released. And this isn't about re-litigating the results of the 2016 election. I mean, I can't prove that John Doe in some small town in Pennsylvania voted for Donald Trump or for Hillary Clinton because of the leaks, so it's not about that. But we should be concerned that this was a Russian attack on the democratic basis of our political system, and that should be a worry to all of us.

And I guess the third factor here, which I worry a bit about, is when you look at the way President Putin and the Kremlin talk about the United States, they pretty much depict the United States as an adversary, and a lot of this is driven, I believe, by Russian domestic politics and the needs that Putin feels for legitimacy within his own country. So if you go back and look at the first two terms when Vladimir Putin was president, from 2000 to 2008, at that time he justified regime legitimacy on the basis of economics, and he was lucky because the price of oil went up, the Russian economy grew 7-8% a year, and that worked well. And you'd have Russians say Mr. Putin has this informal social compact with the Russian people, in which he says you're not going to have a political voice but you're going to see your living standard rise, the economy grow; and that worked.

When Mr. Putin came back to the presidency in 2011-2012, the economic situation was pretty grim, and instead you saw in his campaign a shift, a very strong anti-American theme, and sort of building on this idea of Russia as a great power. And a lot of that internal factor, this Russian legitimacy or the legitimacy of the Putin regime, based on Russia as a great power, drives some of their foreign policy approaches in places in Ukraine and Syria.

DEWS: Well, we grew up in a time when the Soviet Union was the United States' biggest adversary. You know, we all knew about the nuclear standoff between the two, the classic Cold War arguments. You know, I went to college to study all that. I think the American people well understood that the Soviet Union was a major adversary of the United States. But it just seems like, in the last ten or twenty years, the sense of Russia as the same kind of adversary has kind of, culturally speaking, fallen by the wayside.

Now, I may be wrong. That's just my sense of things. But now, it's kind of back at the fore and it seems to be taking people by surprise, perhaps.

PIFER: Well I think there was a difference in the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union and the relationship that the United States has had with Russia since the end of the Cold War. And that, in the last 25 years, you've seen issues where, you know, we've had competitive relations with Russia, but also there have been areas where we've cooperated. So if you go back to the first several years of the Obama administration, a lot of cooperation in terms of getting the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, cooperation on Iran, cooperation on Afghanistan – I mean, the Russians were quite helpful in facilitating the flow of American and NATO logistics to Afghanistan and basically ending a situation in which Pakistan had a monopoly on all the transport routes.

So there has been that mix, and sometimes it seems to me that Americans like to categorize a country as either a friend or an adversary. With Russia, because of the large number of interests that the Russians have, on some issues we're going to be adversarial, on some issues we're going to be cooperative. But probably in the last three to four years, you'd have to say that the mix has changed more towards the adversarial issues than the cooperative issues, and unfortunately we're probably at the lowest point in U.S.-Russian relations since the end of the Cold War in 1990, 1991.

DEWS: Well, let's look at a particular issue and that is the New START treaty, you just mentioned that. We heard that President Donald Trump had a conversation with President Putin, said some things about the New START treaty that didn't sit well

with a lot of arms control experts. First of all, can you tell our listeners, what is the New START treaty, and is it a good deal?

PIFER: The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, also called New START, was signed by President Obama and then-Russian President Medvedev in 2010. It entered into force in 2011, and its limits take full effect in February of next year, February 2018. And at that point, the United States and Russia will each be limited to no more than 1,550 deployed strategic warheads on no more than 700 deployed strategic missiles and bombers. So we're talking about intercontinental ballistic missiles on land, strategic missiles on submarines, and then nuclear-capable bombers.

DEWS: That's the nuclear triad.

PIFER: The nuclear triad, exactly. And the Pentagon has basically sized its future force exactly to fit within those limits. I think the New START treaty is in the American security interest for several reasons. First of all, it puts a cap on overall Russian strategic nuclear capability. It's going to constrain the number of Russian strategic weapons that could strike the United States. That's very much in our interest. It does it at a level that the Pentagon says they believe gives them, in fact, more than enough weapons to have a safe, secure, and effective American nuclear deterrent.

