

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

FALK AUDITORIUM

REBALANCING WORLD ORDER IN AN AGE OF FRAGMENTATION:
A CONVERSATION WITH FINNISH PRESIDENT ALEXANDER STUBB

MONDAY, APRIL 13, 2026

This is an automated transcript that has been minimally reviewed. Please check against the recording for accuracy. If you find any significant errors of substance, please let us know at events@brookings.edu.

WELCOMING REMARKS

CECILIA ELENA ROUSE
President, The Brookings Institution

CONVERSATION

ALEXANDER STUBB
President of the Republic of Finland

CONSTANZE STELZENMÜLLER
Fritz Stern Chair on Germany and Transatlantic Relations, Senior Fellow, and
Director, Center on the United States and Europe, Brookings

* * * * *

ROUSE: Good afternoon and good afternoon, and thank you all for joining us, in person and online. I'm Cecilia Rouse. I'm the president of the Brookings Institution and it is my absolute great pleasure to welcome you to today's conversation with president of the Republic of Finland, Alexander Stubb.

Today's event is part of the Alan and Jane Batkin International Leaders Forum. The series convenes world leaders and senior officials here at Brookings for major policy discussions. The last time Brookings hosted a Finnish president was in 2018 when then President Sauli Niinistö argued that a stronger Europe would strengthen the transatlantic relationship in the face of common adversaries like Russia and China.

Indeed, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Finland, which has Europe's longest longest land border with Russia, decided to leave behind a longstanding policy of neutrality and join NATO and join the NATO alliance, which was followed by Sweden. Finland today plays a crucial role in the security of Europe and the transatlantic alliance, and particularly the security of Northern Europe, which has been the subject of much discussion in recent months. Its decades long experience with building national resilience around a citizen centric approach to security could not be more pertinent in today's debates.

Alexander Stubb became Finland's 13th president in March of 2024. Throughout his career, he has held several key roles in governance, including as prime minister, finance minister, and minister of foreign affairs. He has also held leadership roles within the National Coalition Party and the European Investment Bank. Before his election, President Stubb served as director and professor of the School of Transnational Government Governance at the European University Institute in Florence.

In just a moment, I will turn it over to Constanze Stelzenmüller, director of the Center on the United States in Europe, and the Fritz Stern Chair here at Brookings, who will have a one-on-one conversation with Presidents Stubb.

Mr. President, we are honored to have you with us for a wide-ranging conversation on what you have referred to in foreign affairs as our new world of disorder and how we might restore global balance. This conversation is off, is on the record and live streamed, I guess we should get that right, is on the record and live streamed. And with that President Stubb, welcome to Brookings. We are thrilled to have you. Thanks.

STELZENMÜLLER: Thank you. Well, it's a, a pleasure and an honor to have you here.

STUBB: I got it.

STELZENMÜLLER: You got it. All right.

STUBB: You talk, I do the--

STELZENMÜLLER: All right. Thank you. And it's a particular pleasure to have as a, an honored speaker here, somebody from an umlaut regarding country. I had a huge fight here at Brookings 11 years ago to get IT to accept the umlaut. So the Niinistös, the Stelzenmüllers, you know, we're one tribe.

I'm glad that Dr. Rouse already said that we're going to be talking on the record. We have about 40 minutes, 45 minutes of conversation. And when I was in touch with your office about this, they said to me, they wrote to me, and I quote, "the president is ready to discuss world politics from all angles," which is terrifying.

STUBB: I have a, I have a, I have a really brave team, huh?

STELZENMÜLLER: And as, Cecilia Rouse already said, you really have covered all the job angles. You are really fascinating as a European leader because you were one of... you, you are the epitome of a, both a committed trans-Atlanticist and a committed Europeanist. And this, despite the fact that Finland came to the EU and NATO somewhat later in the game, but you were certainly making up for it.

The other thing is that you were also, well known as an athlete and you've done a number of Ironmans

STUBB: No. Okay.

STELZENMÜLLER: Which requires

STUBB: Let's move on.

STELZENMÜLLER: No, wait, no, no. I'm, I'm actually coming to my point, which is this. I thought it might be fun to have a conversation as an endurance test. So, I have here about 30 questions. None of them are easy. They're mostly on foreign and security policy, but I do also want to get to some domestic issues. And, and I thought we would just sort of try and get through as many of them as possible.

STUBB: Okay.

STELZENMÜLLER: I'm not going to force you or break you off, but, you know, let's give it a try.

STUBB: Sure.

STELZENMÜLLER: Because you are, as your book shows, this is from this year, interested in everything and indeed are ready to discuss world politics from all angles. A note for the poli-sci geeks here, the, the Finland's constitutional order is semi presidential, semi parliamentary. So the president is not the head of government, but he does direct Finnish security and, and foreign policy in cooperation with the government. And he represents Finland, internationally. And he is the commander in chief of the Finnish defense forces. So, big remit.

Let me start with current events and no, I don't mean, the president of the United States and the head of the Vatican going nose to nose, and we will get to Hungary later. I thought we would talk about Iran and the Middle East first.

Your colleague here announced on the weekend in response to the breakdown, for now we hope, of negotiations with Iran, that the US would blockade Iran's blockade in the Strait of Hormuz. Where does this conflict go next?

STUBB: I don't think anyone has the answer to that. You know, this is, was very much a, a war of choice and all of us are now trying to figure out a way out. If you look at the original aims of the U.S. administration, they were partially military—so destroy the missile system, and their nuclear capability. They were partially political because there was talk, at least in the early stage, of regime change.

The strategic aims of Israel were probably quite different. This is something that Bibi Netanyahu had wanted for the better part of 20 to 30 years. And now I think we've all learned that the ramifications of this war are broader than we expected. So the Straits of Hormuz has basically become a defacto nuclear weapon, which has ramifications on not only energy prices and oil, but also fertilizers and food, and trade.

