THE CURRENT: How far will Putin go against Ukraine?
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PITA: You're listening to The Current. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita.

On Monday night, Russia's President Vladimir Putin ordered troops into separatist-held regions of Eastern Ukraine further pushing the region closer to war. In this special episode of The Current, Brookings Vice President for Foreign Policy Suzanne Maloney leads a conversation with Brookings Fellows Steve Pifer, Angela Stent, and Constanze Stelzenmüller in an in-depth dive into the security crisis, including what Russia's next moves may be and how U.S. and European allies can and should respond. This discussion was originally held live on Twitter Spaces. Now, over to Suzanne.

MALONEY: Thanks so much, and good afternoon to all of you who are joining us from a sunny day here in Washington. Good evening to those of you in Europe and beyond. Good morning to those who may be in other parts of the world. It is truly a pleasure to join you all here today for this virtual discussion of Europe's worst security crisis in decades. We will try to cover the waterfront, including some of the factors that have triggered the crisis, the current state of affairs, the strategic options for the United States and our allies in Europe, and the broader ramifications for great power competition and America's position in Europe.

Please feel free to tweet questions at me or at our institutional account, @BrookingsInst, and we will try to put them to our speakers. But let me first introduce our incredibly distinguished panel that we have here joining us on Twitter Spaces for this conversation on the crisis in Ukraine.

I'll start with my colleague, Steve Pifer, who is a nonresident senior fellow here at Brookings and also the William J. Perry fellow at the Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University. He's the author of " The Eagle and the Trident: U.S.-Ukraine Relations in Turbulent Times," among other publications. He's a retired foreign service officer with more than 25 years at the State Department focused on U.S. relations with the former Soviet Union and Europe. Among other senior positions, he served as ambassador to Ukraine from 1998-2000 and senior positions at the State Department and at the National Security Council, as well as in embassies in Warsaw, Moscow, London and elsewhere. We are really thrilled to have Steve with us here today.

We are also joined by Angela Stent, who is a senior adviser to the Center for Eurasian, Russian, and East European Studies and professor emerita of Government and Foreign Service at Georgetown University. She happens to also be a nonresident senior fellow with us at Brookings, and she co-chairs are Hewett Forum on post-Soviet Affairs. She served as national intelligence officer for Russia and Eurasia at the National Intelligence Council from 2004-2006, as well as previously in the Office of Policy Planning at the State Department. She has many, many publications, but her latest book, "Putin's World: Russia Against the West and With the Rest," was awarded a prize in 2019 and obviously speaks very importantly to this moment.

Finally, we are joined by Constanze Stelzenmüller, who is the inaugural holder of the Fritz Stern Chair on Germany and trans-Atlantic Relations in the Center on the United States and Europe at Brookings. She previously held the Kissinger Chair on Foreign Policy and International Relations at the Library of Congress and served as Brookings inaugural Robert Bosch Senior Fellow from 2014-2019. She's been a trans-Atlantic fellow at the German Marshall Fund and former director of GMF's Berlin office. And she was from 1994-2005 editor for the political section of the German weekly DIE ZEIT. Constanze has published many, many essays and articles in both German and English, and her regular column in the Financial Times is considered a must-read by all who are concerned with European security issues. So, we are thrilled to have this terrific panel here today.

Let me first turn to Ambassador Pifer. Steve, we were talking before we jumped on live about the televised address by Vladimir Putin today in which, among other things, he declared that Ukraine was created by Lenin—he is its author and creator—and made a number of other arguments that most will see as a pretext for the war that he may be about to launch. Can you give us a sense of what this address meant and where you see the latest state of play on Ukraine?

PIFER: Thanks, Suzanne, and thanks for organizing this. We have seen over the past three months this crisis between Russia and Ukraine and NATO. I mean, the Russians have tried to frame it as a crisis between Russia and NATO over NATO enlargement, but it really has been about Ukraine and that became clear today. But at every stage of the crisis when there's been a chance to take a diplomatic off-ramp, as Washington refers, or to escalate, it looks like Mr. Putin has chosen to escalate. And that's what we saw today.

There was a very much staged meeting of the Russian Security Council and that led to a decision announced by Mr. Putin that Russia will recognize these independent states. The two breakaway statements, the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republic. That puts an end to Russia's participation in the Minsk process which was trying to resolve this. But he then went on to give a speech probably at about 11:00 at night in Moscow to the Russian people where he laid out the rationale for this, but he went much beyond that. He basically, I think, laid out the rationale for a broader Russian war against Ukraine. And I fear that there may be fairly quickly beginning major Russian military operations against Ukraine.

MALONEY: Well, that's an ominous beginning to the conversation, but clearly very much reflects the situation that we're in. Angela, if I could turn to you, can you give us a sense of what is driving Vladimir Putin? This war that he appears determined to pursue is going to come at a significant cost to his own economy if the sanctions that the United States and its European partners have threatened actually come to pass. And it could come at a significant cost in terms of blood and treasure. So, what is it that is so significant for Vladimir Putin that he's willing to take these risks?

