

MAY: Hello and thank you for joining us today. I am Cliff May, FDD's Founder and President.

Today's discussion comes as Russia continues to build up troops along Ukraine's borders. White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki predicted last week that a Russian invasion of Ukraine is "imminent." Of course, this would be a further invasion. Russian forces seized Crimea in 2014. Since that time, Russian forces and proxies also have been engaging in a separatist conflict in Donbas in eastern Ukraine.

However—as I noted in my column this week in *The Washington Times*--unless your name is Vladimir Putin, you don't know whether Russian troops are going to invade Ukraine one day soon. And even if your name is Vladimir Putin, you may be uncertain. It's an autocrat's prerogative to change his mind.

What we do know is that if Putin wins, it's not only Ukraine that loses. The geopolitical implications are consequential and dire. Among the most foundational rules of the current world order—borders are not to be erased by military force and international commitments are to be honored.

Ukraine gave up its nuclear weapons in exchange for a guarantee of its independence and sovereignty. That commitment, the Budapest Memorandum was signed by the U.S., the UK, and yes by Russia.

A key player often missing from the analysis is Turkey – a NATO member. Turkey supplies drones to Ukraine, but also increasingly is Putin's partner. I'd argue that both Erdogan and Putin seek to reestablish their nation's lost empires and profoundly alter the post-World War II and post-Cold War international order. Beijing wants the same by the way.

We have experts here today to discuss the evolving Turkish-Russian relationship and the policy options for the U.S., NATO, and the EU.

Anna Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, focusing on Russia's policy toward the Middle East. She also serves as a contributor to Oxford Analytica and a fellow at the European Foundation for Democracy.

Sinan Ciddi is an expert on Turkish domestic politics and foreign policy and an associate professor of national security studies at Marine Corps University. We're also pleased to have Sinan as a member of the Board of Advisors for FDD's Turkey Program.

My colleague John Hardie is a research manager and a research analyst at FDD. His research focuses on Russian foreign and security policy, U.S. policy toward Russia and the post-Soviet space, and transatlantic relations.

And finally, today's conversation will be moderated by Aykan Erdemir, senior director of FDD's Turkey Program. Aykan previously served as a member of the Turkish Parliament, including on the EU-Turkey Joint Parliamentary Committee.

As you may already know, FDD is a non-partisan research institute exclusively focused on national security and foreign policy. FDD is a source for timely research, analysis, and policy options. Today's program is part of FDD's Turkey Program, which seeks to inform policymakers and the American public about the dangerous policies pursued by President Erdogan's Islamist-rooted Justice and Development Party. FDD takes no foreign government or foreign corporate money. We never have and we never will.

For more information on our work, we encourage you to visit our website: FDD.org. You can follow us on Twitter @FDD.

Thanks again for joining us for this important and timely conversation. Aykan, over to you.

ERDEMIR: Thank you, Cliff, for that impactful introduction and for your important leadership on this issue. And thank you again for joining us today. I'm Aykan Erdemir, Senior Director of FDD's Turkey Program. Cliff's remarks set the stage well on the dire consequences for the United States if we do not act soon to deter Russian aggression along Ukraine's borders. Let's move forward with my first round of questions to our stellar lineup of panelists. Anna, Cliff just said, "Unless your name is Vladimir Putin you don't really know whether Russian troops are going to invade Ukraine." And he added, "Even if your name is Vladimir Putin, you may be uncertain. It's an autocrat's prerogative to change his mind." Nevertheless, let me ask you the million-dollar question, what is Putin's game plan in Ukraine? To make it more challenging, what is Putin's game plan with Erdogan? How does Putin manage to juggle these two potentially conflicting game plans?

BORSHCHEVSKAYA: Thank you very much, Aykan. And it's a pleasure to be here today with all of you. To the extent that we can divine Putin's game plan, it is the following. It is to use all elements of state power – including coercion and really, compellence – to force the West into a dialogue on its terms and make concessions and this is far bigger than Ukraine. The issue really is not Ukraine. This is about a revision of the post-Cold War world order. This is ultimately about expelling the United States from Europe. It is about fundamentally changing the European security architecture, and Ukraine is part of it really, but this is much bigger.

When it comes to the second part of your question, Putin's game plan for Erdogan, if you look at how Putin has set up the bilateral relationship with Erdogan since the two of them essentially came to power at the same time, it's a disbalanced relationship. It's a relationship where Putin has more leverage over Erdogan than the other way around in multiple theaters and you really have to look at this across multiple theaters rather than one. Frankly, I think this is something that Erdogan may have realized a little bit too late. Certainly, Russia does not appear to be happy with the military technical relationship that Ankara has developed with Ukraine as well as Erdogan's involvement with Crimean Tartars. The issue really is what pressure Putin is ultimately going to use. And that again goes back to who has more leverage over whom.