And now we are in a negotiation process with a ceasefire, which hopefully would last for two weeks. And what the sort of, double blockade here means, we, we don't know at this stage because I think it's been in force for about one hour and 45 minutes. So it's, it's too, too --

STELZENMÜLLER: Sure. It's kind of a bit of a speculative question.

STUBB: -- it's too early to say, but I think on the European side, we have a coalition of roughly 40 countries. We'll have a meeting on the level of heads of state government on Friday, where we talk about how we can, basically deescalate, find a way out, keep the Straits of Hormuz open, while, you know, respecting the freedom of navigation. So it's an extremely complex situation.

STELZENMÜLLER: Sure. I'm going to get to the European side of this in a, in a, in a second. But given the differences that became clear on the weekend between the positions of Washington and Tehran – on the one hand, no missiles, no more uranium enrichment, immediate opening of the strait, and Tehran reparations, sanctions relief, security guarantees before any opening-- where do you think there is any basis for a negotiated settlement? Or do you think like David Ignatius apparently does in a, or argues in a, in a piece this weekend that the administration will now go for economic coercion to make Iran back down. What do you think is feasible here?

STUBB: Well, first of all, I, I think there's sort of good news and bad news. The good news is that the negotiations are still ongoing, albeit now on a lower level. So that's always a good sign that there's willingness to have a dialogue and conversation between the Iranians and the Americans. The bad news is that the JCPOA took two years. So in that sense, I don't, you know, see a very quick respite in this situation.

The blockade, from an American perspective, I would say makes sense, if it works out, in the sense that they now have a stranglehold. But I, I just, I guess, wonder what will happen if they will be at loggerheads with China on this. So, so there's just so many different complicated aspects to this, and we're all trying to find an off-ramp right now, which is not going to be easy, but at the end of the day, usually is doable. But Iran holds a lot of the cards right now. I, I, I'm afraid that that is the reality.

STELZENMÜLLER: And there is of course the potential for horizontal escalation in the Middle East and the Muslim world given that the, this this ongoing conflict as well as continued Israeli bombardment of Lebanon and the largely, largely unregarded military conflict between Pakistan and Afghanistan. How concerned are you that this turns into a major conflagration?

STUBB: Well, the big worry I've had from the beginning, and I talk about, talk about it a lot in the book, not in this particular case, but after the Cold War, many of the conflicts that we had globally used to be local. So they were domestic affairs, civil wars, if you will. Whereas now we're getting to the states stage where conflicts are regional, whether it's Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine or, or, or now in the Middle East, which in the beginning was Israel-Palestine, but now is obviously Israel-Lebanon, Israel-Iran, and Iran versus Gulf States. So this type of escalation from local to regional can then potentially spill over to global. There are already global ramifications on this.

So if I turn the tide and would say that, what if 13 European countries had been hit by missiles or drones within the span of a few weeks coming from one country, what would we call that war? You know, would we call it a European war? Would we call it a regional war? Or would we immediately say this is a, a, a world war?

So I, I am extremely concerned about, you know, the escalation measure. And that's why we talk a lot about deescalation. Now, if I look at things, and I've been speaking to many leaders of the Gulf countries, if I look at it from their perspective, they are really between a rock and a hard place.

STELZENMÜLLER: Do they want to hear what we have to say?

STUBB: It depends on how you define "we." You know, it, it's not about --

STELZENMÜLLER: Sorry, I meant we Europeans at this point.

STUBB: Ah, well, you know, you see, I don't, coming from Finland, I don't call them with, I'm going to give you advice. I'm call them more with --

STELZENMÜLLER: Pretty healthy,

STUBB: -- how are you doing? And what can I do? I, you know, when you come from a small country like mine, you don't go there with any pretext or arrogance because that rarely,

STELZENMÜLLER: Probably also good advice for larger countries.

STUBB: Oh yeah. Your words not mine. So, so, I, I think the Gulf States are probably looking at things: okay, we have an American security guarantee. At the same time, this situation has led to an escalation in our region, which has ramifications on our economy, on our tourism, on our energy, and of course on our security. I mean, when you have close to 2,000 missiles flying into the UAE, you can't just stand by.

And I think actually the, the interesting thing, if, if I may, from an analytical perspective, we can now see the close interlinkage between Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine and what is going on in Iran. So yesterday I had the opportunity to speak with President Zelenskyy

extensively, and you know, he was giving me the rundown of his trip to the Gulf region and what the Ukrainians have done in terms of helping the Gulf States with air defense and modern warfare with drones. So this could then spill over positively, if you will, to an understanding also here in the United States on, on how qualified Ukrainians are in modern warfare and how much they can actually help out.

So we have this sort of, you know, China to a certain extent, but more so Russia and Iran, Russia giving intelligence to the Iranians, which is killing American soldiers

STELZENMÜLLER: Indeed.

STUBB: and hitting American bases in the Gulf region, but Ukraine coming out to help. So, you know, again, we, we, there are a lot of connections here.

STELZENMÜLLER: It's, literally everything everywhere all at once at this point.

STUBB: Yeah.

STELZENMÜLLER: Unlike Canada's Prime Minister Mark Carney, you have made an argument that international law isn't over. Nor have you compared it with communism, which I'm grateful. But European leaders have been all over international law and, and the Gulf on at this point. Do Europeans undercut international law by not protesting against threats of genocide?

STUBB: Yeah, I mean, it's, it's, it's, obviously, it's the, I think in a good kind of a way, the "what about" argument, which, which we face. I make no claim that foreign policy is always consistent. I don't know of anyone in the world who is always true to their values in foreign policy. It's always a balance between interests and, and, and values.

And, and I think the question is justified if you condemn Russia's illegal war in Ukraine, why don't you condemn, say, Israel and Gaza or Israel and and Lebanon? It, it, it's a, it's a very valid claim.

STELZENMÜLLER: Or threatening to extinguish an entire civilization.