STENT: What's driving Vladimir Putin is the conviction that this is his moment to act. He looks at what he sees as a weak and divided West and he is determined to restore Russia to its rightful role on the European continent, which means that it should have a sphere of influence in the post-Soviet countries. But even beyond that, a veto power really over the alliance preferences of these eastern members of NATO. He wants Russia to be recognized as an equal to the United States as a great power player. And for that, he needs this territory and influence. And Ukraine is the first step in restoring this legacy. I think he really does believe that he has a historic mission to gather in the lands as czars did in the past when Russia lost territory and then reincorporated it. But I would say that Ukraine is the first step, but it's only the first step of a broader set of goals that he has as he looks beyond this year, when he turns 70, to his legacy.

MALONEY: Angela, let me just keep you on the line here for another moment. Can you give us a sense of what the subsequent steps might be? Because it's it's even more ominous as we sit in this moment to hear that this is really just the beginning of a broader plan that Putin may be trying to implement.

STENT: Well, I think the next step—and we already heard that from Steve Pifer—I mean, first of all, if they recognize these two entities as independent republics, and then the independent republics claim that there's quote-unquote genocide being carried out

against them by Ukrainians, they can certainly march back into those republics. They can move further in Ukraine. Even if they don't have a full scale invasion, they can destabilize Ukraine. They can use cyber and other methods to weaken the country. What they want to do is to take control of the Ukrainian government or install a government in Ukraine that's pro-Russian.

They wildly do not understand what's going on in Ukraine, by the way. Public opinion polls now reveal that all of Ukraine, including the East, they support Ukraine and NATO; they don't want to be part of Russia. So Ukraine would be the first and potentially very bloody part of this, but I think Putin would probably set his sights further. He would look at the Baltic states. I mean, he's trying to weaken NATO's resolve. I think that's going to be much more difficult. But I don't think it necessarily stops with Ukraine even though that itself will be a calamity.

MALONEY: Absolutely. Constanze, you are speaking to us from Munich where it is indeed the evening—late in the evening there—where a few days ago you interviewed the German Foreign Minister, Annalena Baerbock. And you have obviously been part of a number of other conversations in which the threat from Russia looms very large. Can you give us a sense of what the broader community of policymakers and experts on the United States, Europe, the transatlantic relationship are thinking right now with this threat of an invasion of Ukraine sort of hanging over our heads?

STELZENMÜLLER: Sure. Hi, everyone. Yes, indeed, speaking to you from Munich where I have been for the past week with a brief trip to Berlin yesterday to be in a national chat show. Those of you who have been to Munich know what it's like. Those of you who don't know it, it has been joked that it's like Davos with guns. Obviously, people don't walk around there with guns, except possibly the close protection of extremely senior officials. But I have been going since my journalist days, so I'm sad to say over 20 years. And at times it could be like a sort of ten ring circus of Western elites sort of trying to outperform each other and occasionally, if you will, lacking in a little bit of seriousness. In recent years, that mixture of cruelty and pompousness that you could occasionally see gave way to a degree of dismay at the downturn in geopolitics at the increasing apparently weakening of the West. The increasing confidence of authoritarians.

Then, of course, the last Munich Security Conference two years ago was just before the pandemic, and then everything stopped; ground to a halt. So, this was the first one since then, and I have to say I was both impressed and relieved, but also dismayed at the sense of grim resolve that I encountered everywhere. There are a lot of very high-level speakers. Vice President Harris cam. Ursula von der Leyen came, the European Commission president. European leaders, the chancellor himself, the German foreign minister, whom I had to engage in a conversation. And Vladimir Zelensky came from Ukraine at probably no inconsiderable risk to himself. The conference organizers also tried to get a Russian participant, begged the Kremlin to send one, but were refused. So this was essentially a conversation of the rest. That is to say, it was not just Westerners,

but also participants from India, from Asia, from Latin America, from Africa, really all over the world except for Russia, which made the admission all the more notable.

MALONEY: Steve, Constanze has talked about the degree of unity that there appears to be at least at a very high level on this issue from American and European leaders. Was this something that Vladimir Putin would have expected? Do you think the response that he's gotten—the very aggressive effort to try to head off an invasion through diplomacy but also through warning of threats of sanctions as well as release of very carefully curated intelligence information to demonstrate exactly what the Russians are up to—will any of this have had any impact on Putin's motivations or his game plan?

PIFER: Well, my guess is that Mr. Putin and the Kremlin were surprised by both the aggressive and I think appropriate declassification of information by the U.S. government and by other governments to make very clear and shine a spotlight on the Russian military buildup around Ukraine and in Ukrainian in occupied Crimea. But also, to put out there the notion that the Russians would look to create pretexts for use of military force against Ukraine. You have seen those really play out. I mean, just today the Russians claimed that they had attacked and destroyed two Ukrainian armored personnel carriers with I think about five soldiers who had crossed not into the breakaway part of Donbas but had crossed into Russia proper. They just played out a number of pretexts as if to suggest that now, when there are between 150,000-200,000 Russian troops mobilized around Ukraine, that Ukraine is now going to choose the time to pick a fight.

