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Brookings Cafeteria Podcast
“NATO at 70: More than a military alliance”
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AUDIO CLIP NARRATOR: The Treaty members realized that real peace is more than an absence of war, and they seek to promote the political and economic stability in the North Atlantic area. To ensure this, they're sworn to stand together against aggression. An attack against one would be an attack against all. This union of 12 nations became known as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or, more simply, NATO.

(MUSIC)

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews.

We just heard an excerpt from a video titled "The Birth of NATO." The North Atlantic Treaty Organization turns 70 in April. The alliance among 29 North American and European countries is one of both political defense and collective cooperation. To discuss challenges to and opportunities for the alliance as it enters its eighth decade, today's episode features a discussion among a group of leading Brookings experts. John Allen is president of the Brookings Institution and is a retired Marine Corps four-star general who commanded the NATO International Security Assistance Force and U.S. Forces in Afghanistan. Constanze Stelzenmüller is the Robert Bosch Senior Fellow in the Center on the United States and Europe at Brookings, and is an expert on German, European, and Transatlantic security policy. And Michael O'Hanlon is a senior fellow and director of Research in the Foreign Policy program at Brookings, as well as the Sydney Stein, Jr. Chair. He is the author of numerous books, including, "Beyond NATO: A New Security Architecture for Eastern Europe" and "The Senkaku Paradox: Risking Great Power War Over Small Stakes."

After their discussion, stay around for a short discussion between experts Samantha Gross and Suzanne Maloney on top of geopolitical issues from Syria to Russia to Iran.

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information about any of our shows. If you have any questions for me or the scholars who appear on the show, send an email to bcp@brookings.edu.

And now, here's Michael O'Hanlon, with John Allen and Constanze Stelzenmüller.

O'HANLON: So, John and Constanze, it's a real treat to be here with you talking about a momentous moment in NATO's history, and you both had remarkable roles in thinking about, writing, speaking, researching, and acting with this alliance over your career. John, of course, you were a NATO commander in Afghanistan with the International Security Assistance Force. Constanze, you are a person who gets both Germany and the United States may be better than anybody else I know, given how much time and effort you've devoted to understanding both countries and how much time you spent in both. And so, it just seems that you are about as good of a collection of people as I could ask to start to just reflect on where we are at this moment with NATO and maybe Constanze, I'll begin with you, just because for you this has been a lifelong preoccupation and you watched and studied NATO through its latter Cold War period and then the entire 30 years since, and I just wondered if you could reflect on some of that history even though we're both obviously very young people still today.

STELZENMÜLLER: OK, well thank you very much for that kind introduction. I should perhaps explain why I've been engaged with this because I was a journalist for a decade and a half and in fact covered some NATO missions in the Balkans and in Afghanistan and other missions that weren't NATO, such as U.S. or European missions elsewhere. So yes, I think I can speak to some of the realities and experiences on the ground, for me obviously as a German, as a committed European, but also as a transatlantisist NATO is the military arm of something bigger, which is the transatlantic relationship, which to my mind has been what has kept the peace not just in Europe, but also sustaining the international rules based order for 70 years. And, as such, it's I mean it's important to look at the military arm of this, but let's not forget that it is a part of

something much bigger. And to me that's a community of values a community of rules and of law. And I think that's what we want to preserve going forward.

O'HANLON: Great. And that's an excellent way to frame where I think the conversation needs to go as we think about where NATO is today under substantial stress and a number of ways. So, thank you for setting that up, and John we're of course all in awe of how NATO worked in Afghanistan. And you, I think, were the commander of more than 100,000 troops, but you also had probably somewhere around a hundred civilian masters above you between all the NATO countries and heads of government and ministers of defense, and so you understood sort of coordination up and down the chain of command and the political military integration. What are your thoughts about the alliance at this juncture?

ALLEN: Well, I don't think it's ever been more important. Obviously, it played an extraordinary role in keeping the peace during the Cold War period. My own experience as a young officer was to be prepared to operate on the northern flank for tours with the Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean, being prepared to operate on the southern flank commanded a force which was engaged in Bosnia as Yugoslavia was coming apart, and would ultimately take some of the force into Sarajevo in ‘95 to implement the Dayton Accord, and then I would command the forces on the ground in Afghanistan. Just those points alone should indicate that NATO is a multifaceted organization. That has been the vision of the community of nations, is this significant, this essential transatlantic relationship has been able to move in multiple directions as is necessary to keep the peace in Europe, and as Constanze said very well, to keep the peace more broadly.

As we hit 70 years the challenges are still significant. The challenge either as it continues with respect to the outcome, the long-term outcome in Afghanistan; the challenge that NATO faces as it continues the integration of capabilities in a world that is increasingly dominated by operations in the cyber domain as NATO embraces that; the

challenges associated with modernization in an environment where technology is galloping into the future; and NATO being of a consensus based force is seeking to square the challenges of decision-making within the alliance and being sufficiently agile to react to and address these new dimensions that we face that sometimes are a threat but certainly are challenges.

So, NATO is extraordinarily important today. It is, I think, not just a bulwark for the security of the transatlantic relationship, but as we see challenges to democracy more broadly expressed in particular in the transatlantic relationship, I think NATO is a bulwark there, as well. It's not intended to be, but I think the common values Constanze talked about are common interests, those things that we share in the context of our heritage. NATO as a bulwark, not just for military security and the defense of the transatlantic relationship, it also creates stability in the political sense as well. So, it's extraordinarily important at this moment of seventieth birthday.