So when the treaty was signed, it had the unanimous support of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and seven of the former commanders of Strategic Command – these were the admirals and the generals who actually controlled all American strategic forces – endorsed the treaty. And it's not just the limits in the treaty, but the treaty has some very important verification and transparency measures. So every six months the United States and Russia exchange a large amount of data. They exchange constant

notifications – I think the count as of a couple days ago was almost 12,600 notifications over the life of the treaty – when there are certain changes in types of strategic forces, when certain missiles are moved from place A to place B. And then the treaty allows each side the opportunity, eighteen times a year, to inspect the strategic nuclear forces of the other.

And from the Pentagon's point of view, this is really, really good stuff because they get information about Russian forces, about how the Russians maintain those forces, that they couldn't get anywhere else, and that allows the Pentagon to make smarter decisions about how it operates U.S. forces and equips U.S. forces, and they don't have to make worst-case assumptions. So there's a lot of things in the New START treaty that are useful from the American perspective. The Russians, I think, also see utility on their side. So I'd argue this is a treaty very much in the U.S. interest.

When President Trump reportedly denounced the treaty, I think some of us thought he was acting, really, without fully understanding the treaty, and my hope is that he thinks about the treaty. He really ought to sit down with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and ask them their view. And my guess is they're going to say this treaty is very much in the U.S. interest.

DEWS: I think we hope for a result where the president doesn't withdraw the United States from New START, but just hypothetically speaking, what would be the ramifications of an action like that, if you could even do it?

PIFER: Yeah. Well, the President has the authority to withdraw. I think that would be a huge mistake from the point of view of U.S. security interests. I mean, first of all there would be a lot of international questioning. A lot of our allies would say why are

you doing this? Does this really make sense? Second, we would then cut off the notifications and the inspections and the data exchanges, so we would lose a large amount of information about Russian strategic nuclear forces that we get under the treaty.

Third, we would basically be opening the path to a potential arms race. Now, the American economy is much larger than the Russian economy. In the end, if we made that decision, we could outcompete them. But we would be doing that in that next year or two, when the Russians currently have open production lines. They're building new ballistic missile submarines now. They're building new intercontinental ballistic missiles. They're building new submarine-launched missiles.

Now, a lot of that is simply, they're replacing stuff that's old and stuff that, had they had the money fifteen years ago, they probably would have replaced around 2008-2009. But I'm not sure it makes sense to get into an arms race with the Russians when they have the open, hot production lines and they can keep on producing. Now, ten years from now the situation changes. Ten years from now, we're going to be building new ballistic missile submarines, new strategic missiles, again to replace old American systems. But I don't see where an arms race makes a lot of sense.

And then the fourth point I would make is, if you look at what President Trump has talked about what he wants to do with the military, he would like to address some of the conventional shortcomings and he's talked about, for example, expanding the Navy to 350 ships. He's talked about adding additional manpower for the Army and the Marines. All that's going to cost a lot of money, and to the extent that we open up a path

to a nuclear arms race with Russia, that's going to impose an additional burden on the defense budget, and at some point the defense budget's not going to able to cover it all.

You already have a strategic modernization program, outlined by the Obama administration, which senior officials in the Pentagon say they're not sure how they'll be able to pay for it. If we have to build more stuff on top of that, and then you're trying to do more things to add to conventional capability, you really begin to ask where are those defense dollars going to come from? So I really hope that he's not serious about that, because I do think that maintaining that New START treaty is in the U.S. interest.

DEWS: Let's shift to another arms control treaty, about which there is breaking news actually, today as we're taping this, and that's the INF treaty. Could you explain what the INF treaty is, and what the news is and what the ramifications of the news are?

PIFER: Yeah. Unfortunately, the news is not good. The treaty on Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces was signed by President Reagan and Soviet President Gorbachev back in 1987. And what it did was it banned all U.S. and Soviet land-based cruise and ballistic missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometers. That range is roughly between 300 miles and about 3,000-3,300 miles. The news that's come out: there's been a report in the New York Times that says the Russians have now proceeded to deploy some of these banned cruise missiles.