So I think they have been taken aback by that, and I think the Kremlin has also been surprised by the relative degree of unity between the United States and Europe. You have not only the United States sending additional forces to bolster NATO's eastern flank, but Germany, France, Britain, the Netherlands are all doing that as well. And you have, I think, a fairly strong agreement between the United States and the European Union on sanctions. My expectation, at least my hope, is that either today or tomorrow you begin to see some of those sanctions begin to be rolled out because what the Russians have done really has not helped resolve this crisis but has simply deepened it.

MALONEY: Constanze, let me turn back to you once again and get your sense of the European diplomacy. Obviously, there's been sort of a frenzy of shuttle missions both to Washington by the German chancellor but also to Moscow—as well as efforts to show solidarity by visits to Ukraine. Do you have a sense that there is a clear and unified position in Europe? Are there concerns that if Russia moves in, you know, a less than a wholly comprehensive invasion that there will be some daylight between either the Americans or some of the European parties themselves on exactly how to respond?

STELZENMÜLLER: Okay. Those are great questions, and I think to any casual observer, or even the professional observer like me, I think it is completely legitimate to feel confused given the flurry of multilateral and bilateral visits, trips, and initiatives of the past weeks and indeed this past week where you had just in one week President Macron going to the Kremlin and then followed on Wednesday by German Chancellor

Schulz. In fact, this week, reports of the French making news offerings of a new European security order to the Kremlin and talk of a Biden-Putin summit. So, you would be justified in being confused about what is an offer on the table and by whom.

I think it is at this point safe to set that aside for the simple reason that on most of those trips you could see the French president or the German chancellor standing next to the Russian president in the Kremlin and the French president and the German chancellor clearly believing, and the Russian president somewhat egging them on, that a chink of light for diplomatic negotiations had just opened. Then the following day, the Kremlin, in the form of the Kremlin Speaker Dmitry Peskov, would say "none of that, really, there was really nothing to talk about.".

And arguably, today's events have also put an end to Western offers of compromise or negotiations on issues such as arms control, transparency, confidence-building measures. All of those have at varying times been put before the Kremlin and have been rejected whereas the Kremlin has made ultimatums asking for concessions on principles such as the right to seek alliances freely that were nonstarters for every single western-allied country.

Where does this go from here? What I like to call the machine rooms of policy implementers, in other words the people in the security-related ministries who have been hammering out not just the diplomatic proposals but sanctions packages, which is has been a really difficult job because this entails a lot of really difficult technical questions. And remember that next to financial sanctions, we also have very tough export control measures planned, which could also prove crippling for the Russian economy if it applied. I think what we have is a broad based general agreement on what could come into this package, or what belongs into this package, and there is also a general agreement to not just start slowly and incrementally but to go in high and stay high to quote American senior officials.

That said, that language is a little bit deceptive, allow me to speak as an international lawyer here. In international law, which still applies to us even if it doesn't apparently apply to Russia, or the Kremlin doesn't think it applies, there is still a principle of proportionality. So there is a real question as to what triggers sanctions and to what degree. In other words, the sanctions, the intensity of the sanctions, the cost imposed on the offending party, has to match the size of the offense. And while in principle it is possible that there might be disagreements about that, I think those, in fact, would be entirely legitimate. And we have seen some of those being hashed out in public. I think the outrage at what the Kremlin has been doing this past week and is doing today, from what I have seen in Munich, is going to be so genuine that we will work extremely hard to overcome whatever differences there might be.

That said, the longer this takes, the more Putin teases this out and turns it into, as one of my German think tank friends said, rather than a sort of TV drama into a Netflix series of ups and downs and orchestrated surprises, the more difficult it will be for us, I think, over time to maintain a coherent sanctions consensus.

MALONEY: Thanks, Constanze. Angela, let me bring you back into the conversation. We have heard about the potential for very severe financial sanctions and some export controls that would block Russia's access to key technology. Even before the latest events, it was clear that this was having an economic impact on Russia. The stock market in Moscow has been falling over the course of the past few days. Clearly, there is a significant price that Putin may pay for this, and it will have an impact on his own home front. Are those concerns not outweighed by the desire for Putin to regain the sphere of influence—to resume Russia's role as a great power player? How does he balance those considerations in his own calculus?

STENT: So, I think if you look at Putin and the people to whom he is talking about what he is doing, it's a group of about three or four men. They are nearly all from the intelligence services, and they really are not that concerned about the economic consequences of what might happen. First of all, most of those people have already been personally sanctioned since the annexation of Crimea. They are much more bent on restoring Russia's glory. And I think we have to be careful about exaggerating the impact of these sanctions on Russia.

First of all, yes, if the two or three major banks are sanctioned, that is, you know, could be very harmful. But then those sanctions are going to equally hit countries that do business with Russia and companies, including in the United States but much more importantly in Europe, where these sanctions are going to hit the Europeans more than the United States.