O'HANLON: So, I want to get ultimately of course to policy questions about NATO's current and future role. But first, let's reflect a little more building on what you both just said on where we stand at this juncture. And when I think back to previous NATO anniversaries—in 1979 we have seen a huge Soviet buildup, and John you were referring to that period earlier in your very early Marine Corps career when you were perhaps in Norway or the Med dealing with various challenges. And that was a period of acute Soviet military threat. [19]89 was the more hopeful moment with, you know, the end of that year, of course, being the demise of the Berlin Wall. And so, in some ways that became a more hopeful period. [19]99 was the Kosovo war and NATO met while the Kosovo war was sort of halfway through and not really yet turning the corner towards success. 2009 was a period when NATO was ginning up for a more assertive effort in Afghanistan after a lot of division over the Iraq war. But now a new American president who had talked about alliances and talked about Afghanistan being the right focus for NATO military efforts in

our, in 2019 compared to some of those sorts of benchmarks.

How do we stand today in terms of the threats and just the moment of seriousness that the alliance faces you know on the world stage, but also NATO strength is NATO as cohesive as powerful today as it was in those earlier periods? It has a lot more members and a lot more GDP, but it's had maybe less a sense of agreed military purpose and now of course it has a president of the United States leading it [who], whether you like him or not, he himself is not a fan of NATO, so we can just put that on the table as a basis for discussion too, without necessarily even criticizing Donald Trump. It's just a fact that he's not a big believer in these sorts of overseas alliances. So, with all that on the table, how do we assess today's moment of danger and also NATO's preparedness to handle that danger? And Constanze could I begin with you again?

STELZENMÜLLER: That's a really big menu. OK, let me give it a first shot. I would say that there were a couple of things that prove NATO's relevance. And you've named a really important one, which is that countries still want to become members desperately because they see it as protection against aggression. And they see it as protection against Russian aggression. To be specific, we had we saw a significant expansion of NATO after 1989, and we're now at nearly 30 members. There are still some waiting in line. And while we have had fights about enlargement it's very clear that this alliance is second to none in the world in its attractiveness and in what it's achieved.

Now, one of the problems with saying, with describing exactly what NATO has achieved is that that's a bit of a hypothetical. In other words, there are no doubt a number of causes that have kept the peace among other of the sort of political unity over our values and our interests. Transatlantic trade, which is at 1 trillion between the U.S. and Europe, and these things too, of course, have helped stabilize Europe. But I am [certain], without a doubt, that in the absence of NATO, the military arm of the alliance, this alliance would, the European continent would have been much more fraught, not just because of

Russian aggression on its borders, but also possibly because of controversies and fights between European countries themselves. I don't think they would have necessarily gone to war with each other, but I think that the fact that we are all members in NATO does also help to discipline us politically. That's a really important point.

Now in terms of threats, I've, as a, as a journalist which I started being in the early ‘90s—1979 was actually the year I finished high school. But I do remember the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as one of the sorts of momentous events of my young adulthood, and, of course, 1989 as one of the great joys when I was in my late 20s. But, in many ways, we seem to have come full circle. When I was working as a journalist, the intervention in the Balkans and afterwards the 9/11 attacks on America, the global war on terror, the Iraq war, expeditionary warfare seemed to render thoughts or the history and the experience of territorial defense obsolete. And with Russian aggression in Eastern Europe, in Georgia, and in Ukraine we have turned full circle on that. We've also realized that the global war on terror-framing was not one that the NATO militaries were entirely happy with. Because this was something that really starts with domestic intelligence and police force and then police cooperation, and then works that way outwards. And arguably NATO had a role to play there, but certainly not the primary one.

That said, we're, just as John was saying earlier, we are dealing with a new era of global strategic competition where faraway powers like China are finding a variety of ways of interfering in the European theater, not necessarily militarily, but with propaganda, with cyber warfare, with buying strategic assets, buying allies as it were. And, of course, the Russians are doing similar things. And that makes it necessary for us to juggle, as it were, the traditional task of territorial defense and the nontraditional tasks of defending ourselves against political interference and, of course, new kinds of weapons that like hypersonic weapons developed by the Russians that make reaction speed of the essence.

And all of that, I would say, to tie this together in an age where we have an

American president who is reluctant to endorse NATO, where we have problems of deep disagreements between allies not just about threats and risks, but also about our, as it were, domestic operating systems, the state of our democracies. All of that I would say puts a premium not just on military preparedness, but also on the political aspects of trust, cooperation, mutual understanding, and a willingness to forge compromises in the face of these very disparate threats.

O'HANLON: Fantastic answer. John, I want to pose the same question to you, but also to add on or to drill down specifically, just how dangerous is this era in history in your judgment compared to those previous NATO birthdays? You know, of the Cold War, and then the Kosovo war, and then the Afghanistan buildup, the previous sort of 10-year anniversaries that we can remember? And just how well is NATO prepared as a cohesive body? Leave aside the specific technical issues, which we can get into in a minute, like cyber and hypersonic defense. But, as a body, that can work together at 29 members, how do you how do you find its strength today?

