

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
BROOKINGS CAFETERIA PODCAST

BROOKINGS PRESIDENT JOHN R. ALLEN ON RUSSIA, UKRAINE, CHINA, AND
LEADING THE INSTITUTION FORWARD

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

After eight-and-a-half years and more than 430 episodes, I'm closing the doors of the Cafeteria. Over these years, I've had the chance to share with you, the listeners, the best insights on and solutions for the policy challenges of our time from hundreds of Brookings scholars and other experts. And I'm humbled that the show was honored with awards and nominations from the Academy of Podcasters and the Ambies.

But this is not the end of Brookings Podcasts. While the Cafeteria doors are closing, we're still producing other shows and launching new ones on a range of policy topics that will interest you, including Dollar and Sense: The Brookings Trade Podcast; The Current; Foresight Africa; TechTank; and Vying for Talent, a new podcast from Brookings and the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Here's more about that new show.

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RYAN HASS: Hi, I'm Ryan Hass with the Brookings Institution.

JUDE BLANCHETTE: And I'm Jude Blanchette with the Center for Strategic and International Studies. We're the co-hosts of "Vying for Talent," a podcast examining the role that human talent plays in competition between the United States and China.

HASS: Both the United States and China are vying to demonstrate which governance and economic system is best able to deliver results in the 21st century. Much of this competition hinges on economic performance, which is driven by innovation, which is being pushed forward by talented individuals in both countries.

BLANCHETTE: "Vying for Talent," puts faces and stories to the sprawling competition underway between the United States and China. Through this podcast series, we're using stories to shine a light on what more the United States can do to improve its edge for the future.

HASS: "Vying for Talent" is produced by The Brookings Podcast Network and distributed by both Brookings and the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

You can download and listen to it on Apple, Spotify, or wherever you like to get your podcasts.

Learn more at [Brookings dot Edu slash Vying For Talent](https://www.brookings.edu/podcasts/vying-for-talent/).

DEWS: Visit [Brookings dot Edu slash Podcasts](https://www.brookings.edu/podcasts/) to learn more and sign up for the podcast newsletter to get notified about new shows. You can also follow us on Twitter at [Policy Podcasts](https://twitter.com/PolicyPodcasts) for episode highlights.

And now on with the final interview. I'm honored to be joined in the Brookings Studio by John R. Allen, Brookings president since November 2017. President Allen is a retired United States Marine Corps four star general and former commander of the NATO International Security Assistance Force and U.S. forces in Afghanistan. He served in senior diplomatic roles following his retirement from the Marine Corps, including special presidential envoy to the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL. John, welcome back to the Brookings Cafeteria and for the last time.

ALLEN: Well, thank you, Fred. It's great to be with you. And Fred, it would be difficult to overstate just how important this podcast has been, but also how important your role in all of this has been for eight-and-a-half years. But now we go on to other things and podcasting continues at Brookings, and you're your role in that will be essential.

DEWS: Absolutely. Thank you very much for that, John. I appreciate it. So let's start with the biggest foreign policy challenge, the biggest foreign policy crisis we've seen in many years. That's Russia's invasion of Ukraine last month. Recognizing that a lot can happen between now when we're taping this and when this episode airs, what does Vladimir Putin's invasion say about his attitude about Russia's place in the world generally?

ALLEN: It would be difficult, probably, to isolate his views from what has become, I think, a relationship with China, which in just the last few weeks was codified, if you will, with a joint statement on the 4th of February where China and Russia committed themselves to a relationship that knows "no limits" and where nothing is "forbidden." And in that statement, they talk about their own definition of democracy and human rights, their own definition of sovereignty as a state,

and territorial integrity. They talk about an unlimited cooperation in artificial intelligence and data security and internet governance—things that ought to send a cold chill down all of our spines when we hear China and Russia beginning to combine their efforts in the context of the future and the roadmap, if you will, for the 21st-century relationship that they intend to travel.

So in that context, what it says, I think, to Vladimir Putin is that his expectation was that he would have Chinese support in this effort. And I think the jury is still out on what the Chinese knew before the invasion of Ukraine and how the Chinese could potentially be important in this.

Now specifically to Vladimir Putin, his intent has always been to do what he could to restore the greatness, if you will, of the Soviet empire. He's talked about the fact that the collapse of the Soviet Union was one of the great catastrophes of the 20th century. But he follows a long line of Russian leaders, whether they were Soviet leaders or imperial leaders, who have had at the center of their ethos not just controlling the Russian people, but controlling those people in the neighboring states, which are often called the "near abroad." Those states that border Russia. And in that regard, what we have seen is a revanchism, if you will, of the intent by Vladimir Putin both to control the near abroad—Ukraine being one of those states that borders Russia directly—but also potentially to recreate the greatness of a Russia that is now long past in the context of its form of the Soviet Union.