And Constanze is right. There is this issue of proportionality. So I would just add, if we're not in a full scale war, i.e. if Kiev isn't now under threat of being taken but if it's just—just quote-unquote—the recognition of these two entities and maybe some more Russian military going into those territories, I very much doubt that you are going to get these full-fledged sanctions. Yes, the export controls would hurt the Russian economy. You know, not exporting semiconductors. I think the energy sector sanctions are off the table. At least that's my understanding from a few days ago. So this will have an economic impact on Russia, but really not, I don't think, affecting the decisions and the frame of mind of the people who are making these decisions.

The Russian economy has come through the COVID pandemic and the effect of sanctions. It's not doing well, but it's not collapsing. Russia has over $600 billion in hard currency reserves. The Russians and the Chinese are trying to figure out ways of avoiding some of these financial sanctions. So yes, it will hurt them, but it's not enough to deter them. That's been quite clear, and they live in a world where this does not matter that much to them.

The people whose voices would be arguing for this just a couple of years ago, someone like Alexei Kudrin, the former finance minister, very well respected in the West, who could publicly argue that it was not in Russia's interest to have such an adversarial relationship with the West because, you know, Russia needed to modernize its

economy, it needed to become a modern country, those voices are not heard publicly anymore. They may be heard privately, but those people are not in Putin's inner circle anymore.

STELZENMÜLLER: Suzanne, may I come in on this?

MALONEY: Of course, please.

STELZENMÜLLER: I have a couple of points here. I mean, everything that Angela just said is right. But I want to sort of maybe add some shading here. For one, I think the point of sanctions is not just quantifiable economic damage. Sanctions are also there from political signaling. And though the sanctions imposed by the West after the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 were painful to Putin, not because of their limited economic impact but because they say they suggested that he had made a mistake by underestimating the cohesion of the West and the outrage at the annexation. They really did change the relationship, and that is specifically true for my country which decided to dial down the relationship from what previously had been called a strategic partnership. That's my first point.

On the economic damage, I would just say that the Russian stock markets went down 14 percent today, says the Financial Times front website. I would also add that as we speak of potential actions by Putin, let's not forget that we are already in a context or have been for the longest time not been in anything that could be called peace. For one, more than 13,000 people, mostly Ukrainians, have been dying in the Donbas since 2014. But also, the array of increasingly combat-ready forces that Putin has brought to three borders of Ukraine, combined with the written ultimatums presented in the form of treaty drafts just before Christmas, and finally, the bellicose rhetoric from the Kremlin. All of this is a combination of military material and bellicose rhetoric. In other words, a form of aggression, threats, and bullying to gain political goals. So let's not forget, you know, this is not a binary. We are already on that sliding slope.

And finally, I would just say the annexation of Crimea was undertaken by Russian special forces, Spetsnaz, who are, I think, truly fearsome and ruthless and I think trained to care about nothing except achieving their mission. The 130,000-plus troops arrayed around Ukraine are another matter. They are composed of some special forces and parachute regiments—the 82nd I believe. But otherwise, they are composed of a conscript army, the National Guard, and reservists. And that's another question entirely.

Apparently, Western intelligence services have already been picking up chatter from the soldiers deployed there who are worried about potential shelling by Ukraine. There had been previous chatter about whether the Ukrainians might have javelins that would be able to take out their tanks. It seems to me that we shouldn't overestimate—I mean, the material surely is much better than what Putin had 10 years ago. But I want to raise a large question mark about the human resources that he has brought to this task and whether those, given that this is a conscript army, that putting the children of Russian families back in Russia at risk in Ukraine might not actually lead to civil society outrage

in Russia that could put Putin and [inaudible] under pressure after all. Sorry, that was a long comment, but I wanted to make sure I address those points.

PIFER: Suzanne, can I jump in also? I would juxtapose against what Constanze just said. I had the chance about three weeks ago to visit Kiev, and the mood there was really one of pretty dark determination. So yes, I believe the Russian military over matches the Ukrainian military for example in areas like air power, but the Ukrainian military is prepared to fight, and also Ukrainian civilians. I think it was the mayor of Kiev yesterday who made the observation that it is now impossible to find any gun in Kiev. All the gun stores have sold them out. I talked to a friend about 10 days ago in Kiev, and they said that for civilians that wanted to take up small arms training the waiting list was two weeks. So again, I think there are material advantages on the Russian side, but it would be a mistake for the Russians to assume that major military operations against Ukraine would be a cakewalk.

I thought it was interesting Constanze mentioned the point about some nervousness on the part of Russian soldiers. There was an article about two months ago that described how in occupied Donbas, the so-called Donetsk People's Army, apparently they were building these metal gratings above the turret to their tank to protect against javelins. The Ukrainians went out and test fired a javelin against one of their own tanks with one of these gratings on top. The grating barely slowed the missile down. So I think there's a lot of nervousness on the part of Russian ranks. We'll see how that plays out.

STENT: Suzanne, can I also add something to this just to reinforce these points? I think it's quite clear that there would not be popular support in Russia for a large-scale war against Ukraine. President Putin told the Russians in July in his 5,000-word article that Ukrainians and Russians are brothers and sisters, and to now tell all of these conscripts and the other soldiers that they now have to fight and maybe be killed in a war which is essentially fratricidal. Public opinion data, as much as we know about it in Russia, shows no support for a war against Ukraine.