The U.S. government, back in the summer of 2014, publicly charged that Russia had violated the treaty on Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces by testing a ground-launched cruise missile of prohibited range. There's been effort by the United States government the last two years to try to persuade the Russians to come back into

compliance with the treaty. The Russians, for their part, have denied that they violated the treaty at all. And the disturbing news today is that if they've actually deployed – you know, while they were testing it would have been easier to get them back into compliance. If they've actually deployed, you know, there still may be a path to get them back into compliance, but it doesn't help the treaty's prospects, and that's going to cause concern on a number of fronts. It'll cause political concern, it will cause concern about future arms control agreements.

It would be very hard, for example, to see approval by the Senate of a new U.S.-Russian treaty if there's this big question hanging over about Russian violation of the INF treaty. And it's one that I think the administration will have to come to grips with fairly quickly. You have the Vice President traveling to Europe, the Defense Secretary will be in Europe. I think these questions are going to come up, and I think one thing the U.S. government needs to think about is, you have a treaty issue between the United States and Russia.

If in fact the Russians are building these intermediate-range cruise missiles, they can't reach the United States. They could put them in some locations where the Russians have never put missiles before, and they might be able to reach Alaska. But the targets for these missiles are going to be the countries of Europe and Asia. And one of the things that we have perhaps self-limited ourselves on the American side is, because of concern about sources and methods, concern about protecting how we got the information, we probably haven't talked to a lot of countries in Europe and Asia in detail about the nature of the violation. And what I would like to do is see us find a way to do that, because this ought to be an issue with the Germans and the French and the

Swedes and the Poles and the Italians and the Japanese and the Chinese, because these missiles are going to be targeted at them, not at the United States. And if you look over the last two years those countries haven't said much, and part of that may be of lack of information.

So we've got to be looking for ways to make this an issue between Russia and a lot of its European and Asian neighbors. Let's let Mr. Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, go home and say every time he travels to Europe and Asia he gets queried about this, he gets pressured not to do this. And so making this a multilateral issue may help us in a political way.

DEWS: I do want to get to questions about Ukraine and also U.S.-Russian relations more generally in a minute, but I want to finish off our discussion about nuclear weapons policy, nuclear policy more generally, by asking you what are some of the top issues that you think the Trump administration needs to deal with in the coming months and years, with respect to nuclear policy that we haven't already talked about?

PIFER: I think one thing that the Trump administration plans to do is a nuclear posture review, which is a sensible thing for the administration to look at, and say, what are the threats out there? What does it want to achieve with its nuclear force posture? And then, what systems, what policies does it need to achieve that posture? One thing that I would argue the administration ought to take a look at is the plan for strategic force modernization that it inherited from the Obama administration. And that includes the construction of 12 new ballistic missile submarines in the 2020s. It includes the Air Force's desire to have a new intercontinental ballistic missile. The Air Force also wants

to build a new stealth bomber called the B-21. And the Air Force is also asking for a new stealthy long-range air-launch cruise missile.

It was interesting when Secretary Mattis did his testimony. He basically endorsed three of those four elements. He said the submarine makes sense, the ICBM makes sense, the B21 makes sense. He said he wanted to take a look at the cruise missile, and I think that's actually something that's worth looking at. The United States first built air-launch cruise missiles in the 1970s because the B-52, the then-only American strategic bomber, was a really big target on a Soviet radar screen.

And the concern was the bomber wouldn't be able to penetrate Soviet airspace, so the cruise missile gave the bomber the ability to launch missiles into Russia or into the Soviet Union from well outside of Soviet airspace. But the B21 bomber is supposed to have very advanced stealth characteristics and electronic warfare capabilities, so it's being designed to in fact be able to survive and fly in a very sophisticated air defense environment. If that's the case, I'm not sure I see the logic for a new cruise missile.