STUBB: Yeah, it's, it's another one. Then again, there, I have to say that there's a difference between what you say and what you do. If you do it, it is clearly war crime; if you say it, then it's a form of diplomacy, which, you know, you can have --

STELZENMÜLLER: Fair enough

STUBB: -- arguments, arguments for or, against.

But I, I, I always say, I mean, so Mark Carney and I, we're very good friends, and I'm actually flying to Canada today for an official visit there tomorrow. And, and we're working on some language together on try to understand the world order. So the difference between Mark and I, is, is Mark was like, you know, an editorial of The Economist. You shock first and then you give a a suggestion. So his shocking was full rupture, it's all over, et cetera. And then he says, middle powers.

My argument is that, no, we are in a transition because the world order is never black and white. It's a rational construct. And the fact that someone is violating international rules and norms and institutions doesn't mean that they're null and void. It's a little bit like saying that someone gets a speeding ticket, that doesn't make the rule of speeding wrong or right. It's a question of how you fix it. His answer is middle powers. My answer is more power to the Global South in the current multilateral context.

STELZENMÜLLER: I look forward to that Economist essay. But, I mean, one other aspect of this crisis is that it's very much a U.S. war of choice, but it's suddenly turned into a NATO crisis. Should Europe participate in this blockade? Should it participate in mine clearing, otherwise protect freedom of navigation? You have mentioned the conference and the conversations among Europeans and I believe some non-European democratic allies about potential participation. But my understanding this, this is not before a cessation of hostilities.

STUBB: Yes, that's, I think the basic thinking that we had in, in, in the declaration that we signed with 31 countries a couple of weeks back, and then 16, 17 countries last week. And that's probably the approach that the 40 countries will be having in, in the meeting on, on, on Friday.

But I think we need to separate two things here. The first one is, NATO has kind of been brought into this, but we forget that NATO is a defensive alliance. NATO takes decision on consensus. And in NATO we consult each other on the basis of Article 4. Right? And there's only one case in which we have used Article 5, collective defense, and that was 9/11 when the United States was attacked.

Finland was not a member of NATO then, yet – unfortunately, I always add. but, now that we are, but even --

STELZENMÜLLER: So you're not regretting it yet?

STUBB: No, no, not at all. Quite the contrary. I've been working for this ever since 1995, so I'm all smiles. But, but, Finland actually went to Afghanistan with 2,500 troops, over the years that, that ISAF took place there.

But the bottom line here – so that's the first bit – now what, what this is, it is going to be a coalition of the willing. In other words, which are the countries that want to help the United States, probably after the conflict is over? And there are already countries that do that now.

And I, I want to make this clear that there has been some misunderstanding in... See, I fully understand the American perspective as well, that you know, the reason that the U.S. is in NATO is that you can use bases. And if there's a country in NATO that doesn't allow that, there's going to be sentiments of frustration. I, I get that. I, I completely get that.

But at the same time, there's been a misunderstanding because if you look at the usage of bases, and I think actually they're all open, there's only one country that's not allowing that. I'm not going to mention it. But, but you know, so, so, so we have to make the separation here and work on this very pragmatically.

STELZENMÜLLER: I think it's also perhaps just worth noting, that the usage of bases is regulated on the basis of bilateral agreements.

STUBB: Yes, exactly. So therefore it's not NATO.

STELZENMÜLLER: It's not a NATO point. I do wonder sometimes, I don't believe Finland has any American bases, does it?

STUBB: No. But we have a lot of American soldiers training with us, and of course we have a defense cooperation agreement.

STELZENMÜLLER: I mean, it might, it might be worth at some point, sort of pointing out, just what those bases cost, the host country, those countries, you know, just by way of saying, this is what we contribute.

But let's move to Ukraine and Russia. So Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has just entered its fifth year. What in your view are, at this point, the chances of ending it, if any, with a negotiated peace, and what would that look like?

STUBB: Yeah, I mean, we work on three base scenarios for this year. One is that the war continues. Two is that we get a peace settlement. And three is that one party or the other is weakened for external reasons, be it war in Iran or withdrawal of, of, or, or of someone, or a collapse of the economy of Russia, whatever that may be. Our scenario right now, the most predominant one is one, that, that, that the war will continue. That's why I think it's very important now that we prepare for next winter.

I actually think that Ukraine is in a much better place than it has been at any stage in this horrific war.

STELZENMÜLLER: Because?

STUBB: Because the first year of this war was survival. The next three years of this war have been resilience, and this year is mathematics. And by that I mean to say that right now Ukraine is on top from a military perspective. Since December, they have killed somewhere around 35,000, killed 35,000 Russian soldiers per month. Russia is not able to recruit enough soldiers to compensate those 35. Ninety-five percent of the kills are through drones. The killing ratio right now, and sorry for being so morbid, is one to five. So one Ukrainian soldier to five Russian soldiers. In 2025, Russia gained less than one percentage point of territory with 400,000 casualties. The rate at which they're going now is roughly 150 to 157 dead soldiers per square kilometers. Were they to continue at this rate, it would take x amount of months to take over Donbas with 800,000 casualties.

STELZENMÜLLER: Then let me open the, the lens though there and point to the fact that there are some vulnerabilities to the Ukrainian posture, which is its exquisite dependence on U.S. intelligence and Starlink, which is private, and on strategic enablers purchased by the Europeans from the U.S. All of those have been put into question or currently are in question because the U.S. might need strategic, missiles, interceptors for the Middle East or even in the Pacific.

Are we Europeans, or let me put it this way, the only options for the Ukrainians, barring further access to these interceptors, are deep strikes to the Russian factories, right, that produce the missiles or the chips for these interceptors. And that is something that the

European partners of Ukraine have been notably nervous about. How do we balance that? How do we support Ukraine? Should those factors of support dwindle or, or stop?