A majority of Russians blame the United States and NATO for this crisis because all those that follow their state-controlled electronic media, but there's no desire to get into a war with Ukraine. And I think that would be, if there were major operations and major casualties, there will be resistance. There will be protests, even though, of course, there has been a greater repression. So that could, in the longer run, represent a real problem for the people in the Kremlin. And I wonder how in tune they are to the public mood.

Also, you see reports now, unofficial ones, of coronavirus spreading amongst these troops in their tents there. Of excessive drinking, things like that. I mean, they have told the soldiers not to use their electronic media to communicate anything, but some of this is coming out. So I think that should be a deterrent to a larger scale invasion, but we don't know whether it will be.

MALONEY: I want to just note that while we've been talking, as I'm sure some of you have seen, including our speakers, the White House has announced that President

Biden will soon issue an executive order prohibiting new trade, investment and financing by Americans to the contested regions of Ukraine. So this is just, I think, the start. They have made very clear that there would be additional measures to follow if in fact we see more kinetic action by the Russians.

I wanted to ask all of you maybe a basic question. Clearly, there's been an enormous amount of diplomacy invested around this issue over the course of the past couple of months. Diplomacy among partners and allies led not just by the United States but also as concerns as made clear by a number of European leaders. And there has been obviously a lot of diplomacy aimed at Russia, both public and private diplomacy. Is there anything that the United States could do either in the lead up to this or even at this point that would reverse Putin's apparent determination to retake part or all of Ukraine?

STELZENMÜLLER: Deep silence.

PIFER: I think the answer is no.

STELZENMÜLLER: Yeah, exactly.

STENT: I agree. I mean, the West has made several offers to President Putin. Lots of things we could negotiate that have to do with Russian security concerns, although they fall short of Putin's maximum demands. But that seems so far to have made no difference. And therefore, one does wonder what the future, you know, are we in fact going to have a summit between the two presidents next week?

PIFER: If I could add, I mean, first of all, on the things that the West have offered in terms of arms control measures, risk reduction, and confidence building measures, they actually had the potential to make a genuine contribution to European security, including the security of Russia. But the Russians have continually downplayed those going back to their demand that NATO renounce any further enlargement.

The second point I would make is that at this point I really do question Russian sincerity in diplomacy. I mean, we saw President Macron went to Moscow last week, met for five hours with Putin, came out and said the Russians have agreed not to escalate. And the next day, the Kremlin spokesperson came out and said we never agreed to that, and then went on to twist the knife and said, and besides, this is just France. You know, France is a member of NATO, but France is hardly the leading member of NATO. That's another country. So how could we possibly do any deals with France?

I really do question whether our Western leaders see much advantage in subjecting themselves to that treatment, and maybe before the possibility of a Biden-Putin summit or summits with other Western leaders. The demand from the West should be you, Putin, need to take real steps to de-escalate this crisis.

MALONEY: I'm curious, Steve, if you were back in the White House, would you put that kind of a condition on any actual summit? Or Angela, from your perspective sitting at the

National Intelligence Council, would you in any way encourage American officials to essentially take some caution in the way they approach Putin to avoid either further humiliation or playing into his hands?

PIFER: I mean, I was in the Foreign Service for 27 years, so I don't want to downplay diplomacy. But at this point in time, I would think that there would have to be some indication to the White House that a meeting with Putin would actually have a chance of yielding something. Right now, again, based on the experience that Macron had, that Schultz had, it doesn't seem like these meetings, I mean, I think they are ego boosters for the Russian president, but they don't seem to be doing anything to turn him from a course which again has been one of continual escalation of the crisis. You know, not taking steps to de-escalate or to take any of the diplomatic off ramps that have been put before him.

MALONEY: Yeah, I mean, since December, we, the United States and Europe, we've essentially responded to an agenda that was set by President Putin. We have had a flurry of diplomacy—obviously U.S.-European diplomacy, but also European-Russian diplomacy, U.S.-Russian diplomacy. We have gone out of our way to respond to some of these concerns. And, as Steve said, we've made offers that really would address some of Russia's security concerns. At this point, I think to have another in-person meeting between President Biden and President Putin without some conditions being laid for the Russians, without them showing some goodwill or sincere interest in discussions by reversing some of the things that they're doing, I think it makes no sense to do that because otherwise we're just playing into the Kremlin's hands and it looks as if they're going to go ahead and do whatever they want to do irrespective of these negotiations.

MALONEY: I would like to widen the aperture just a little bit first beyond Ukraine to the rest of East-Central Europe, and then hopefully, if we have time, a little bit beyond that and talk about the kind of broad strategic questions about what's happening here. First, in terms of the rest of East-Central Europe, obviously there's huge trepidation about what Putin may have in mind beyond Ukraine. There's also, you know, some notice of the fact that now there is a fairly well-established Russian military presence in Belarus and effective control over Belarus. Is Putin accomplishing some of his aims in terms of intimidating the rest of Ukraine's neighbors simply by virtue of this action even if he doesn't go any further than he has today?