ALLEN: Well I think in some respects, as Constanze said, what NATO has done for us, is it's provided us a level of stability in an environment where illiberalism is creeping into some of the Democratic states of NATO. And in that regard, the commonality that we all enjoy when the ambassadors of NATO sit at the North Atlantic Council, the commonality that we enjoy as a result of the leadership of the Supreme Allied Commander of Europe with all of our 29 partners, that is a stabilizing factor in a world that has become very unstable in many respects. NATO faces, I think, the challenge that it has today, NATO faces a challenge of adaptation, and where before the threat was generally known to us the threat was generally planned for and received, and the resources were accumulated to deal with that threat, particularly during Soviet era, the challenges that we face today is the challenge of a revanchist Russia with multiple capabilities—both conventional modernized capabilities plus operations in the cyber domain not just targeted

upon the edge of the NATO frontier, but, of course, targeted in many respects through a strategic influence campaign deep into the democracies of NATO itself. NATO has to adapt to the challenge of a modernized Russia. NATO has to adapt to climate change, for example, which is just coming I think with a real vengeance, and, in particular, how NATO deals with the far north in conjunction with the potential for competition with Russia and China, actually, as the Northeast Passage may well in fact be opening up within a generation.

NATO has to deal, I think, with a continued presence of unstable Middle East and the potential for a destabilized North Africa, which can of course produce the kinds of either economic or conflict migration into Europe that can fundamentally change not just the demographics of the European population but can polarize the politics in ways that can accelerate the illiberalization or the illiberal tendencies of certain of the leaders of Europe.

NATO has embraced the role of the extension or the projection of stability as one of its principal objectives now as it adapts for the future. The stability being the capacity for NATO to work with partners that are not part of NATO but are in that region to stabilize the.

So, we have Russia to the east, we have an uncertain north, we have a destabilized south, each of which is creating its own unique set of challenges, which means that NATO has to look in all directions simultaneously. But it also has to look internally as well. We have to look at the continued process of our interaction between the various militaries of the 29 partners. We have to consider how NATO forces can deploy in certain directions and move quickly from one spot to another. I know the Secretary General is deeply concerned about the capacity of NATO forces in transit to become quickly relevant in the event that we have a crisis on the eastern frontier of NATO, the eastern flank.

But we also have an environment where, with terrorism increasing—a direct result of the Islamic State and then some unknown still level of terrorism that will emerge

whether it's domestic terrorism, which is emerging as well as jihadi terrorism—NATO has real capacity to work closely with the European Union, and the members of the European Union to provide certain kinds of assistance to, as Constanze properly said, national efforts for law enforcement and counterterrorism to keep the populations in Europe safe.

So, those are all challenges that one or another would be a challenge in and of itself. But, for NATO to have to deal with all of them simultaneously is a very challenging environment. And I would also add, and I was participant in a study from a think tank in Europe called GLOBSEC, where one of the challenges that we face is not a challenge of a threat, but it is the challenge of the disparity of technology that we are seeing. The technology associated with the U.S. military continues to evolve, it continues to improve in many respects as we continue to embrace artificial intelligence as a component within our military doctrine and military capabilities, other capabilities as well. The U.S. can afford to embrace these kinds of technologies. And one of the greatest attributes of NATO has been traditionally our interoperability across the board, whether it's firing the same round out of our small caliber weapons or the command and control at the most strategic level. And as technology continues to evolve, which takes us into the realm of highly accelerated military operations, sometimes called hyper war. As that technology continues to evolve, I worry that we could begin to see a gap start to open between U.S. capabilities and all other capabilities …

STELZENMÜLLER: … that's already there …

ALLEN: … and I think interoperability will be the bill payer, and we have got to do all that we can as NATO undertakes this adaptation, whether it's adaptation to cardinal directions on the compass or adaptation to climate, or adaptation to the growth of illiberalism, or adaptation to the galloping realities of technology, NATO has to deal with all of those simultaneously. Any one of those was a challenge. All of them together is a great challenge now at 70.

O'HANLON: A couple of follow ups. Constanze just mentioned that interoperability is already an issue, but as the ISAF commander, five years ago, six years ago, I think I hear you saying that for that kind of a fight, it was a problem, but it wasn't a huge problem. But for a future fight against a technologically advanced foe, it could become a matter of success or failure on its own merits, the interoperability and technology question. Is that what I'm hearing?

ALLEN: No question. When we're fielding the F-35, which is arguably the most sophisticated system that flies through the air—you don't even want to call it an airplane anymore, it's an information and intelligence capability that has wings, and I know I'm being a bit flippant here—but, when you have those kinds of capabilities that only certain nations will buy the whole concept of how you conduct long-range strike operations, et cetera, changes dramatically.

But, it's not just that, it's how we how we identify our requirements, how we fulfill those requirements. We often say NATO is not what you want, it's what you need, and having a coherent way of identifying the requirements that we need and then pursuing those requirements with the kinds of speed necessary to maintain the relevance of our interoperability is really important. Until just recently, and it may still be the case, and I could be corrected on this, but from idea to fielding your average NATO requirement took something along the lines of 16 years. We can't be that slow in an environment where our opponent is fielding hypersonic weapons and all of the technologies associated with the requirements to both detect, command, and control the resources to deal with, launch those resources, and ultimately to effectively defend against hypersonic weapons coming at you at Mach 5, that requires a level of technology and the capacity to develop that technology, embrace it, and field it at speeds that we've never been faced with before in NATO and we're going to have to consider that.

O'HANLON: So, when I hear you both describe the security environment today and

what NATO's facing, I think I hear the following. And let me just be a little provocative and then push back obviously, if I'm getting it wrong. I think I hear you both saying this is an extremely complex moment. It's quite dangerous. It may not quite rise to the level of existential danger of the early to middle Cold War decades, because both you listed various kinds of serious, but arguably not existential threats when you began your litany of problems NATO faces. So, I'm just trying to sort of adjust on a rheostat just how fraught I should consider the global environment and specifically the European security environment today. If Cold War was up in the 9 or 10 range, and the 1999 period of the Kosovo War—important but still, you know, a fight over two million people in Southeastern Europe with no larger powers involved—if that was whatever three or four or five, where are we today on sort of the danger scale?