STUBB: Well, here's the second reason I think for Ukrainian optimism at the moment. In the month of March, there were more drones and missiles flying from Ukraine to Russia than they were coming from Russia to Ukraine. You look at two key hits. One was of course, to the oil refineries in the Gulf of Finland, in Ust-Luga and Kstovo, which were quite big. And despite the peak in oil price, actually have hit the capacity for Russia to export oil, so therefore, the war machinery finance, quite hard.

And the second one is that they have actually hit factories which produce Iskander missiles. So I'm not saying they don't need Tomahawks anymore, but we forget that in modern warfare actually the capacity to project power a thousand, 2000, 3000 kilometers away, has been obtained by the Ukrainians.

The other reason I'm optimistic is that I think first of all, from my conversations with my American counterparts, I have yet to hear the idea of withdrawing intelligence, which I fully admit, especially when it comes to targeting, is extremely important for the Ukrainians.

But the Ukrainians have another, if I may, trump card in in this situation, and that card is that how do you defend the Gulf States? Does, do the Gulf States have the capacity to do it by themselves without Ukrainian knowhow in air defense and missiles and drones? The answer is no. So there is a little bit of a tradeoff here, which I think gives it a more comfortable balance. And I am, quite convinced that it's, it's in the interest of the United States to stay engaged.

May I just push it one step further? And and that is to say that the capacity of Ukraine right now to conduct war is at such a level that there is only one country in the alliance that can come close, and that's the United States. So I am just wondering, whether instead of us thinking of American or European help to Ukraine as some kind of altruism --

STELZENMÜLLER: That Ukraine is teaching us something.

STUBB: -- it's actually we that need Ukraine more than the other way around.

STELZENMÜLLER: That I, I perfectly take your point, but that does bring me to my next question, which is that isn't Europe in some way also a potential weak link or an actual weak link in the support of Ukraine? Are we doing enough to persuade the Kremlin that Russia cannot win this war against Ukraine? You know what I mean? Military supports, sanctions enforcement, the shadow fleet. And also are we doing enough to persuade the Kremlin that they cannot split us within Europe, with hybrid means --

STUBB: You mean after the Hungarian elections?

STELZENMÜLLER: Well, we'll come to that. Don't worry. No, I'm, I'm talking about everything from propaganda and disinformation to sabotage, right, and drones flying over Finland.

STUBB: Yeah, yeah. Again, you know, this is --

STELZENMÜLLER: -- if they're not Ukrainian.

STUBB: Yeah, yeah. No, it, it, it, it's a really good question. Because, but at the same time, I don't see this as binary at all. We can always say we're doing too little, too late. But at the same time, as an EU nerd, I have never seen the European Union more united or with stronger resolve than it has been in the past four years, in turning a peace facility basically into a war machine, in finding innovative ways of financing Ukraine, in many ways depleting their stocks of arsenals to help out Ukraine, at the same time bringing their defense expenditure to three and a half, to 5%, having an innovative way through PURL to purchase American material to help Ukraine. So, and, and, and 20 sanctions packages.

So I, I think what we are all trying to do is to change the strategic calculation of Putin. And and I think we've done as much as we possibly can. And I am sure we will continue to do that. Because if you remember that, you know, a year in this war is a short time. Last year at this time, we didn't have peace negotiations. Last year at this time, it wasn't only the Europeans that were paying for it. And last year this time the Ukrainians were in a much worse position in the battlefield that they are right now. So we just have to keep at it.

STELZENMÜLLER: All right. I do want to get to one last point in this particular chapter, and that is China's increasingly overt support for Russia in this, in this war. You describe in your, in your book, "Triangle of Power", a conversation in 2024 with Xi Jinping as one of mutual respect, and you describe China as a constructive power as opposed to Russia, which is a destructive power. Isn't that a bit too charitable, given recent events and their, also their support for Iran?

STUBB: Mm, I I I, I started writing this book when Trump ended his first term, and I almost finished the book when Trump started his second.

STELZENMÜLLER: fair enough

STUBB: And then when I was about to publish it, my team started to put in different kinds of things that would be, so I don't remember that part there at all, so.

No, but, I, I think, no, what I'm trying to say in that part is, is that first of all, first of all, in the beginning of the war, China was actually sitting on the fence. You know, they, they, they were taken by surprise. And from a Chinese perspective, you know, the fact that Russia has not been able to advance more than two percentage point of Russian territory in four years is a complete disaster. And this just shows that when you have the resolve to defend yourself, you're probably going to, you know, defeat the aggressor.

I, I, I like Kissinger's take that, if it's the big one, attacking a small one, and the small one doesn't lose, it by definition wins. And the big one, if it doesn't win, it by definition loses. And I, I think that's where we are.

But what I was trying to say there is that China, constructive or not, is a power that is able to project power in a completely different way than Russia. Russia is short term and desperate, whereas China is long-term and patient. And, and right now, of course, if you look at the relationship with China and Russia, it's completely asymmetrical.

STELZENMÜLLER: Well, let me, that brings me very elegantly to my section of questions on international order, such as it is. I'd like to quote my colleague Tom Wright here, who has been writing a much-read column in The Atlantic. And in his latest piece he says the U.S. is moving towards a world in which it faces more connected opponents with a less cohesive coalition of its own. Problem for us?

STUBB: To a certain extent, yes. Again, I don't want to throw the baby out with the bath water. But you know, the thesis in my book was to say that there's a triangle of power. So the --

STELZENMÜLLER: But which you've since revised to suggest that as a rectangle.

STUBB: A rectangle of power. Exactly. So the idea was that--

STELZENMÜLLER: Which does sort of suggest that we, there might be a division within the, the classical trans-Atlantic relationship,

STUBB: -- which which suggests that foreign policy's always in motion.

STELZENMÜLLER: Very elegantly put.