At the same time, he has been concerned, deeply concerned, about the eastward expansion of NATO. And you see that echoing in his concerns as well. And our listeners would do well to remember that there have been occasions where in the Central Asian states there has been popular uprisings of opposition against the leaders of those states. And in fact, in January of this year before the invasion in February, January of this year there was a popular opposition uprising in Almaty in Kazakhstan, and the president requested aid from Russia. The Collective Security Treaty Organization, which is an entity of multiple armed forces of several states, responded and put that down brutally, because Putin simply couldn't have a state going unstable to his rear as he was projecting his attention to his front with respect to Ukraine.

You've asked a really important question, it's a complex answer. And what we have seen is, I think, an enormous underestimation, first, of the Ukrainian people, but second an underestimation of the capacity of the United States to lead the community of democracies in responding to this naked aggression, this invasion of Ukraine. His sense was, I believe, and I think it's bearing out now, that the Ukrainian military could not or would not fight, that the Ukrainian people would not oppose a Russian occupation, and that the Ukrainian government would collapse. All of those estimates on his part were spectacularly wrong. And I don't think he believed that with Ukraine quickly collapsing, the remnants in his mind of the U.S.-led community of democracies, the so-called liberal world order, rules-based liberal world order, I don't think he believed that we could get that organized quickly enough to oppose him, that he would present us with a fait accompli. And all of his estimations there were fatally flawed, and now we see the situation that's unfolding before us.

DEWS: It strikes me that his assumption about Western weakness, about NATO weakness, about European Union weakness, have all been turned around. And now we even see countries like Finland and Sweden, which aren't part of the NATO command structure, increasing support for possibly joining NATO, and countries in Europe are trying to fast track Ukraine into the European Union. Can you talk about how this military action, this invasion of Ukraine, not only belies his assumptions, but actually strengthens that liberal western United States-led order?

ALLEN: Sure, well first, your perception is exactly right on the issue, and the question is really important. The last thing he needed was for the EU to be strengthened in its cohesion with respect to opposing Russia, because the EU in the end is an economic juggernaut. It's also a dear friend of the United States. The last thing he needed was for NATO to be unified in a way that we have never seen before. Yet underestimating the strength of the capacity for U.S. leadership of the rules-based liberal world order, underestimating that, I think he was completely surprised by how quickly NATO came together with an unambiguous American commitment to Article 5 of the NATO charter, if you will, the Treaty of Washington. How quickly the EU came together, how

quickly nonaligned states with respect to NATO have reinvigorated a conversation about whether they want to join or not. Sweden has already been warned by Russia that Russia will react negatively if it attempts to join NATO. I was just speaking to a conference of Nordic CEOs here in Washington, and there is enormous interest in Finland, to your point exactly, Fred, there's enormous interest in Finland, which has a very long border with Russia about becoming part of NATO.

So the equilibrium that he had sought to disrupt to his favor has in fact consolidated very much against his desires and against his aspirations with respect to increasing his control over segments of Europe, potentially fragmenting the European security architecture, and ultimately potentially even separating the desire of the Europeans to have a relationship with the United States. All of those assumptions were wrong, and all of that has been turned on him.

DEWS: Well, let's leave the Russia-Ukraine crisis for a moment because we can't know where it's headed. Let's go over to China. You mentioned the emerging and perhaps strengthened China-Russia relationship, perhaps as explained in that February 4th agreement that they made. But just thinking about China, specifically, John, we heard a few years ago, President Xi has a plan for China to become the global leader in every area possible by 2050, including military power, but also artificial intelligence and other areas. So what's your assessment now of China's trajectory and should we be finished with saying "rising China"—it feels like China has already risen?

ALLEN: Well, Fred, that's a very important question and it's extraordinarily important right now because of the reality that we're facing in Ukraine. Again, for your listeners, if they have not done it, they should go read the 4 February joint statement. It is really a manifesto for how China and Russia see the world today and where they intend to steer the world in the future. And you're right, President Xi Jinping has made a number of public statements with respect to how he wants to position China in the future. How much of what is made in China is ultimately sold in China. How much China is involved in the international community. China's capacity to master emerging

technologies, artificial intelligence, biotech, et cetera. And ultimately where he intends to position China by the middle part of the century. He's been very clear on that.