STELZENMÜLLER: Let me try and take a stab at that, and then John can add onto that. I think it's correct to say that right now the probability of all out regional or global kinetic warfare has receded somewhat compared to the Cold War that all of us spent part of our lives in. I think we're entirely agreed that if it were to materialize that that would be catastrophic in the same way that that probability was considered catastrophic at the time.

What I think has changed, and what makes this period so dangerous, is that we can now envisage for a variety of reasons small scale frictions escalating extremely quickly, hopping theatres. And the because of a degradation of the political, legal, and security environment that prevented that kind of theater hopping and escalation in the past, you are seeing the potential of a greatly increased risk of miscalculation of mutual misunderstanding, error, and escalation with catastrophic results. That is my biggest concern.

And that is also something that I think is not fully considered by those who advocate restraint or an American retrenchment here for two reasons. One, because I think it is underappreciated how important the European theater and the European assets are to

American strategic interests across the globe, not just to protect Europeans. And secondly, because I think there, is if I may if I may sort of be so provocative, there is a sense in America that America is an island in the same way that Britain thinks of itself as an island. And that it could in some way insulate itself against the impact of events happening very far away, which I think at this point with the kind of theater hopping and escalation possibilities that I've just outlined, is an illusion. Not least because the damage done to American interests can arrive on several different levels. It can be kinetic on American shores. It can be kinetic directed at American forces or bases outside of America. But, just the impact on American trade and investment of a limited regional engagement in the Pacific or in Europe would also be massive and would translate itself on American well-being and prosperity and, yes, stability very, very quickly.

O'HANLON: So even if maybe not quite as dangerous of a moment and quite as high stakes as the worst moments of the Cold War and maybe not too far away from that?

STELZENMÜLLER: Well, the thing is that these days because of the general degradation of international degradation of international law, of trust among Western allies, because of the increased powers of non-western powers to challenge us to act as effective adversaries, or to just to thwart American and European purpose in the world, and because of the potential, again, of not just a theater hopping and escalation, but escalation from conventional to nuclear, those things combined, I think, are what makes this dangerous in a different way and frankly it makes having lived through the Cold War, grown up in it and being, you know, the Germans were supposed to be the theater of the place of nuclear warfare. And the assumption was that conventional warfare in the Cold War would turn nuclear in three weeks, and then Germany would be an ash heap. You know, that's not a lot of fun growing up with. But, it was I will say that it was something that we in a weird way took for granted but because of the existence of red telephones between the Soviet Union and the United States, because of arms control agreements,

because of successive disarmament efforts in the ‘70s at least leading up to 1989 and the events of that year, there was a feeling in Europe and indeed in Germany that this might somehow be defanged. Right now, we're looking at an environment that has become darker, that has become more tense, and where if anything our assumption has to be that things are going the other way around.

O'HANLON: John, do you want to comment on that? And after that I have a question for each of you before we sort of broaden the periscope to the future.

ALLEN: I think Constanze has really put this well. My worry about the environment today with regard to NATO isn't we won't fight or can't fight. It is, if you will, the vertical connectivity between the liberal democracies, the North Atlantic Council, the capacity for rapid decision-making there, that decision-making being tied to a relevant, credible, NATO nuclear deterrent, then to the conventional capability. I worry about firebreaks in there.

STELZENMÜLLER: Exactly.

ALLEN: And as we find ourselves potentially more politically fragmented within the context of the members of NATO, which is also the members of the EU in many respects, I worry once again, as I said before, that the capacity for an alliance to truly deter is its credibility and the demonstrated capacity to fight. But also it's the appearance of its willingness to be determined to make the right decision with the right speed to defend to defend ourselves. And I worry that there has been, as Constanze has properly said and used the right word, a degradation in the continuity from the moment of the need to make the decision to our capacity to implement at the speeds necessary. For those speeds in and of themselves to be the deterrent factor. Not counting tanks, not counting aircraft, but the speed of our capacity to react as an alliance is a deterring dimension in and of itself. And where we have become disconnected, or where we have become a bit rusty because we haven't had to think in those terms, we should put a lot of effort at the 70th birthday of NATO into thinking about, in every way possible, how we increase the connectivity

between our democracies as a group, our commitment to the alliance as a whole, and our capacity to decide with the kinds of speed necessary to create the credibility and the deterrence necessary to defend NATO.

The Secretary-General has said many times, many Secretaries-General have said this, NATO isn't against anyone, but NATO is for the defense of Europe. And we need to think in those terms. And when you think in those terms the absolute imperative and the necessity for interoperability to sustain that in every possible way we can, but to create that vertical tempo of decision-making and force commitment is absolutely essential to the future. We don't see the Russian, the Soviet hordes, lined up on the border again, but there are threats to the in the aggregate which I think can break down the political unity of NATO and cause the president of the United States to wonder whether NATO's even worth it anymore. And that, I think, is in some respects the existential threat to NATO. It’s not a thermonuclear threat. It's the incapacity of the members to show sufficient unity to justify the reason for the alliance.

O'HANLON: And thank you. You set up a question I want to pose to Constanze in just a minute about how NATO is doing halfway through this term of President Donald Trump in the United States. But first, John, I want to ask just sort of a more almost casual question, but you know it's a serious topic. When you commanded NATO forces in the field, what was it like? What's the sort of striking takeaway at a personal level? Obviously you've both talked about all the things that NATO's good at. But all the complications of working with a big group? What struck you when you were in command compared to other jobs other commands you had had in your military experience? Was it the politics and bureaucracy of it? Was it the unity of it? Was it the amazing breadth of the different organizations that came together in common purpose? How would you describe all of those things?