Now, if as some have suggested, ultimately the B21's stealth might be compromised, then maybe we ought to reverse our thinking, build the new cruise missile, but not build a very expensive stealthy bomber. You know, build a modified B52 that can fire cruise missiles from well outside the enemy radar.

So I think those are the sorts of questions they have to look for in terms of U.S. nuclear force modernization. The other question, and you know it's become more complicated now with the revelation of the Russian deployment of a ground-launch cruise missile in violation of the INF treaty, would be, would the Trump administration want to do something further on nuclear arms control? Certainly, the New START treaty

coming down to 1,550 deployed strategic warheads is significant progress since, say, the end of the 1980s when the United States and the Soviet Union each had about 10,000 deployed nuclear warheads. But I think most analysts would argue that you can still go below that, that there can be room for further reductions. Will the Trump administration want to pursue those sorts of things, and then if it wanted to go down that path would it have to address other issues such as missile defense, long range conventional strikes, maybe something on third country forces? There's a whole bag of issues. But again, I think all of that set of questions now becomes much more difficult to address if in fact we do have the Russians having violated the INF treaty by deploying a prohibited ground-launch cruise missile.

DEWS: There's a lot of issues, we could have a whole other podcast episode just about nuclear weapons, so I appreciate you taking the time to walk us through that. Let's switch over to Ukraine. What do you see happening in Ukraine this year?

PIFER: I fear that Ukraine this year is going to look pretty much like Ukraine in 2016, in 2015, in terms of the conflict with Russia. And here the focus is on the Donbas in Eastern Ukraine. Now, that doesn't mean people are forgetting about Crimea. Crimea is illegally occupied, illegally annexed by Russia. But in the Donbass, where you have the ongoing fighting where, over the last two and a half years, nearly ten thousand people have been killed.

The problem that the Ukrainians have is that even though German Chancellor Merkel brokered a ceasefire agreement nearly two years ago between the Ukrainians and the Russians, you haven't really seen over the last two years a real effort by the Russians to implement that agreement. The first two provisions of the agreement were

a ceasefire and second, a withdrawal of heavy weapons from the line of contact. And over the last two years, you've had lots of violation – to be fair, on both sides. But I think when you look at the count, for example by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which monitors this, far more the violations are being committed by the Russians and the separatists than by the Ukrainian side. And one wonders, you know, why can't they enforce the security elements, which would then open the path to moving forward on some of the political elements of the agreement, things like decentralization of power and election law, restoration of borders?

There's a lot questions which are stuck because they can't get past the basic ceasefire. And my own conclusion at this point is that the Russians have come to a decision that in fact, keeping what's going on in Eastern Ukraine as a frozen or a simmering conflict, where they can ratchet the pressure up or ratchet it down, that allows Moscow the ability to distract and destabilize the Ukrainian government, to make it harder for that Ukrainian government to go forward with much-needed economic and political reforms, makes it more difficult for Ukraine to build a successful state or to implement the association agreement that they signed nearly three years ago with the European Union.

And we haven't seen much change in Russian policy over the last two years. I'm not sure I see anything that suggests that Russian policy is going to change now. They seem to be quite comfortable with this situation of maybe no war, no peace. And it's unfortunate because it really means that for those people still in the Donbass – and many have fled either to Ukraine or to Russia – you're living in a situation where the economy's been destroyed, the infrastructure been destroyed. It's a very difficult life, but

it doesn't seem that there's a prospect where they could actually move to a situation where you could begin to reestablish peace and normalcy.

[MUSIC]

DEWS: And now, what's happening in Congress with Molly Reynolds, a fellow in Governance Studies. I'm excited that Molly will be continuing this valuable segment that I launched on the program nearly three years ago with senior fellow John Hudak. Thanks, John, for your great contributions, and welcome, Molly.

REYNOLDS: My name is Molly Reynolds, and I am a fellow in the Governance Studies program at the Brookings Institution. Congress is on recess this week, so most of the important action is happening off Capitol Hill, but there's still plenty of it. Members, both Republicans and Democrats, are holding town hall meetings in their districts and states, and as we've seen on the news, some of these meetings have become quite testy for the members who are actually willing to participate in them.