STUBB: Yes. So the, the, my basic idea was that you have the global West led by the United States, followed by about 50 countries in Europe, South Korea, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, who basically want to preserve the current multilateral world order, which is based on its institutions, norms, and rules and cooperation. Right?

And then you have the global East, which was led by China, followed by Russia and 25 countries roughly speaking, conceptually, which wanted a multipolar world order, which is exactly what was described by your colleague. More transactional, more sort of bilaterally connected than multilaterally connected.

And then my argument was, and I still think this holds, that the one that's going to decide whether we go for multilateralism or multipolarity, is going to be the global South. Those are the middle powers that Mark Carney talks about. So is it good news for a trans-Atlanticist like myself to see the United States in the national security strategy and elsewhere rejecting multilateral cooperation in benefit? The answer is no, of course. But it's my job as president of Finland to try to save the situation and convince the Americans that without allies it's difficult to project power.

STELZENMÜLLER: Indeed. I'm going to quote you again and then I'll stop. The black swan for – page 204 – the black swan for everyone would be the unlikeliest of alliances, a pact between the U.S., China, and Russia. We're not seeing a pact obviously, but we're seeing a certain rapprochement of interest.

STUBB: I think diplomacy is always based on two pillars. One is state-to-state relations, so values, interest, geography, history, culture. The second one is personality. And I think in academia and in --

STELZENMÜLLER: So we have an unlikely triangle or sort of an unlucky triangle of guys who like each other at the head of Russia, China, and the U.S.

STUBB: Well, I think Gideon Rachman in his book talks about

STELZENMÜLLER: The strong men

STUBB: strong men. Yeah. and I think there's an element of that. I, I don't deny that. But at the same time, I still firmly believe that with the two predominant superpowers right now, there's still a very strong tension between the United States and China, despite what the personal relationships might be.

STELZENMÜLLER: I think there are people in the Pentagon who will be very happy to hear that assessment.

STUBB: I, yeah, I hope so.

STELZENMÜLLER: Anyway, let's move on to Europe. I think it's clear to you and to me and lots of others that regardless of who rules in Beijing, Moscow, Washington, Europe can only preserve its open, free, and democratic model, or put more brutally, prevent the weaponization of its dependencies, which are very sticky, from a position of far greater strength than it has now.

Let's look at what that would entail. And I have a sort of whole sequence of questions here that you can answer much more quickly. Does Europe need an independent nuclear deterrent?

STUBB: To a certain extent, it has with the UK, which of course is not completely independent from the U.S., and with France. And with France's changing nuclear doctrine, which was outlined by Macron just about a month ago, which basically is open to have a conversation, training, planning, and at the end of the day also stationing of, of nuclear weapons. I think the whole nuclear scenario in the world is changing from a bipolar, Russia-U.S. 1,500 warheads

STELZENMÜLLER: to more nuclear proliferation.

STUBB: Exactly. With China now 500 up to a thousand, then 1,500, with roughly 10 countries with nuclear armaments, with 40 with the capacity to build them, and us being in a state without agreement. So I I, I think European, Europe needs to take more dependence on it. But remember that out of the three pillars of deterrence in, in, in NATO one of the most important one and one that I don't want to let go is, is the U.S. nuclear umbrella.

STELZENMÜLLER: But you have, you are discussing nationally, right, the, the possibility of a stationing of NATO nuclear assets?

STUBB: No.

STELZENMÜLLER: Or was that misreported?

STUBB: No, it's, it's, it's sort of misreported. It's basically, I mean, just to put it in, in, summarize it. There's a law on nuclear energy from the 1980s, which was trying to prevent Soviet nuclear weapons from ever entering or going through Finnish territory. Now Finland is a

100% member of NATO and what the government is trying to do is to bring our nuclear doctrine to the same level with the other Nordic states so that we don't have any legislative elements that would prevent us to be part of nuclear planning in NATO.

STELZENMÜLLER: Do we need to do more to just develop European strategic enablers specifically space assets and long-range weapons with independent targeting capabilities?

STUBB: Yes, definitely. And, if you want to do that, this is a commercial break, come to Finland. We have an absolutely fantastic satellite cluster. Combine that with the most trustworthy networks in the world through Nokia and linked to that a country which is far ahead of many others in quantum and quantum computing, the place to do it is Finland.

STELZENMÜLLER: Right. I, did not arrange this question in advance just to make that very clear.

STUBB: I used the opportunity.

STELZENMÜLLER: Given the – fair enough, that's your right. Given American dissatisfaction, should Europeans offer to take the lead in NATO with an observer status for the U.S.?

STUBB: No. I mean to the second question. I, I think again, let's, let's cool things down a little bit. What we're seeing in NATO is a burden shifting, I'll simplify it, from 60-40 to 40-60, so U.S.-Europe. And this is happening, hopefully, slowly, surely, and systematically. The Americans are absolutely right in asking for Europe to take more responsibility. And that is what we will see at the summit meeting in Ankara in July.

STELZENMÜLLER: All right. The EU has recently concluded a record number of trade treaties. I, I have to say, if you told me this two years ago, I would've said, you're crazy. India, Australia, MERCOSUR, all FTAs. The, whereas the negotiations on the U.S.-EU trade agreement are still pending. In effect, Washington and Brussels are fighting each other on trade rather than cooperating to fend off the China shock 2.0.

STUBB: Yeah. I think we need --

STELZENMÜLLER: Do you have any recommendations?

STUBB: First of all, two observations. The first one is that with everything that's going on in trade, with the U.S. approach to the WTO, with the U.S. approach to tariffs, and I had a chance to discuss this with Jameson Greer over the weekend, I think what we should now do, first of all, as, as Europe is to have more of these free trade agreements. And I, I, I welcome the fact that we did one with MERCOSUR, that we did one with India, and that we continue to have them. Because now we have over 40 free trade agreements with over 70 countries in the world. And if Europe is roughly 30, that's a hundred. Half of the world is now covered basically by European free trade agreements. And I think that's good news.