ALLEN: It’s all those things, Mike. There was an occasion one night when I had

ordered a raid on a particular objective. And it was to recover some Western hostages. And I was in my Combat Information Center. Sitting next to me was my British three star and on the other side is my French chief of staff, three star. The usual watch floor individuals were manning up all of the intelligence sites, et cetera, and we had full motion video looking down on the raid site as the S.A.S. element was about to go hot. And I was struck as I was watching this, because we had been watching this mission unfold now for hours. They'd been inserted. They'd had a long offset march onto the objective, so we've been watching this for hours. And now the culmination of this operation was about to be undertaken. And, I sat back in my chair, and I looked around the room, and it became very clear to me that while we had different patterns of camouflage and different flags on our shoulders, we were not one whit different from each other. And that to me was the realization of the power of NATO. That we were many different nationalities, but at that moment, we were one organization. That I think is what has kept us safe now for 70 years, and in the end that will keep us safe for the next 70 years.

O'HANLON: Which is then a segue to my question to you, about it will keep us safe another 70 if we don't find a way to destroy it one way or another. And so, I wanted to ask Constanze, and I've heard you speak on this topic very eloquently, just how much damage has the last two years done to NATO?. Blame whoever you want, blame President Trump for not supporting NATO, blame Europeans collectively for not doing enough on the burden sharing front, blame all of us. But how much damage has been done? Are we sort of in the flesh wound category where if things change in a couple of years, either because there's a new president, or because President Trump himself changes his view, that a lot of the damage can be repaired quickly? Or has it really been a lasting systemic change to NATO because of these last two difficult years?

STELZENMÜLLER: So, let me perhaps just add onto the back of what John has just described very eloquently, that as a journalist I've also seen NATO troops in the field a

number of times, and I have also always been struck by how good Western troops are at cooperating with each other across very different rules of engagement, different kinds of materiel, and the sort of a general sort of chaos and confusion that you often find on missions. You remember the famous American TV series *M*A*S*H*, which we presumably all loved. There's always an element of that going on everywhere when you send soldiers out on a mission. But the miracle truly is that we managed to get things done across all these divides. That is a remarkable achievement.

But, the question for me is, are we, all of us, at this point able to invest the amount of political will to keep it that way? And my answer to your question, Mike, is that the world has changed in ways that we have been slow to acknowledge, and we have been particularly snowed slow to acknowledge in Europe that we are in a framing of strategic competition that has had a huge impact on the European, and indeed the German assumption after 1989, that everything was going to change for the better. Right now, that assumption has flipped, and we're looking at a much darker environment. And there I think we have been very slow on the uptake to understand that we really have the choice between being diners or dinner in this framework.

Much of the strategic competition is taking place in the European theater, and Europeans need to understand that they need to do more for themselves if they want to remain attractive partners to America. I worry, that Americans, or some Americans, and that probably includes the president of the United States, don't understand enough how intimately their interests are tied up not just with the European theater, where so many of their bases and their servicemen and women are stationed, but also where American trade and American investment play such an important role. And I do, of course, deplore the fact that this particular president doesn't seem to think that it matters what values and interests we have in common. But, again, as a German, as a European, I think the burden is on us Europeans, and indeed on Germany as the key nation in Europe, to provide for a larger

bulk of the burden sharing that we are now doing. The German defense spending debate in this context is particularly painful for me.

And, the truth is, of course, that a lot of what we have to be doing to stabilize the situation in Europe or around our periphery are actually not major war missions. There are small to medium sized stabilization or crisis management missions with which we are already having problems. If we can't do that as Europeans on our own, then I think we shunt ourselves out of the picture as allies to be taken seriously. But again, the ultimate point I want to make is that in a global era of strategic competition, if we Europeans and you Americans don't understand that we are crucial for each other to survive this, against Russian and Chinese hostility and against their competition, then I think we set ourselves up to lose, all of us.

O'HANLON: Even though, remarkably, we account collectively for half of all world military spending and almost half of world GDP, there are still ways to be pretty inefficient and pretty unprepared depending on how we handle it.

I think, that we should now just open up and talk about the future of NATO. And, I'm just going to put that basic question on the table and after you've each spoken, I'm going to volunteer my own thoughts, but I'm not going to put them on the table just yet, I'd rather hear from you. And, I think we can all just maybe lay out a vision that has to do with membership, priorities, geographic focus. Anything else that you think is most central to how we should be trying to encourage NATO leaders to build an even stronger alliance going forward so that in John Allen's hopeful phrase we have another 70 years of NATO history still ahead of us.

ALLEN: Well I think we do. Apart from the apparent ambivalence at any given moment by the U.S. government toward NATO, I think that the sense, certainly among our European partners, as opposed to U.S. leadership, American leadership, I think there's a very strong commitment to the transatlantic relationship. And we cannot have an

expectation that that transatlantic relationship will remain secure except with a viable NATO. The challenge, as I said before, is embracing—first of being able to identify the challenges that are coming at us, and being able to adapt NATO incredible ways. And I believe that NATO is really trying to bend itself to do this now after the Warsaw summit in ‘16, where there was a very, very clear direction for NATO to both identify and embrace these changes and was beginning to move off in those directions. I was encouraged that regard.