ERDEMIR: Thank you, Anna. Sinan, let me now turn over to you. Over the last few years, we have seen Erdogan play a spoiler role with NATO to water down the transatlantic alliance's punitive action and rhetoric targeting Russia. Turkey remains the only NATO member state to be slapped with U.S. sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act for its purchase of the S-400 air defense system from Russia. Nevertheless, some analysts in Washington argue that Turkey is an important counterweight against Russia in NATO's southeast flank and for that reason, the United States should take a more appeasing tone. Is Erdogan's Turkey still the bulwark against Russia the way it used to be during the Cold War? What is Erdogan's game plan with Putin?

CIDDI: Likewise, with all colleagues and thank you to Aykan and my colleagues here at FDD and thank you for organizing this timely sort of gathering once again. I wish we could have done it in person, but here we are. Good questions. I just saw before coming online today, that President Erdogan is scheduled to go travel to Ukraine in the very near future to meet with his Ukrainian counterpart, which does sort of escalate the main question of what you just asked me, what is Erdogan's game in terms of what is he signaling by traveling to Ukraine in the next few days? It seems to suggest that he would probably like to reiterate, reinvent, and underscore his value or his potential value to NATO,

the United States and all other concerned parties in Europe, simply by saying, “I have some demands. I think I’ve been treated badly in the last few years. We still have a lot of convergence and therefore it would behoove you to essentially pay attention to what I can do.”

That being said, I think Erdogan is in a very uncomfortably precarious position, vis-à-vis, Russian actions or proposed Russian actions in Ukraine. Yes, we still don’t know the end game of what Putin is proposing or seeking to achieve in Ukraine, but it’s also the case that Turkey’s not entirely happy with the proposed Russian action. I don’t think it necessarily has any strong bearing with the treatment of Crimean Tartars or any sort of cultural sort of attributes that people may want to ascribe. That sort of bridge was crossed a long time ago with the invasion of Crimea here in 2014 and Turkey’s response was just basically to ignore it. But at this point there is one element that I’m trying to pay attention to, which has not been paid a considerable amount of attention in this area is what happens to the future of the Black Sea? One of the main concerns of all these states along the Black Sea littoral is the proposed Russian naval buildup, right?

And what that would mean for European and basically Caucasus security, particularly to other vulnerable countries in the region such as Georgia. NATO has not been too vigilant, not least of all because the United States has been absent from the region for a while in any substantive manner. But we’ve been particularly absent in terms of Russian naval build up in capabilities built up in the Black Sea, which is going ahead with full steam, and this is something or Russian naval dominance is something that they never had even during the Cold War, but this could actually become a reality at this point given their sort of domination of Crimea. If they do succeed in building that land bridge or corridor connecting Crimea and Russian mainland, then we have ourselves a problem not to mention the Russian naval basin in Latakia that’s also in the Eastern Mediterranean. So, the Turks are not happy about this, and I don’t think Erdogan is in a position where he would like to see the continued naval buildup and dominance of the Russian Navy in the Black Sea that goes uncontested.

This is something that I don’t think even he wants even in his craziest dreams. But he is in a difficult position mainly because he may not necessarily be able to deter Russian actions in one way or another simply because he learned a hard lesson in November 2015, after shooting down the Russian fighter jet. That Vladimir Putin does not actually have to hit back Turkey militarily but can make his life extremely difficult by slapping on a variety of punitive economic measures or sanctions, if you want to call them, which would cripple the Turkish economy, which it did then resulting in a full apology by Erdogan to Putin. But in this economic climate that Turkey is going through, any strong rebuke of Russian actions by Erdogan I think would be met by even stronger reactions that would seriously harm the already fragile and beleaguered Turkish economy. So, it’s unclear what Erdogan’s options are, I think simply because I don’t think he would be acting from a position of strength.

ERDEMIR: Thank you, Sinan. And now let me turn to John. John, as you and I together with Sinan explained in our recent FDD monograph, *Collusion or Collision? Turkey-Russia Relations Under Erdogan and Putin*, bilateral relations between Ankara and Moscow are extremely complex. Can you walk us through the areas where Putin and Erdogan have found common ground to join forces over the last two decades in diplomacy, defense, and energy?

HARDIE: Right. Thanks, Aykan. Great to be with you. As you say, despite centuries of war enduring mutual suspicions, and these days increasing competition across a range of theaters, Russia and Turkey really have achieved close transactional cooperation in the economic, diplomatic and even security spheres. So historically since the late Cold War era, economic and particularly energy cooperation was the main driver, as well as a buffer against geopolitical tensions. Turkey is dependent on Russian gas and Turkey is an important gas export market for Russia. The two powers had the Blue Stream gas pipeline come online in 2003. More recently in 2020 they inaugurated the \$11 billion TurkStream

pipeline, and they also have a \$20 billion nuclear power plant. As Sinan mentioned, Russia is a top market for Turkish agricultural products and construction contracts and Russia is also a top provider of tourism to Turkey, which are all important revenue streams for Turkey's beleaguered economy. The second key factor is really antipathy toward the West. For Erdogan ties with Russia facilitate independence from the West.