My second point is that I am worried that we are reducing the relevance of international norms and rules like the WTO, although the WTO still covers a lot. So what we should do now is to have a fair and free trade agreement between the European Union and the United

States. Not an easy task to do, but the Europeans and the Americans are at least working on it.

STELZENMÜLLER: Is it realistic for Europe to achieve digital sovereignty at all? Is it possible to divest from U.S. tech platforms like Microsoft or Palantir? Or from Chinese providers for that matter, like Huawei?

STUBB: On the first question, no. On the second question, yes. And I, I don't say this --

STELZENMÜLLER: The second question being the Chinese provider.

STUBB: Yeah, exactly, and Huawei. And I don't, I'm not saying this because you're German and most of German 5G is Huawei and not Nokia. But, but, but another commercial break.

STELZENMÜLLER: Fair enough.

STUBB: But, but the bottom line, yeah. The, the bottom line is that, that, that, that's not going to happen.

But one of the big problems I think we have in the tech debate is that a lot of people who are pessimistic about Europe's chances, they're fighting the battles of the 1990s or 2000s or 2010s. So what you need to do in tech is always look at the next frontier. And for me, the next frontier is quantum, the one that can control quantum and quantum computing and supercomputers will control also AI. And I think we need to do that in cooperation with the United States, and therefore we cannot detach ourselves from it.

STELZENMÜLLER: We're getting along really nicely with my list of questions. My next one -
-

STUBB: I'm answering quite quickly, no?

STELZENMÜLLER: Yes, you are. My next one is a slightly more sort of future-oriented one about Europe. As you were pointing out, we've, it's possible to say that we've done surprisingly well since the Russian full-scale invasion in February '22 with pragmatic patches, innovations.

STUBB: Yeah.

STELZENMÜLLER: You know, doing things we didn't think we could do. But what if there are further economic and/or security shocks, which we can well imagine, and more countries apply to join the EU, NATO, and or the eurozone. And there, I have a list here. Ukraine, Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, the UK, the Balkans, and of course Canada. What's your take on this, and should accession perhaps be simplified in times of crises?

STUBB: Okay. I have to be very careful, you quoted the Finnish constitution there, clearly.

STELZENMÜLLER: I did.

STUBB: So it's the prime minister who is in charge of EU affairs. But I can say, I, I, I wrote my PhD at the LSC on, on flexible integration.

STELZENMÜLLER: Yes.

STUBB: So the possibility for EU member states inside the EU to do different things at different times. And I just gave a speech at Chatham House about three weeks ago, a month ago, where I called for more flexibility. So I think it's,

STELZENMÜLLER: -- but that's flexibility on the side of, of the EU.

STUBB: Both inside and outside.

STELZENMÜLLER: Yeah. Right.

STUBB: So, so I think that the convening power of the European Union is extremely strong. I mean, we keep on bashing the EU all the time. And I, I fully understand that. But if you look at world politics right now, it's a beacon of stability. And, and, and, you know, even the slowness sometimes can be quite convenient.

But, what I want to see is the European political cooperation, which is about 47 states, being used as a laboratory then for different countries who are outside the EU to come as close as possible, and then in some cases eventually join based on, you know, merit and conditions and the rest of it.

And I'm really glad to see that the UK is now reconsidering its strategic relationship with the European Union. Iceland is going to have a referendum on whether to restart the negotiations. Norway is not there yet, but of course, I mean, as a Nordic, if someone asked me, do I want to see Iceland and Norway in, and if I said no, I'd probably lose my job. I'd love to have them in, you know?

STELZENMÜLLER: All right. Probably duly noted in Reykjavik and Oslo.

STUBB: Yeah.

STELZENMÜLLER: That said, and with all the, you know, sort of self-praise and so on, and, and you know, I'm with you there, but with or without further enlargement, Europe does have a growth, innovation, competitiveness, and scale problem, right?

STUBB: Yes.

STELZENMÜLLER: And that is being further massively exacerbated by the Iran crisis. It reduces government's fiscal space even further. Conjures up the risk of guns versus butter debates that can be exploited by extremist parties, never mind external adversaries. Should Europe finally implement the Draghi report's recommendations, banking and capital markets union, energy integration, a 28th regime. I think you've written about this in your book as well. I just want you --

STUBB: Yes.

STELZENMÜLLER: -- want to give you a chance to commit to it again publicly.

STUBB: Again, on, on, on your analysis, I fully agree. On the Draghi report, I fully agree, and I would add the Letta report to that, as well. And, and, and these are things, as you well know as a Europeanist, that we keep on battling all the time. And, and, and the way in which the EU works is obviously that integration in one area leads to pressure to integrate in another one. And we usually deal with one big project at a time. You know, so in the 1980s, it was a single market. In the 2000s, it was the euro in -- in the 1990s, it was the euro. In the 2000s, it was enlargement. In the 2010s, it was a financial crisis. And now in the 2020s it's, it's, it's, war and, and defense. So, I, I I think we're moving --

STELZENMÜLLER: Let me pin you down though.

STUBB: Sure.

STELZENMÜLLER: Let me pin you down. You are part of the fiscally frugal, or prudent, whatever you want to call them, countries. You've, spoken out against eurobonds. We are going to have to actually liberate some money to do all this, right? What's the recipe?

STUBB: Ask my prime minister.

STELZENMÜLLER: All right. All right. That's an invitation.

STUBB: My foreign minister is in town. You can ask her as well. I, I, I believe in the rule of law. Yeah. I believe in the rule of law and I follow the Finnish constitution.

STELZENMÜLLER: Helps us, keep that that, helps us.

STUBB: This is a great job. No, but I'm telling you, I'm, I'll be serious here, that this is like being president of Finland is the ideal job because you deal with foreign policy and you're the commander in chief. Yeah. And you leave everything else to the government.