But, the issue of membership I think is going to be important. Does NATO need to continue to expand to the east with all of the challenges associated with that? That's a question that we need to answer. I think that the open-door policy should still be operative. There are other states that we should be considering to join NATO. I have no reason to believe that NATO cannot expand beyond 29 members. I watched very closely the process of Montenegro going through its preparations. The very strong work that it did in terms of adaptation that was necessary in order to be a candidate for NATO membership. And I believe that there are other states who will want to consider being part of NATO, not just for their own security, but for the value of the synergy that comes from being in an alliance like that.

But we have to be very clear that the states have to be able to have to adapt to the NATO standards with respect to intelligence, and capabilities, etc. So, I think, we should keep the open-door policy. The question is which are those states that could be candidate members remains on the table? Ukraine, Georgia, Macedonia, Northern Macedonia, whatever we’re calling it, and, of course, potentially some of our northern partners. But we should remain open to that, and we should not close the door on NATO membership because of Vladimir Putin or the Russian concerns. But I also think that the challenges that NATO must adapt to will be in many respects maintaining its political coherence. We have some members that if they continue their illiberal slip, we're going to have to consider very

seriously whether they can remain in NATO. And I'm not going to name them here, I think they know who they are. But the challenge is one that I think could be not insignificant to the organization. We've invited many people in, we've never invited anyone out. And the question, at some point, needs to be asked when we see NATO state slip into authoritarianism, even though it's geographically relevant, whether it should remain in the alliance.

And then, of course, I think the challenge that we face increasingly in the domain of space, and the cyber domain that's confronting us with a whole series of technological challenges that we have to embrace and, of course, limited resources with respect of defense budgets, etc. are going to drive us in that regard.

So, there are many challenges that NATO will have to address in its second to 70 years. But, I think, the organization is up to it. I think the leadership of the current Secretary-General and a whole string of them before him has been very positive in that regard. And, in some respects, I think NATO has adapted to the Trump administration. We've seen, in many respects, a verbal, public commitment to the reality of what NATO stands for coming from capitals around Europe and from our European partners in ways they never felt they had to talk about it before. The essential dimension of NATO to our transatlantic future. That's a very positive thing. And if I think if, in the end, as a result of the current administration's sense with respect to NATO, if that has in fact deepened European appreciation of NATO and helps Americans to understand a more deepened appreciation of our European partners and the alliance, then that's a good thing.

From my perspective—you've heard me say at Brookings that the U.S.-China relationship in the 21st century will be the consequential relationship that we will have. That the Indian-U.S. relationship could in many ways be the indispensable relationship. But I think the essential relationship for the United States in the 21st century is the transatlantic relationship, and that relationship will be secured by the NATO alliance, and

we must be committed to that alliance for that purpose.

O'HANLON: Thank you, very eloquent. Constanze?

STELZENMÜLLER: Well, I would only add two points. One is that I'm in agreement with John Allen that we should keep NATO's door open. And, I think, it would already help if some of us didn't preclude that option. There are political groupings or politicians in Europe who like to say, "well Georgia and Ukraine must never become a member of NATO." I would say, let's never say never, and work towards change in those countries in such a way that that question, and indeed the question of EU membership, answers itself once those changes have taken place.

And that leads me to my second point, which is that I also agree with John on the paramount importance, increasingly, of the nature of our domestic operating systems. What unites us, what makes us share values and interests, is the fact that we are constitutional democracies, who live by rules rather than by might. And we've seen I think over the last rounds of EU and NATO expansion, that living in the EU or living in NATO can put a great burden on new democracies in their adaptation process. And the early rounds—the Balts, the Poles, and others—I think, dealt with that without struggling too much, the cost wasn't too high. But I think for very fragile democracies, it is possible that this burden would add an additional strain that might actually tip them in another direction. At any rate— which is why I'm saying keep the door open but take things slowly and pay attention to the overall transformation. And that is in our interest and not just in theirs because every new country that is added also adds to the stability and the safety not just of Europe but also of American interests in Europe.

But, I would also plead for not underestimating the importance of the European Union and the transatlantic trade relationship in all of this. Because those two things, the European project and the trade relationship, have also helped stabilize American-European relations and have helped deepen and enrich them, and have helped create a

degree of trust and commonality and interchange between our two political cultures that is unparalleled in the rest of the world. And that, sometimes, when we look too narrowly at NATO itself, at the military arm, we undervalue as something that has created the kinds of commonalities that can play out in the theater of operations. These things matter.

And that is, I think, what I would also say to America: don't forget how important Europe is to you as a provider of political stability, of cooperation and development, as a provider of economic prosperity. And that is something that is worth protecting and continuing to engage with.

The key element, though, I think, is trust between our leaders. That is where the rubber hits the road. Without trust between our leaders there can be no kind of decision making at the depth, relevance, and speed that John was describing as crucial to NATO's future. And without that we're looking at a dark prospect.

O'HANLON: You both have been so eloquent, and we're near the end of our of our almost hour together I hesitate to open up a debate, so I'm not going to frame my one point of modest disagreement with you two in terms of a stark difference of opinion, but I'll try to round it out in a more sort of conciliatory way, and then give you each the chance to respond before we say goodbye.

I've written against the idea of further NATO enlargement or expansion, but with a lot of provisos. And I would only commit to this as an alliance if we could persuade the Central and Eastern European neutral states, and then Russia itself, to go along with the other stipulations. And I begin with the basic thought that, you know, I like to say Thucydides, if he were around today, the great scholar of antiquities, he might not have liked Vladimir Putin any more than the rest of us, but he would have understood him. Because Thucydides said people go to war for one of three reasons: out of interest, out of fear, or out of pride. And I think Russia and Putin in particular are all about wounded pride. And I think the NATO expansion process into former Soviet space specifically can really

intensify and exacerbate that. It doesn't justify Russia's views, it doesn't make us morally wrong for what we've done with expansion. But, it makes me think that we may have reached the point of diminishing returns. And the only way I would however consider trying to pursue that kind of an understanding with Russia would be in an overall package deal, a new security architecture where Russia acknowledges we don't have any right to keep Ukraine and Georgia out of any other organization. In fact, we don't even have the right to keep them out of NATO. But NATO itself is willing to rethink its own plans. But these countries have the right to be in the EU if they're invited someday. Every other opportunity they may wish because they're sovereign states, they're not in a Russian sphere of influence. This can't be a Yalta II.