MALONEY: Well, you know that in Belarus Putin has all but integrated Belarus into the Russian Federation at this point. He has bullied Lukashenko, whose power is essentially on life support at this point into accepting this. The last straw here, as you say, was the release of the news that the Russian troops that were supposedly there just for exercises are planning to stay. There are already reports, news reports, about depredations by those troops. And in Munich, the opposition leader who last year spoke at Brookings, gave the Breyer lecture, was there and spoke movingly about this. Gave a speech in the in the conference hall. But the truth is that the Belarus opposition has

unfortunately developed diversionary tactics against this—or other escape tactics—and one of them is exile.

There are well-established, well-provided networks of exile and support outside of Belarus for people who are persecuted. Sadly, that has not worked for all of them. There are hundreds of opposition leaders and completely normal people who just went on the road to demonstrate in Belarus in prisons. One of the, I think, the concerns is that if there is a military incursion even just into Donbas—and all of us, I think, have noted that Putin in his speech said that it wasn't just the territory now held by so-called separatists who are, of course, proxies of the Russians and supported with Russian forces. Those those territories that extend until into the contact line, which is about half of the entire region of Donbas, Putin today claimed that they should take the entirety of the Donbas region.

So we unfortunately must expect major refugee outflows. Real refugee outflows this time, not the fake ones orchestrated of the past days to create a pretext by the by the separatists. And if this continues, if there if there are further incursions, particularly in the direction of Kiev from Belarus which is not very far from Kiev, then I think we can also expect not just internally displaced person movements but also refugee outflows to neighboring EU-NATO member states like Poland and the Baltics.

PIFER: Let me add: I think given the Russian military presence in Belarus and the growing closeness between Minsk and Moscow because of Mr Lukashenko's absolute dependance now on the Russians, I think it is time also for NATO to begin to revisit some of the commitments it made back in 1997. So, for example, in 1997, it said there would be no permanent station of substantial combat forces on the territory of new NATO members, and the deployments that have taken place since 2014 have all been rotational deployments. But I wonder if it's time now for NATO to begin thinking that perhaps it is time for permanent deployments and probably somewhat larger than have been deployed since 2014 in the Baltic states and in Poland. Because there needs to be a very clear message to the Russians that while NATO has said it will not fight for Ukraine, Ukraine is not a member of the alliance and is not protected by Article 5, there needs to be a very clear signal that Nieto will fight to defend NATO members.

STENT: We had the rather chilling statement by the Russian foreign minister a few weeks ago saying that when the Warsaw Pact broke up, Central and Eastern Europe were quote-unquote orphaned from Mother Russia. A wonderful metaphor here.

Then you have, again, the demand in the treaty to NATO that it has to withdraw to its military posture of I believe it's May 1997. So the question is, what are Russia's real goals beyond Ukraine back into its former Warsaw Pact allies or to the Baltic states? We don't know, but we do know that if there were to be a major war breaking out, if they were to be an attack on Kiev, nobody knows what would follow from that. But a country like Poland could be directly threatened, whether it's by cyber or some other incident. Then NATO would have to revisit the question of what Article 5 means, because if Poland were really threatened there would maybe have to be a response. So it's not

only what Russian designs are beyond Ukraine, but it's the impact of a major war on these eastern members of NATO.

STELZENMÜLLER: Absolutely. Let me illustrate that with an example. Imagine there is a back and forth of Ukrainian and Russian forces on Ukrainian territory. Imagine then that Ukrainian forces try to seek an escape hatch into a NATO member state, and that NATO member states let those forces in and decides to shoot back at the Russians. It's not impossible.

So the notion that because Ukraine is not a member of NATO's Article 5 does not apply, and that therefore the risk of a violent conflict in Ukraine is somehow containable and that NATO can be firewalled against it, is entirely academic. There are many different ways in which this could become a regional issue. Another development that we saw in the Yugoslav wars was massive depredations against a civilian population or of simply the acceptance of massive so-called collateral damage—a term which I have always found obscene—but essentially it means huge damage to civilian property and civilian lives.

We would then see Western debates about getting humanitarian aid into the scene and conflict. The International Red Cross and the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees would be demanding a cease fire, would be demanding perhaps military protection for humanitarian aid at the scene of conflict. Anyway, there are many, many ways in which this kind of thing could become extremely complicated and implicate NATO directly.

MALONEY: Well, and it seems as though Putin was explicitly signaling this when he talked in his speech today about the fact that it was madness that any of the former Soviet republics had been permitted to depart the union. This message has to be heard loud and clear in the Baltic states and the rest of the region.

STELZENMÜLLER: Absolutely. By the way, I would like to add something to what Steve said earlier. The matter of permanent basing in the nations of NATO's eastern flank is one thing. I think that we would also see the NATO response force and the VJTF be activated. We would see NATO forces generally being put on high alert. Those aren't things that won't happen just because Ukraine isn't a member state. Sorry, that was a triple negative, I think. What I'm saying is it's very likely that they will happen. And that will hopefully signal to Putin, but whether that has any deterrent effect to him is something of this point that it is very hard to establish.