STELZENMÜLLER: Unless of course you're actually, unless of course you're actually in a war, right? But --

STUBB: That's true.

STELZENMÜLLER: I actually only have two more questions, so this is great. So this Sunday we actually did get regime change. Not in the Middle East, but in Hungary. And France, the UK, and Germany would like to know, is this the end of the populist surge or do populists have to rule for 16 years before they are discredited? Possibly some Americans would like to know as well.

STUBB: Yeah, I mean, it, it depends. Yeah, I mean, it depends on the country in question. And, and I think populism, whether on the right or the left is very specific to the culture and historical context of the country in question.

So a country like Finland took what at the time was considered to be a populist party in the form of the so-called "true Finns" into government in 2014. They took responsibility, split into

two, went to opposition, and then came back into government a few years later. So they very much became the part. And, and that party is now in government, in Finland, and the finance minister is probably the biggest driver of fiscal prudence and austerity. You wouldn't necessarily call that, you know, populist. Then a country like Sweden --

STELZENMÜLLER: Maybe it's just Finnish populism, which is sort of, you know, a little clunky.

STUBB: Yeah, I, I don't know. But anyway, I'm, I'm saying that's the Finnish experience.

Then, in Sweden, the *Sverigedemokraterna*, were kept out for a long time until it became impossible to form a minority government without their support.

Then a country like Italy, which you could say that Meloni's party and Meloni was considered to be of the populist right. Then you look at the way in which they work in, in Europe. And you know, she's been on the right side of history with with Ukraine, et cetera.

Then you have the type of populism that we saw in, in, in Hungary and 16 years of it, which was in essence an attack on the rule of law, on, on, on everything that we stand for in, in, in the European Union. And now that party and that leader gets completely humiliated and loses an election. So I'm trying to say that these are time-specific and country-specific. You don't have a magic potion for it. The choice is either you hug them or you reject them. Usually hugging works better.

STELZENMÜLLER: Well, that brings me to my 27th question, which is that Hungary was indeed the rare case of a single party government ruling for more than a decade and a half. Most European governments are coalition governments and a number of European governments, as you've just outlined, have abandoned the cordon sanitaire or firewall against the far right. Germany is a notable exception, but that is hotly contested in parts of the conservative spectrum. Go ahead.

Do you have a recommendation for Germany? It's my very last question before I go to Q and A.

STUBB: No, I, I don't have a recommendation to Germany and, and if I may, you can take this as you wish. It's quite often not very helpful for your own goals to meddle in the politics of another country.

STELZENMÜLLER: So true. I I, I was asking this as an academic question, but clearly not working.

STUBB: I, i, so I, I watched a, a snippet of, of Chancellor Merz, who I, great colleague who I respect a lot, his reaction to the Hungarian elections. And, I follow whatever Chancellor Merz, --

STELZENMÜLLER: He was clearly very happy

STUBB: -- on German politics. Yes.

STELZENMÜLLER: Well with that, I'm through my questions and I am going to take yours until the full hour. We've got a little less than 10 minutes. Antoine van Agtmael first. Mathilda.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: I wanted to ask -- I'm a Bookings trustee. I, I personally, being from home, believe that actually Europe can defend itself if they're ever be a fight with Russia, unlike some people here. But the question of course, is the Baltics. You are as close to the Baltics as, as anyone. You're the commander in chief in Finland. You have fought the Russians, at least not you, but Finland. So what, what could Europe without the U.S. do to defend the Baltics? What can it do already now to make sure that Putin doesn't get any ideas?

STUBB: Yeah. First of all, you know, deterrence is partially military, partially political, and partially strategic communication. And if we take the border with Russia from the northern tip of Norway through Finland, all the way to Ukraine, we're talking roughly 5,000 kilometers. You add Turkey onto that, and you think about what are the four biggest conventional forces in Europe today? They're Finland, Poland, Ukraine, and Turkey.

You look at the defense expenditure and the defense posture of the Baltic states compared to what it was in 2000, to what it was in 2010, to what it was in 2020, and you suddenly start getting a picture of a very forceful deterrence package.

The, I, I speak a lot with the secretary general of NATO, Mark Rutte, including this weekend when we spent a lot of time together here in Washington, D.C. There's one thing on which we disagree. And that is the question that you pose. Can Europe defend itself or not? And I look at this very much from a Finnish perspective, because our whole defense posture was there to be able to defend ourselves without anyone's help for the better part of eighty years until we joined NATO. There's a reason why we have general conscription, 1 million men and women who have served in the military out of 5.6. There's a reason why we can mobilize 280,000 within weeks. There's a reason why we have over 68 F-18s, why we just bought 64 F-35s. So there's a reason why we have long-range missiles, air, sea, and land. There's a reason why we have the biggest artillery in Europe together with Poland. And that reason is not a worry about Stockholm. So, you know --

STELZENMÜLLER: Good to know.

STUBB: -- my point is that, we are very comfortable with our capacity to have deterrence nationally, regionally together with Sweden and and Norway, and then in the alliance as NATO. So I, I don't have any worries about our capacity to defend ourselves.

And let me just add onto this again, without undermining the strength of the Russian military, it's been four years. And in four years during World War II, Russia advanced to Berlin. In four years in Ukraine, with all of their military might, they have advanced to Pokrovsk. So my point is that, I feel quite comfortable where we are as an alliance, but I feel even more comfortable that the United States is engaged.

STELZENMÜLLER: All right, let me see. Dan did you? No, wait a moment: Anders Aslund.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Thank you. Thank you very much. Anders Aslund, Stockholm Free World Forum. Thank you very much for a wonderful discussion. I have one question to you as president of Finland: what would you like to do with a Russian shadow fleet in the Gulf of Finland?