Concern about the Affordable Care Act has been a major topic at these meetings, but other issues like immigration and questions about Trump's performance in office have also come up. Lots of comparisons have been drawn between this recent round of town hall meetings and the early Tea Party protests in 2009, and for listeners who are interested in that I would refer you to the excellent work done by my Brookings colleague, Vanessa Williamson, on the earlier Tea Party movement. But it's difficult to say at this point whether congressional constituents who are upset about their members' current conduct will actually translate into electoral challenges for House Republicans next fall.

In political science, we generally assume that members of Congress are most significantly motivated by reelection, so for them to start changing their behavior they need to feel like whatever it is they're doing right now is putting that reelection in jeopardy. That's part of why so much attention has been paid to the level of public opposition to rolling back parts of the Affordable Care Act. The specter of losing benefits that voters already have is a concrete issue around which it's easy to mobilize people. It's one that has direct consequences on people's lives.

It's also probably part of why we've seen less willingness on the part of members of Congress, particularly on the House side, to explore more aggressively some of the allegations related to Russia in the Trump administration. To be motivated to exercise oversight against the president, particularly a president of one's own party, members of Congress really have to feel that they're bearing real political cost for what the executive is doing.

As for whether these political costs are likely to come into play next fall, it's worth returning to a topic we talked a lot about on this podcast last year, which is that relatively few congressional districts, only 35 in 2016, split their ticket between the two parties. So only in 35 congressional districts did voters choose a House member of one party and give a majority of the presidential vote to the presidential candidate of the other party. Most of those split ticket districts, 23 of them, are districts where a Republican won the House seat but Clinton won the majority of the presidential vote. Seven of those are in California, and others are in places like suburban Denver, suburban Chicago, suburban Philadelphia, and suburban Washington, D.C. So these

are the kind of districts that we should be paying particular attention to as members hold town halls and as we see possible other protests about what Congress is doing.

When Congress returns to Washington at the end of February, they'll have a substantial amount of work awaiting them. In the Senate, Democrats have employed what we might call a slow-walking strategy to delay the approval of Trump's Cabinet nominees. Thanks to a change in the Senate's precedence for the consideration of nominations in 2013, only 51 votes are required to invoke cloture to end debate on nominations, except to the Supreme Court.

Democrats have taken advantage of the ability to consume all of the time available to them to provide themselves with a pretty easy messaging tool, even if they're incapable of actually voting down the nomination. Presidential nominations provide voters with a clear, straightforward policy issue – it's a specific nominee with a specific background on which there will be an up or down vote. There are four nominees ready for floor consideration, the nominees for Secretaries of Commerce, Interior, HUD, and Energy, and we should expect to see those nominations move along with possible continued slowing-down of the process by Democrats. When Congress returns, I'll also be on the lookout for continued use of something called the Congressional Review Act, which is a special procedure available to Congress to overturn regulations promulgated by the executive branch. It provides for an expedited procedure for doing so.

So in the Senate, when a resolution overturning a regulation comes to the floor, there's a limit on debate so that resolution can't be filibustered, and congressional Republicans have taken advantage of this law to provide themselves with a number of off-the-shelf policy proposals that are very popular with their interest group allies to

move on quickly early in the Trump administration. We've seen 13 of these CRA resolutions passed by the House so far.

Beyond nominations and the CRA, congressional Republicans are still working out differences on two of their really major policy initiatives: what to do about the Affordable Care Act, and what to do about tax reform. They'd like to use the special budget reconciliation procedures that prevent a filibuster in the Senate for both of these policies, but it appears the calendar might not be on their side, since it appears that they will need to complete work on one reconciliation bill before taking up the second. In addition, several other deadlines loom for Congress in the near future. The current temporary spending bill funding the government runs out on April 28th. The debt limit will need to be addressed at some point this year, along with the regular appropriations process, which may or may not include language addressing the caps on discretionary spending provided by the Budget Control Act. So Congress has had a busy few weeks, and has busy weeks and months ahead, and that's what happening in Congress.