I would also say that the territorial disputes in the Donbas in northern Georgia would have to be solved to mutual satisfaction. And, I would also say security cooperation of the type that exists today and that you, John Allen, commanded over when Georgian forces, I believe, were part of your overall contingent in Afghanistan, that would have to be allowed and continue. We're not trying to isolate these countries into some geostrategic nether land where they are just frozen out of any kind of interaction. That overall architecture, however, I do think would be preferable to our current path where we have essentially said someday Ukraine and Georgia might join but there's no interim security guarantee. There's no timetable, and, therefore, I worry that we by hewing to this principle of an open door potentially make things worse rather than better.

So, that's the only point of disagreement I would have, and anything that you've said and I, again, I feel bad about bringing in it the end, but that's Brookings, right? Right, President Allen? That's the way we talk with each other here? And so, let me now having deviated from my moderator role, give you each the last word.

STELZENMÜLLER: I think you're entirely right on that. Why don't I go first. That gives John the last word.

O'HANLON: Perfect.

STELZENMÜLLER: Now I'm going to both disagree and agree with you, but not make it too long. Very briefly, I think that to me what is paramount is the desires of the countries wishing to join. And it's just a fact that all these countries that are now member members of NATO that were members of the Warsaw Pact or even Soviet republics like the Balts, not just wanted out but wanted in to NATO and, in fact, also wanted into the EU. And that I think that we under the circumstances had a moral responsibility to let them in.

As I was saying earlier. I think, you have to balance out at some point Europe's—the EU's and NATO's—alliances' absorption capability with the need for these countries to transform at a speed that doesn't break them. And that is something where I think we may have reached a very, very difficult balancing act where we need to be careful. Now, where, I think I agree with you is that I would always want to treat the Eurasian continent as a single strategic space. And I'm going to say, perhaps provocatively, that I think that Europe won't be safe until Russia has transformed, until Russia is a different kind of country. And being a liberal optimist myself, I would want to practice policies and practice a kind of diplomacy that keeps holding out that hope and that option to Russia, without sacrificing to this particular Kremlin run by this particular president the Liberty and the freedoms of nations in between. And I'll leave it at that.

ALLEN: I don't know if I could improve on that at all. And I don't know whether, as Constanze said, whether this Kremlin would be would act and behave in any way different if the NATO frontier ended at Poland or ended at the Ukraine border—ended at the western border of Poland or into the Ukrainian border. I simply believe that NATO will always be, the Western alliance of democracies will always be, anathema to the current occupants of the Kremlin. And technology has given them the capacity to both threaten our democracies and to threaten our security in ways we've never seen before, which makes, I think, once again NATO so much more relevant today in many respects than in just the

previous generation.

So I think NATO continues to be enormously relevant. And when I visit countries in Central Europe, and I talk to the young leaders in those countries who grew up in a very different environment and now see that their future could be tied clearly to NATO and clearly tied to the EU and clearly tied to a relationship with the United States, there is just no value judgment made in their minds. There is nothing that is attractive to them in many respects that comes from the East. And so much of their future they believe is tied irrevocably to the West. In broad terms, to the EU, to the security that the NATO alliance provides, either as a member of NATO or near the frontier of NATO. And then, I think, in many respects, until just recently they believed that they could find common purpose with the United States in so many areas and in particular human rights and the rule of law. And, I think, many of our partners, our youngest democratic partners, are very confused about the example that we're setting.

So I think right now is an extraordinarily important moment. I absolutely agree with Constanze that we should hold out the hope that nations in Europe who are able to adhere to the standards of NATO should always have the hope that there is a future where they are a part of NATO. But I fully understand, Mike, your view that the rapid expansion to the East has in fact created a sense of instability or insecurity in the Kremlin that has in fact generated the reactions that we have seen. No one's fault. We have no reason to apologize. But I also think that we have to the reality of where we are today, and where I think NATO will go in the future, has to take into account that we have a moral obligation to be prepared to induct those young states that are willing to, against great pressure from Russia, adopt a credible, liberal democracy that rests on a constitution, that reflects the dedication to the rule of law, and a commitment to human rights. And if they achieve that we should be prepared to take them in. And Russia should be prepared to accept that we're going to do that.

O'HANLON: Well, thank you both. It's really been a privilege, and let's wish happy birthday to NATO. Like you say John, inspirationally, 70 more years to come. I think we all agree on that.

ALLEN: Thank you Mike. Well done.

STELZENMÜLLER: Thank you Mike, thanks John.

(MUSIC)

DEWS: Samantha Gross, fellow in the Foreign Policy Program's Energy Security and Climate Initiative, and Suzanne Maloney, deputy director of Foreign Policy and senior fellow in the Center for Middle East Policy discuss top geopolitical issues, including Russia's role in Syria, the broader Middle East, and how Iran might use oil prices to respond to continued pressure from the Trump Administration. Gross and Maloney had this conversation while they were at CERA Week in Houston, Texas.