PIFER: Let me add that those steps. I mean, the activation of the NATO response force would be a very good signal. The steps that have been taken over the last three weeks to bolster NATO's force presence in the eastern flank have all been bilateral steps. But if NATO now reaches a consensus to activate the response force, I think that would send a very useful political signal. Whether it turns Putin from his course or not I don't know, but it would be a much stronger signal if it showed that all 30 members supported it.

MALONEY: We have about 10 minutes left in our discussion today, and before we close I do want to hear from each one of you about how you think this ends and what else you think the Biden administration and, Constanze, those countries that you know so well, might do to try to avoid the worst possible outcome here, if anything. But before we go to that kind of final set of remarks, I wanted to ask each of you your sense about the timing of this, which of course follows on the Olympics in Beijing and a meeting between Putin and Xi Jinping in which some observers began to talk about the emergence of a new axis of autocracy between these two countries. We have since heard from Beijing at least some notional support for Ukrainian sovereignty and perhaps dampening the support that President Putin might have received while he was in Beijing. But is there a real concern about a broader alignment between Russian and Chinese interests and aims that would result potentially in some sort of Chinese support for this attempt to take Ukraine?

STENT: Well, the axis of autocracies has been going for some time. I mean, you have to go back to 2014 when China did support Russia after the annexation of Crimea, even though China has not recognized its incorporation into Russia. But the Chinese provided economic support. They signed the major gas deal. So this relationship has been growing stronger, and it made it impossible in 2014 for the West to isolate Russia, which is what the goal was, because China was there and China essentially was, you know, it was bolstering Russia.

I think what you saw clearly in the summit in Beijing was this, you know, 18 page document where the Chinese supported the Russian claims about their security interests, that NATO shouldn't enlarge anymore, that it should withdraw to its 1997 posture. That was in the document, but of course the word Ukraine wasn't mentioned. I found it very instructive that the Chinese foreign minister in Munich specifically mentioned Ukraine and that it has a right to territorial integrity and sovereignty.

You know, Ukraine is part of the Belt and Road project. China and Ukraine have, you know, good economic ties and perfectly fine political ties. And China doesn't really want to be associated with, you know, a major war breaking out in in Europe, the first since 1945. So the Chinese, if the Russians go ahead with a major invasion, the Chinese aren't going to disown them. Obviously, those two countries have a lot in common, and they do see the tide turning, that the West is flailing, and they want to make the world safer for authoritarian rule. But they will also, my prediction is if there aren't major sanctions, they will probably not defy them as they didn't after 2014, because their economic interests with the United States and with the West in general are greater than their economic stake in relations with Russia.

So yes, they are supporting Russia. They won't abandon Russia. But I think that if there is a major war, this could cause some tensions in a relationship which on the one hand is strengthening, but where Russia knows that it's the junior partner. And there are some tensions that too.

STELZENMÜLLER: Suzanne, if I could come in there. I want to foot-stomp what Angela has just said. All that's true. And indeed, I thought that the Chinese foreign minister, not that he is particularly relevant it has to be said. He's as irrelevant as Sergei Lavrov is in the Kremlin. I think both of them take their talking points from a higher power, as it were. But he was being notably circumspect about Ukraine, and it was clear that he was uncomfortable with this. And I think the larger point here is the following, that Europe plays a role in Russia's designs as well as in China, but it plays a different role.

Russia doesn't want an inclusive European security order that includes Russia. Russia wants a disorder that it can exploit. Russia has no interest whatsoever. In fact, the European Union and the single market and the democratic transformations that it has helped bolster have always been a threat to Russia. Let's not forget that the annexation of Crimea and the [...] came after a the a very a DCFTA, which is a close economic association agreement, being proposed to Ukraine. The real danger from Europe to the Kremlin, of course, is not NATO's encircling Russia. It is the soft power of magnetism of Europe.

Now for China, China couldn't care less, I think, about NATO. But it is quite interested in the survival of the EU, because in China's sort of world encompassing grand infrastructure designs that are supposed to obviously help further its political outreach and dominance strategy, the European single market and the cohesive infrastructure of transport both physical and digital that it provides are absolutely essential to the Chinese project, which is why the Chinese foreign minister at the end of his speech in Munich called on the European Union to disassociate it from this mess with Russia and to make sure that it was on the right side of China.

MALONEY: Angela or Steve, did you want to say a word about the Putin-Xi relationship? If so, why don't we wrap those into some final comments from each of you. And perhaps we can just go in the same order in which we began with Steve, then Angela, and then a final word from Constanze on any points we haven't gotten to. Obviously, we have a much longer list of questions than we have been able to answer here today, but also your sense of what comes next and how this ends. Over to you, Steve.