[MUSIC]

DEWS: There was a policy proposal put out in the last year or two here in Washington to provide what we would call lethal military aid to the Ukrainians fighting this proxy war. Whatever became of that idea?

PIFER: Yeah, well, I was actually one of the people along with Strobe Talbott, the president of Brookings, who advocated that. This came out of a trip that several of us made to Ukraine back in January of 2015 to look at what the Ukrainian military needed. And we came back, we issued a report that was issued by Brookings, by the Atlantic Council, and by the Chicago Council on Global Issues, and it talked about six or seven

recommendations for what the United States should do to help bolster Ukraine's military capability. All but one of those recommendations were actually for non-lethal equipment, which was the policy of the Obama administration. It was things like secure communications, like reconnaissance drones, counterbattery radar so they could pinpoint where attacking artillery was firing from.

But the one recommendation that we felt was important for lethal military assistance was for manned, portable, anti-armor weapons. And that was because, when we traveled actually out to Kramatorsk, the field headquarters for the Ukrainian army in the Donbass region, they made very clear that they were seeing lots of armor coming across from Russia into Eastern Ukraine: tanks and armored personnel carriers. And that had found that their stock of Soviet-era manned portable anti-armor weapons simply didn't work. So we made that proposal in late January, early February. It got quite a bit of attention in Congress and when we briefed this proposal around town, we talked to people at State, at the Defense Department. We talked to White House officials. My sense was that actually there was quite a bit of support for that idea, although people said that obviously it was going to be a presidential decision.

Well, I think one of the few people that we did not persuade was President Obama, and he took a cautious approach – more cautious than I would advocate, although, I mean, this was not a slam-dunk decision, this was a 60/40 call. And I think his caution was reaffirmed because basically about the time when this seemed to come to a head in early February of 2015, Chancellor Merkel came to Washington, and she was on the eve of launching this effort in Minsk in Belarus to try to negotiate a ceasefire. And she felt that this kind of step by the United States would not be helpful, and my

sense was that the president deferred to her wishes. I still think it's something worth considering, but I'll make an important note about it that we made two years ago, which is, the objective of this was not the give the Ukrainian army the ability to beat the Russian army.

When we talked to Ukrainian officials, both in Kiev but also the field commanders, they understood that there was no way that they were going to beat the Russian army and drive the Russians and the separatists out of the Donbass. But what they were looking for was the capability to defend themselves better, basically to raise the cost of attacking the Ukrainians, and then take away easy military options from the Russians and the separatists. And from my perspective, that made sense because to the extent that the Russians saw their military options limited, that might give the Kremlin more of an incentive to really pursue a negotiated peace track.

DEWS: I think a lot of people might look at the situation in Ukraine, if they look at it at all, and wonder what's at stake for the United States – you know, a very inward-looking, kind of even isolationist perspective. You know, why should we care about Ukraine at all?

PIFER: That's a good question. I should say I have a little bit bit of a bias, having spent three years in Ukraine. But I'll give a couple reasons. One of them are, if you look over the last 25 years, on some big foreign policy issues, the Ukrainians have acceded to American wishes. So in the early 1990s, they got rid of what was the world's third largest nuclear arsenal, largely at the U.S.'s behest. In 1998, they synchronized their policy on nuclear nonproliferation with us, and they pulled out of the project that the Russians were leading in Bushehr, Iran to build a nuclear power plant there. In 2003,

after the American military occupied Baghdad and we were looking for countries to provide forces for the stabilization force in Iraq, the Ukrainians contributed 2,000 troops. So on a lot of big issues in the foreign policy world, when the United States has made a request, Ukraine's delivered, and I think that counts for something.

A second point is, part of the agreement under which Ukraine agreed to give up 2,000 strategic nuclear warheads, by the way which were all designed to target the United States, was the 1994 Budapest Memorandum of Security Assurances, in which the United States, Russia, and Great Britain agreed that they would respect the territorial integrity, the sovereignty, the independence of the Ukraine. They agreed not to use force or threaten to use force against Ukraine. They agreed not to apply economic pressure on Ukraine, and Russia has violated all of those commitments. And I think that imposes a certain obligation on the United States to be supportive of Ukraine. Again, that's one where I may be personally linked to this because I helped negotiate that agreement, but the United States negotiated that agreement at the time for something that was very important to us, which was getting rid of these 2,000 nuclear weapons.