STUBB: Well, obviously I'd like to get rid of it, but, but, but right now it, it seems to be standing in the Gulf of Finland at about 180 strong, waiting for the oil refineries the depth of the Gulf of Finland to work. And they're not. So I think what we're doing so far has been quite okay in the sense that, you know, we focused on a lot of the environmental issues. We've been quite robust, when there have been ships with anchors dragging for 170 nautical miles.

I think the French, the Brits have been quite robust as well. The Swedes have certainly been very robust. So we have actually diminished the capacity of the shadow fleet to work. Also because of the decisions that the European Union has taken on the country of origin or the ownership. So we are creating, I think, a system whereby the capacity of the shadow fleet to work has been reduced. But yeah, I'd like to get rid of it.

STELZENMÜLLER: Alright, last question goes to Dan Fried, and apologies to everybody who hasn't gotten in a question. My fault.

STUBB: Dan is a good one because we did the war in Georgia together. Well, actually we did the ceasefire in Georgia together.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: We tried.

STELZENMÜLLER: Thank you for that clarification.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Yes, last week we had another round of speculation that Trump would pull the United States out of NATO. In the end, he didn't. And the talk seemed to shift to punishing allies that aren't helping, rewarding allies that are. Where do you, you've been one of the most effective European oculars with President Trump. Where do you, is there a happy landing on the other side of whatever it is we're going through for the U.S. and European components of NATO? And can you describe that?

STUBB: Yeah, definitely there's a happy landing. I, I, I, I said over lunch that we human beings have a tendency to over-rationalize the past. So we project the past into the present without having been in the past ourselves.

Second mistake we do is we overdramatize the present. And when we do these two mistakes, the third mistake we do is we underestimate the future. So don't underestimate the interest of the United States to stay engaged with the alliance. We get a negative example of that with some countries not allowing the U.S. to use their bases for U.S. interests. So this has been a wake-up call, I think, to the European countries that did it, and a wake-up call to the United States.

Why am I optimistic? Because I think we are seeing a slow shifting of the burden inside the alliance. And I think it's a justified shift as we have spoken. In the conversations that I've had, both with the American military and the American administration, I see no signs, off the record, of American withdrawal. But we are going to see a change in the defense posture.

Final point I want to make. When it comes to American foreign policy, for me, it's very important that we stay engaged. I I'm a, as you began, I'm a pro-European, I'm pro-American, therefore, by definition, a pro-trans-Atlanticist. And that also means that you understand the realities. The realities of American foreign policy right now have been defined two documents, the National Security Strategy and the National Defense Strategy. They are

good guidelines for what we expect to happen. In the National Security Strategy, there are two pillars. One is ideological, and that's MAGA. And MAGA is, you know, anti-globalization, anti-multilateralism, anti-international institutions, and probably anti-European ideology.

STELZENMÜLLER: And some other antis. But let's not get into that.

STUBB: Yeah, but I mean, so, so, so live with that and understand that.

The other one is policy, and that's America First. And in the policy, there's a pecking order. First comes the Western hemisphere. Second comes the Indo-Pacific, third comes Europe, fourth comes the Middle East, and fifth comes Africa. But we can see those priorities shifting because of global events. So Venezuela was very much Western hemisphere. Ukraine is very much Europe. And now Iran is very much the Middle East.

So we have to navigate and live in this world. And then when you add onto that the National Defense Strategy, where you clearly see that there will be a burden shifting, then follow that, take it literally and work with the Americans and then decide where you need to improve your own conventional capacities with keeping the United States engaged.

So I try to see and be very pragmatic, you know, move all the noise out of the system and then look at where you are.

Final point. Finnish and American foreign policy, or especially defense cooperation, it's never been closer. I mean, the thousands of American soldiers --

STELZENMÜLLER: Is this where we mentioned the icebreakers?

STUBB: Icebreakers. See thousands of American soldiers training in arctic conditions with our military. Our defense cooperation agreement, our agreements and work on technology, et cetera, et cetera. So let's not throw the baby out with the bath water. The trans-Atlantic partnership is going through a rough patch, but it ain't over.

STELZENMÜLLER: So you're not worried about further sort of, shall we say, interest in Nordic real estate from Washington? I do have to ask this.

STUBB: No, I I, I do think

STELZENMÜLLER: forcing meeting.

STUBB: Yeah, yeah. No, no, it's fine. it's, I think I, I have to admit that, and I've said this publicly as well, that the Greenland issue in, in, in January when we were in Davos, was very uncomfortable. And there was obviously a breach of trust on that, which will take a long time to patch up.

But I think what we tried to do was to create an off ramp. And the off ramp had two processes. One was Greenland, Denmark, and the U.S. negotiating about Greenland. And the other one was, how do we improve Arctic security? So if we come out of this with an agreement that the Americans have made together with the Greenlanders and the kingdom of Denmark, by and large, on how they can, you know, create security space on Greenland

as allies as they did during the Cold War, by the way, and then on top of that, that we strengthen Arctic security, especially Finland, Sweden, and Norway. Then, I, I think we're, we're all good.

STELZENMÜLLER: All right. I think we've reached the end of our time. Possibly the end of your tether. But thank you for demonstrating such extraordinary resilience and, and, and good cheer and optimism.

I want to thank the team at the president's office and at the embassy for working with us to make this possible. I want to thank my own team at the Center on the United States and Europe, without whom I would be completely powerless. And I want to thank all of you for your interest and your questions, and apologies for those that I didn't get to.

And I will, and finally thank you to you, Mr. President, for coming and joining us today. It's been a wonderful conversation. I enjoyed it greatly. Come again.

STUBB: No, thank you. Thank you very much. And, and, and thank you for the questions. I know that it's, it's, a lot harder to prepare the questions than for me to answer. So.

STELZENMÜLLER: I, that, that, you know, I'm going to have to think about that one. But if I could ask everybody to stay put while we exit, for all the obvious security reasons, I'd be very grateful. You will be, the doors will open once we have made our way out. Thank you.

STUBB: Thanks. Thanks.