And I think that while there was and remains potentially significant interest in a relationship with China where we could find areas of common interests, areas where there might be common opportunities to cooperate, collaborate—recognizing that we still in the context of two great powers on the surface of the planet economically powerful, would still compete with each other—I think we've now moved into a dynamic where we're not quite sure about the capacity for our relationship with China to be one that is collaborative or cooperative moving forward. Again, the Chinese were very clear in that statement that democracy to them is not democracy as we understand it, and human right to them—understanding that a million Uyghurs are in concentration camps, if you will, in the Xinjiang province—is not the same as human rights to us. That the rule of law, international rule of law, which the Chinese will say shapes their own view on the inviolate nature of a country's sovereignty and territorial integrity, yet one of the two ends of the China-Russia axis issued the agreement and then turned around and violently violated the sovereignty of a fledgling democracy. So just as just as though this definition of democracy as defined by them in that statement sets a new standard with respect to their willingness to tolerate the participation of the populace in the actual actions of governance, the Russians turned right around and have frankly wrecked a young democracy on their border.

And so where the Chinese come down on this, I think, is one that we're very interested in understanding. Because while there are many of us, myself included, that looked for a 21st century where in fact we might find ways for the Chinese to be fellow travelers in this world, I'm not so sure now in the aftermath of that statement and in the aftermath of Russian naked Russian aggression, massively articulated and characterized by violations of the laws of armed conflict and international humanitarian law. Where are the Chinese in this? Clearly, the Chinese greenlighted this invasion. But the question is now what are they going to do about it and how can they recover the fact that the junior partner in this relationship, in fact, is violating every dimension of what we

all hold as the sovereign truth—that inherently human rights are preeminent in how we should govern our states, that democracy is important, that the rule of law is paramount. All of those things that are important to us, which are espoused by the Chinese and the Russians, have been violated by what we have seen underway in the last three weeks. So I listen to what Xi Jinping has said, I'm attentive to what he has said, and there is context for what he has said now with that 4 February statement and how the Chinese are behaving in the aftermath of that invasion. And we should all be watching that very closely as we go forward.

DEWS: Well, I wish we had more time, John, to continue on foreign policy focus—there's so much more to cover from climate change to global education, development in Africa, global trade. Listeners, I encourage you to visit our website, Brookings dot Edu, to find all manner of scholarship and podcasts on these topics. But I'd like to shift our focus now closer to home. Andre Perry, senior fellow in Brookings Metro, was on this show a couple of months ago, and he was mostly there to talk about the new Brookings-NAACP partnership. And he talked about issues like the rise of white supremacy, bigotry, misinformation, and disinformation, and I'm going to quote something he said. He said those issues are “threatening the very existence of Brookings. So it's not simply something to do out of our moral take on this. We won't exist if facts can't hold weight.” How do we ensure that Brookings Institution remains relevant and actively engaged in countering these and other trends that we see both at home and abroad in the 21st century?

ALLEN: Well, Andre is right. We should all listen very closely to what Andre Perry has to say on almost any question or any issue. First, I would say one of the ways that Brookings remains relevant is exactly to the point of why he was on this podcast, which is to talk about this new partnership. The NAACP is a storied organization that has done a great deal for Americans, all Americans, but certainly Americans of color, the Black community. And a five-year partnership with the NAACP is exactly the kind of thing that Brookings should be endeavoring to pursue with other organizations that stand for justice, social justice and equity. But his point about the existence of Brookings is not so much whether someone will wash us away overnight. The issue is that truth

is under direct assault, and Brookings has to be an exemplar of truth, it has to be a beacon of truth. And that comes from the capacity for us to do the kind of comprehensive research that incorporates the rich strength of diversity in this country that can bring all views to the table, that can bring the commitment of the institution to our own diversity and to diverse research to the table so that the truth that we purport to produce in our scholarship is an inclusive and diverse truth. Otherwise, when you don't have all of the views or all of the data or all of the input that is incorporated in the nature and the depth of the research, then the outcome can be questioned, the outcome can ultimately be dismissed.

And Brookings has always had a very comprehensive research, and our reputation for truth has been very strong. But in a world where there are alternative facts, in a world where there is systemic racism, in a world where social media has given voice and form to white supremacists in ways we have never seen before—and they've always been there, they are the enemy among us, and they're a national security threat, frankly. But in a world where there are so many competing voices, there's even greater requirements for Brookings research to benefit from the enormous value of diverse research so that our outcomes are, in fact, what people look to ultimately to represent the truth, that is a truth for equity and justice and racial equality.

DEWS: And that Brookings-NAACP partnership is on our website and also the interview with Andre Perry. People can find that.

John, I want to narrow the focus again a little bit more to just the people sitting at this table. I, for a very brief season, was a U.S. Army officer in the National Guard and Reserve, very brief time of service, and yet that time I still think about that time today, the lessons I learned and the values that I learned are so with me every day. You, of course, a United States Marine Corps officer for, I believe, nearly 40 years. You come from a family of people who served in the United States military. What lessons do you apply from your, again, long career as a United States Marine Corps officer and also a senior diplomat to leading this institution?