A third point I would make is that it may be important for future American nonproliferation efforts to be supportive of Ukraine, because this idea of security assurances – it was applied to the Ukrainian case, but also for example in the 1990s, people were looking at security assurances as part of the problem to persuading North Korea not to go forward with a nuclear program. I think what's happened is the Budapest Memorandum has discredited that idea of security assurances, so it may not be a tool in the future for nonproliferation efforts, and we may want to look at ways to be supportive of Ukraine that, in fact, might revive the value of security assurances.

But I think the other point I would make about why the United States should take an interest, and it goes beyond Ukraine, is that the Russian challenge to the existing European security order is – there were a set of rules that grew up, beginning during the Cold War and going back to 1975 about how countries would behave – and the Russians have basically torn those rules up and become a much less predictable power. They've provoked concerns that the Russians might use force, and one of the concerns here is that if Russia gets away with what they're doing in Ukraine, with what they see to be minimal or acceptable costs, do the Russians do it somewhere else?

And again, I don't think it's high likelihood, but I wouldn't want the Russians to be tempted to try something against, say, Estonia, because unlike Ukraine, Estonia is a member of NATO. We have a treaty commitment there. So part of this is pushing back against the Russians and telling the Russians no, there have to be rules, there have to be orders, there have to be principles that govern the non-use of force, and we need to get back to that kind of set of rules that govern European and trans-Atlantic security relations. Without it, I think Europe is in a more dangerous and more risky place.

DEWS: Estonia and Ukraine are on the borders of Russia, but lately we've seen Russian disagreement with the ascension of Montenegro to NATO. We've even seen reports that Russia might be probing Sweden a little bit. I mean, do you see Russia trying to do this more and more throughout Europe and maybe in other parts of the world that it's around?

PIFER: Russia's definitely looking and trying to think of ways it can challenge NATO, and part of this goes back to, I think, Vladimir Putin's narrative of NATO. I worked at the National Security Council in the Clinton administration when we launched

the project to enlarge NATO. What triggered that was countries like Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary coming out of the wreckage of the Warsaw Pact and saying we want to be full members of Europe, we want to belong to all the institutions of Europe including NATO. And it was really difficult saying, you know, if those countries are prepared to become fully democratic, embrace the principles of Europe, contribute to NATO's defense, how can you say no? So I think NATO enlargement was very much demand-driven. It wasn't something the United States said "we want to do this to hem in the Russians."

Mr. Putin, I think, sees the last 20 years very differently. He believes that the United States, Germany, and Britain got together and said we're going to enlarge NATO because we want to compress Russian space, we want to bring troops to Russia's borders. In fact, you know, NATO didn't deploy any military forces, with the exception of a couple of fighter planes, on the territory of new members until 2014, after the Russians seized Crimea illegally from Ukraine. But I think Mr. Putin has this narrative, which we probably cannot persuade him is incorrect, that NATO is somehow enlarging in an offensive way. And so he's trying to push back, and if he can find a way to weaken, undermine institutions like NATO and the European Union, I think he's going to try to do that.

You've seen in 2016 the interference by the Russians in the American presidential election. Well, there's a French election this spring and already in France they're talking about Russian efforts there to interfere in the election, fake facts coming from Russian news outlets, things like that. The Germans have talked about possible Russian interference in the German election in the fall. And these are designed not only

to weaken individual countries, but also to drive divisions within institutions such as NATO and the European Union. And that very much strikes me as a high objective on the part of the Kremlin, and we're going to have to find ways to push back and resist that.

DEWS: I'm going to ask you to keep your policy advisor hat on for a couple more questions. What is one thing that you hope the Trump administration does not do with respect to Russia?