GROSS: Hi, I'm Samantha Gross, I'm a fellow in the Foreign Policy Program at the Brookings Institution, and I am here with—

MALONEY: I'm Suzanne Maloney, I am a senior fellow in the Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, here at CERA week, with Samantha Gross, who coordinates and manages all of our work around energy and climate.

GROSS: And Suzanne was just on a terrific panel talking about today's most important geopolitical issues. So, Suzanne, during the panel I heard a lot of emphasis on Russia's role in the world, and particularly their changing role in the Middle East. How has Russia's role in the Middle East changed in the past few years?

MALONEY: I think it was a really interesting way to start off a discussion about the regional geopolitics. You know, if you thought back 10 or 20 years ago, you wouldn't have considered Russia to have been a significant player in the dynamics of the Middle East, whether it was the first Gulf War or 9/11 and the response to it, Washington has been the dominant actor in terms of shaping Middle East politics, Middle East security, and

everything else that goes along with it including the nature of economic relationships.

But what we've seen since the Russian intervention in Syria, which was a risky move and one which many in Washington presumed would end in disaster, is that Putin has very cleverly taken advantage of an opportunity that was presented by the instability in Syria to position himself as the one interlocutor who is absolutely vital for all of the players in that conflict and more broadly for all the powers aspiring and jockeying for influence across the Middle East.

This doesn't mean that the Russians control the region or that they have even fully overshadowed Washington, but they have relationships—constructive relationships—with every player of any significance, whether it's the Israelis, the Iranians, the Saudis, and the Turks. And that makes them, I think, a very different sort of an actor and creates different concerns and constraints for U.S. policy in the region.

GROSS: One of the more interesting things I heard as the panel was going on is that the major powers in Syria today are really Russia and Iran. How is that likely to play out as the war in Syria winds down? Can they agree on the future of Syria?

MALONEY: It's an interesting question. The bigger question is how, and when, and in what shape will the war in Syria wind down, because I think what we're seeing is the end of one phase, but probably the beginning of another. And, of course this has been a conflict that has had multiple phases, beginning with a civil war and then morphing into a trans-regional war, involving outside players that took a big stake in the outcome. That phase of the war is now ending and we're moving into a period in which there is likely to be continued conflict in Syria, both because of the ultimate instability of sustaining a dictator who effectively held on to his position by committing horrific atrocities against his own population, but also because of the presence and opportunities in Syria for other actors, whether it's the Islamic State or the various offshoots of al Qaida, that have made inroads among some segments of the opposition to Bashar Assad.

And so, there is going to be, I think, continued instability, there is going to be continued intervention by players like Iran, Russia, but also an increasing role for state-to-state relationships between Bashar Assad and some of the Arab players that have, to date, sought to remove him from power. We have seen already at least some evidence that the Emirates are looking to reestablish both a diplomatic and an economic relationship with Bashar Assad. And we're going, I think, to have a prolonged period of uncertainty and jockeying for influence in post-conflict Syria.

GROSS: That's a big policy shift. Speaking of another policy shift I know you know a lot about: Here in the United States we've seen just a complete 180 on Iran policy with the Trump administration over the last couple of years. What is the administration's policy goals in Iran, and will this policy help them achieve their goals?

MALONEY: There is a lot of uncertainty about what the administration is trying to accomplish in Iran. The president has said that he is after a bigger, better deal in Iran. And even from his time on the campaign trail when he criticized the Iran nuclear deal it was always with an eye to his own negotiating prowess, his conviction that in fact because of his own experience as a "master" of the "art of the deal" that he could have done much better than what the Obama administration managed to do in terms of wresting concessions from the Iranians in those negotiations.

Those ambitions do not appear to coincide precisely with some of what his senior national security bureaucracy has articulated, particularly National Security Adviser John Bolton and of course Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. Both Pompeo and Bolton are longstanding on the record in support of regime change, and it appears that that ambition overlaps with the president's goal in the sense of applying pressure. Both parties, whether you are looking for regime change, or whether you are looking for a bigger and better deal, see an incentive to ratchet up pressure on Iran in hopes of getting what they want from it.

I think under the current circumstances it leaves Iran with very little exit strategy

other than to simply try to endure the pressure and hope for some sort of change from Washington. If and when that fails, or if the pressure becomes too significant for the regime to continue to endure, then I think they are likely to find some other way of changing the narrative, and the most obvious one is one that is of course key to the people who are here the conference of CERA Week, and that's around oil prices.

For the Iranians, if in fact they believe that they cannot continue to manage under this level of pressure, taking some action that would disrupt energy supplies from the Middle East in particular would be enormously advantageous for them in terms of helping their own bottom line by raising the price for whatever quantities of oil they are able to continue to export, and hurting the domestic political prospects of President Trump who is keenly, acutely aware of oil price, and prices at the pump in advance of a reelection campaign.

GROSS: Given their strategic position at the Strait of Hormuz that's a little bit scary.

MALONEY: I think we're in for a pretty rough ride over the course of the next two years, and it is a direct consequence of the actions that the administration has taken.

GROSS: As the president likes to say, we'll see. Thank you, Suzanne, thanks for joining me for this podcast.

(MUSIC)

DEWS: The Brookings Cafeteria Podcast is the product of an amazing team of colleagues, including audio engineer and producer Gaston Reboredo with assistance from Mark Hoelscher. The producers are Chris McKenna and Brennan Hoban. Bill Finan, director of the Brookings Institution Press, does the book interviews. And Eric Abalahin provides design and web support. Our intern this semester is Quinn Lukas. Finally, my thanks to Camilo Ramirez and Emily Horne for their guidance and support.

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Until next time, I'm Fred Dews.