PIFER: Okay, well, I usually try to be optimistic, but it's hard to be optimistic today. The Russian military, by some accounts, has something like 65 to 70 percent of its ground force power now deployed in or around Ukraine. And the speech that Mr. Putin gave just an hour and a half ago was not designed just to justify and provide to the Russian people the rationale for recognizing the Donetsk People's Republic, the so-called People's Republic, and the so-called Luhansk People's Republic. It was designed to lay out a rationale for a broader invasion of Ukraine. And the White House has since December laid out what that response would be—major and painful sanctions, military assistance to enable the Ukrainians to better able to defend themselves. And I think at this point, it should also be including the types of assistance that you would want to provide a country that might be engaged in substantial guerrilla operations and also

steps to bolster NATO's military presence. There may well be a role for diplomacy, but I think it's going to be some time. And you are going to have to see some readiness on the part of the Kremlin for real diplomacy and not just, I think, the sham diplomacy that the Kremlin has carried out for the past two and a half months.

MALONEY: Thanks, Steve. Angela?

STENT: Okay. So on the Putin-Xi relationship, I mean, I've seen President Putin and President Xi sit on the stage together in St. Petersburg and describe each other as each other's best friends. There's a lot of exaggerated rhetoric whenever they meet. But I think that they, for very pragmatic reasons, they support each other because they do want a world which has moved beyond a global order where the United States and its allies have set the agenda. That neither one will ever criticize the domestic politics of the other one. They don't see their positions threatened by the other. So they have a lot of practical interests and cooperation. That doesn't mean they're not natural allies. It doesn't mean that there are not tensions; there are huge asymmetries. But I think as long as Putin's in the Kremlin, he's calculated that the stronger and stronger relationship with China will help keep him and his associates in power, and will hopefully make the world safe for autocracy.

So it's, you know, it's practical and pragmatic and very instrumental. Although, ultimately, I do believe that the Chinese do not regard the Russians as their equals globally. They look at the United States as the power which is really their equal. But the Russians have apparently accepted this.

I don't have too much to add to what Steve said. Unfortunately, I don't have anything optimistic to say. If there isn't a major war, a major invasion, you can have a continuation of what's going on now sort of indefinitely. You know that there are a military flare ups. You will have the recognition of these two entities as independent republics. The Russians may use this as an excuse to formally send Russian troops in. I mean, Russian troops have been there since 2014. And then continuing pressure on Ukraine.

The goal will be to grind Ukraine down. The economy in Ukraine has suffered obviously, terribly, from the war scare. To grind them down, make it hard for the government to function. And from the Kremlin's point of view, hopefully have a government come to power that's more pro-Russian. But it will also continue to keep the West, the United States and its allies, guessing, off balance. We don't know what Russia's going to do next, even if there aren't 160,000 troops deployed around it. And I think the Kremlin calculation is eventually weakening the kind of western unity that we now see and that I think has surprised Putin. I do not see any good outcomes here. And hopefully Ukraine will be able to withstand all of this, but it's going to be a real challenge.

MALONEY: Thanks, Angela. And over to you, Constanze.

STELZENMÜLLER: So, I mean, it's hard to look for optimism here, but I will say that I was relieved to see the new German government, I think, hitting its stride finally in Munich. I'll make an exception for the defense minister, who I think, I'm going to have to conclude for now, I think it doesn't really like her job and isn't inclined to take it terribly seriously. It's a terrible thing to say, but that is what I have concluded.

But I thought the foreign minister was really quite impressive in the conversation that I had with her, and a terrific speech on the main stage and then a conversation together with Antony Blinken in which they seemed very much in tune with each other. Then the following day, Chancellor Olaf Scholz took the stage and after what I thought would have been a somewhat wooden performance and a very cagey one, with the exception of that famous quip about Putin being a dictator but losing office sometime, in Moscow, I thought gave a much more commanding performance and for one important reason. He finally managed to situate Germany's responses into a coherent, cohesive strategic narrative of what's happening and of the nature of the confrontation between the West, including Germany, and Russia.

I thought, and I've also seen, I have to say, his own party, the Social Democrats, including that TV conversation, the primetime chat show that I participated in together with the general secretary of the SPD who is in his early 40s and 20 years younger than the chancellor, also giving a really quite spirited and tough response to Russian provocations. And that, I have to say, as for the moment, somewhat heartened me.

MALONEY: Well, Constanze, thank you for ending on a modestly optimistic note—or at least for a note of some encouragement at a time where I think we are all deeply unnerved by the words of the Russian president today and by the developments, including the hundreds of thousands of troops amassed on the border of Ukraine.

I really want to thank Steve Pifer, Angela Stent, and Constanze Stelzenmüller for, I think, giving us a Brookings moment as we say around the building. This is the very first official Brookings experiment with Twitter Spaces. I want to thank all of you for listening in and going along on this ride with us. What we heard today from my colleagues is really a phenomenal example of the tremendously important and deeply informed research that scholars at the Brookings Institution, and especially my colleagues in Brookings foreign policy do every day. Policy relevant, in-depth, empirical and thoughtful work on the world's biggest challenges. So thank you, Steve, Angela and Constanze. Thank you all for listening. And we will be back with you. If there is any crisis that justified going a little bit over our appointed time, it would be this one, but we look forward to speaking with you as developments progress over time. Thank you all.