PIFER: Well, there's been a number of suggestions from the president and some people close to him that they might decide to relax sanctions on Russia without first requiring that Russia change its behavior. Beginning in 2014, the United States, along with the European Union, imposed some visa and financial sanctions on certain Russian individuals, but also imposed some broader economic sanctions targeted at the Russian financial industry, high tech industry, defense and energy sectors, and these were designed to encourage the Russians to change their policy toward Ukraine and basically to implement the Minsk agreement. Chancellor Merkel said that should be the benchmark for easing of sanctions, is Russia's full implementation of the agreement reached in February of 2015 in Minsk. If the United States were to drop those sanctions, my guess is the Europeans probably would follow, and the West would give up a significant amount of leverage it has in terms of trying to encourage the Russians to change their policy.

Now, sanctions are only one factor. The Russian economy may finally be growing this year. It's had about three years now of contraction and stagnation, and that resulted from three things. One is the failure of President Putin to make choices several

years ago about reforming the economy. Second, the price of oil has come down dramatically from when it was over $100 per barrel, and that's had a big impact on the Russian economy. But also these sanctions. Now if President Putin wants to improve his economy, he can't control the price of oil. He's ruled out significant economic reforms.

So the one thing that he could do that might make it easier on this guy would be to take steps to ease the sanctions, but that would require a policy change in terms of what the Russians are doing in Eastern Ukraine. And if the United States gives that up, then I fear that we in the West will abandon leverage, and that will make it harder to persuade Moscow to really work toward a restoration of peace and normalcy in Eastern Ukraine.

DEWS: And on the flip side, what is something that you hope the Trump administration does do, maybe on the positive side, with respect to Russia?

PIFER: I hope they reexamine some of the assumptions that seemed to underlie at least the way the president and the former National Security Advisor General Flynn seemed to look at Russia, where some of their comments suggested that they saw an opportunity to improve the relationship with Russia, perhaps by overlooking egregious Russian misbehavior in Ukraine, with the goal of finding in Russia a partner to fight against ISIS and also somehow pulling Russia away from China and perhaps becoming a bit of a partner in sort of pushing back against China, which they seem to see, correctly, China as the new emerging superpower. And it seems to me that those hopes are fundamentally misplaced. I mean, there are certainly limits on how far the relationship between Russia and China can go, but I can't see any way in which the

United States could pull Russia away and have Russia as a partner in trying to contain China. Likewise, Russia as a partner in dealing with ISIS – we've seen a lot of evidence in this regard.

The United States military and the Russian military have both been conducting operations in Syria for about 18 months, and while the Russians say they're fighting ISIS, most of their military strikes since September of 2015 have been targeted not at ISIS but at more moderate opposition groups in Syria that pose a more direct threat to President Assad there. So, it's not clear to me that A, the Russians are prepared to work with us against ISIS. Second, I'm not sure what they actually would bring to the game. And third, we really have to ask, would we want Russia as a partner in some of these operations? I mean, look at the Syrian-Russian military operation against Aleppo, and what you saw by the Russian military or the Russian air force was pretty much indiscriminate bombing of the cities, including, it looks like, hitting some hospitals, some schools. I'm not sure that's the kind of partner we want in a counterterrorism campaign against ISIS, where those kinds of activities, in fact, may fuel support for ISIS as opposed to helping us contain it.

So I hope the administration takes a hard look at some of its premises about engaging with Russia, because some of the things that the president said on the campaign trail suggest that he has some hopes that probably would not be met, and you really do need to have a realistic basis when you approach your policy about Russia.

DEWS: Well, Steve, I think we can leave it there. I really appreciate you sharing your time and your expertise with us today.

PIFER: Thank you for having me.

DEWS: You can learn more about Steve Pifer and get more research and analysis on Russia and nonproliferation and other issues on our website, brookings.edu.

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DEWS: Hey listeners, want to ask an expert a question? You can, by sending an e-mail to me at bcp@brookings.edu. If you attach an audio file, I'll play it on the air and I'll get an expert to answer and include it in an upcoming episode. Thanks to all of you who have sent in questions already.

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