ALLEN: Well, Fred, in a very real way, the institution sort of leads itself. And why is that? Because I arrived at an institution that was dedicated and committed almost in every possible way to something that's pretty simple: doing good in the world. And I could have stayed in government, I could have gone back into government. But what I wanted to do was to be part of an institution, and I've been given the great privilege and honor of leading the institution, to be part of an institution that every single day is doing good. And it's doing good, I hope, and will continue to do good and expand the capacity for us to do good for every sector of our population, every community of our citizens, our capacity to govern each other in a fair and decent way, ultimately to recover the strength of our middle class, which has been under enormous duress in the last several years for all kinds of reasons—political, economic, social, racial stresses, et cetera, disorder.

And I want Brookings to be at the heart of that and not just in terms of our domestic and national equilibrium. But I want Brookings to be consequential on the world stage as well. But it's difficult for America to lead on the world stage when it's difficult for us to lead on the domestic stage. And one of the very few think tanks in this country, if not the only think tank in this country, a public policy research institute that has the breadth and the width and the depth to do research across all of those sectors is the Brookings Institution. And we are capable of doing that. We're well-resourced, funders who are very generous provide the kinds of resources necessary for a world class organization, a world class set of researchers and academicians and scholars to provide the kinds of research and outcomes necessary for not just our doing good, but to heal the wounds of this country and to help us to reconcile these deep wounds that didn't start just four or five years ago. They've been underway for many, many years, and in the case of Black Americans, it's been underway for centuries. And Brookings has a role to play in that, and that's now a role that we can actively play.

So I'm honored to be part of the institution, and my very commitment to the troops that I led in combat in several wars is the same kind of commitment that I have to this institution and the

scholars here. We are an institution and an engine for doing good, and I'm going to do everything within my power to permit that to continue.

DEWS: Well, John, one thing I learned in my years is hosting this podcast is when to end an interview, and this feels like the exact right moment to end this interview. John, I want to thank you for sharing with us your time and expertise today, but more generally thank you for leading this organization over the years, and especially these very difficult last two years that we've been dealing with COVID. I really appreciate it.

ALLEN: And thank you for your leadership as well. it's been terrific. And this podcast is really an iconic effort by Brookings, and thank you for what you've done for this.

DEWS: And now the Cafeteria is closed. It's been a real privilege to host this podcast, and I have a lot of people to thank for contributing to its success. Thank you listeners for joining us every week to hear from top experts on such a vast range of policy challenges and solutions. Your listenership and feedback made it possible for me to continue creating new episodes. I always tell other podcasters to put listeners first, to understand that a host is lucky to be in the booth with guests and should ask the kinds of questions that the audience would like to ask if they could. And also thank you to all the guests who have been on this show, both Brookings scholars and non-Brookings experts as well. I've enjoyed interviewing all of you.

Many colleagues here at Brookings, past and present, have contributed to making the Brookings Cafeteria possible. I'll start with the audio engineers, two of them, Gastón Reboledo, who has made all Brookings podcasts sound better since 2016, and before him, my former colleague Zach Kulzer, who was my first partner in creating and launching the podcast. Also, a special thanks to all our audio interns over the years who joined us from the audio technology program at American University, and all the other communications interns who I hope learned a little something about creating public policy audio content.

My thanks to Andrea Risotto, Soren Messner-Zidell, and Ian McAllister, who provided essential support and guidance over the last few years. And before them, I have to thank a line of

generous colleagues, including Camilo Ramirez, Emily Horne, Richard Fawal, and my former communications vice president David Nassar, who said to me way back in 2013 that we should have a podcast and that I should host it. Also, Bill Finan, who joined me a few years ago to host interviews about Brookings Press nooks—I count nearly 60 such interviews. So thank you, Bill for that tremendous contribution.

Also, I want to recognize a host of other colleagues present and past who helped make the Brookings Cafeteria podcast possible. From audio editing to promotions to web support to art to strategic advice including Erik Abalahin, Lisette Baylor, Eric Bull, George Burroughs, Rebecca Campany, Colin Cruickshank, Brennan Hoban, Mark Hoelscher, Raman Preet Kaur, Taylor Kelly, Chris McKenna, Jessica Pavone—who designed the first Cafeteria logo, a juice box—Chris Peters, Adrianna Pita, Vanessa Sauter, Ashley Wood Schelling, Rebecca Viser, and Marie Wilkin. Thank you all.

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Until we meet again, I'm Fred Dews.