Then for Putin, Turkey's willingness to break with Washington and with other NATO allies really meshes well with Moscow's efforts to erode U.S. influence and undermine the transatlantic alliance that Turkey's S-400 purchase which is incompatible, as we know, with NATO systems as really the key example here. Finally, I think both Russia and Turkey recognize that even where they compete, they can achieve more through cooperation than they can otherwise. Of course, they still compete, but across a range of theaters, Syria, Libya, the Caucasus. We've seen them reach negotiated outcomes that get their interests further than where they would otherwise. Syria is really the key example here. The basic bargain was that Russia would enable Turkey to conduct operations against the Kurds to prevent emergence of a Kurdish state on Turkey's border and then Turkey in turn facilitated deals with the Syrian opposition that ultimately enabled a return of Assad regime control in various areas across Syria. I'll stop there.

ERDEMIR: Thank you, John and Sinan let me get back to you here. If Erdogan, as most opinion polls predict, loses Turkey's 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections, what is your prediction about the foreign and security policy course a post-Erdogan Turkey would take vis-à-vis Russia? Can Turkey pivot away from Russia and come back under NATO's fold once again?

CIDDI: Good question, Aykan. I'm going to preface this by sort of pushing back against the sort of recent commentary on sort of mainstream, sorry, not mainstream, but independent Turkish media and analytical thinking that a lot of us follow in a Turkish spheres, such as the *Medyascopes* of this world or the *Ahval* podcasts and where there is this sort of heightened concentration of what's going to happen after Erdogan should he lose the upcoming presidential and parliamentary election, specifically, if they sort of are held on time in June 2023 at the latest reason being is I think this is too premature to go down this road. I still think this sort of pushback is sort of sometimes accused of being the pessimist route, which then is predicated upon sort of giving Erdogan increased lifeblood, because there are so many pessimists around in terms of not being able to see what happens to Turkey after Erdogan.

I say that because the literature is clear on this, authoritarian regimes whilst they are fragile and whilst they do not necessarily last, there are good case examples where they do continue despite very, very heavy, negative economic consequences and unpopularity of leaders. There are numerous littered examples of this, not least of all Venezuela, but also Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe and there is no guarantee that Erdogan should he lose an upcoming election that he will transition power over and the pushback against that is typically that he lost Istanbul, Ankara and a number of other cities in the previous municipal elections in Turkey. That is true and if he could have had his wish, he may have not sort of let those power transitions in the municipalities happen, but let's underline one thing here, losing Istanbul or Ankara or any other city is not Erdogan losing national power or the presidency.

CIDDI: What I extrapolate from this is to suggest that we should not underestimate the Assad-like potential that Erdogan maintains in his grip to hold onto power. Because as you and me, or some other people have been saying, this has been about survival for a very, very long time, and that is number one. So, I think a lot of these sort of the Turkish perspective that concentrates on, "he's cooked, he's done, the economy's terrible, people are starving, the exchange rate is collapsing, he cannot hold onto power." I would just like to draw attention, even if it's not apples to apples, of how certain autocrats hold onto power, not least of all Bashar Assad going back to the early 2010s. This is not outside of the scope of Erdogan's potential or ability to carry out should he wish to do so. Not to mention all of the paramilitary,

conventional military, and law enforcement measures that he maintains under his skin to continue to survive. So that would be my first point. Let's not bet against the house, even though it may be depressing or pessimistic. This has the potential to continue.

Now, if it is the case that the regime is not able to survive, or there is this— we can start talking about the post-Erdogan phase, what the foreign policy arena will look like, again, we should be cautious in terms of nostalgia, thinking that Turkey will essentially sort of thaw out from its sort of authoritarian grip of Erdogan and re-engage in a positive manner with all sorts of Western partners, allies, and institutions, because I don't think that rosy scenario is likely to play out, at least in the short term.

The entire edifice of the Foreign Ministry, for the most part, in senior positions, even at the ambassadorial levels, has been housed and occupied now by ideologues. The entire integrity of these, of the foreign policy establishment, has not only been gutted, but it's been filled by lackluster ideologues or, former diplomats who came from the actual professional background have thrown in their lot with the government or the Erdogan perspective and become, I would say, "trolls" on behalf of the regime. Expecting them to come out of this shell is unrealistic in the short term.

But furthermore, the influence of the military under Erdogan's revamping since the coup attempt and the staffing of senior officers and whatnot has placed what a lot of you have correctly observed as a new ideological tint on the aspirations of where Turkey wants to play in the world, this so-called Eurasianist track, that Turkey should question its anchor with the West and its role within the United States and Europe and absolutely push back against what they perceive to be unfair demands. So, if it's the Osman Kavala and Council of Europe's decision to really take Turkey to task for breach of court rulings for imprisoning human rights activists, then I think there's a considerable pressure upon the Turkish foreign policy establishment to say, "No, we're not going to follow any of these unfair 'imperialist', Western, Soros-led impositions."

I suspect, also, any of the opposition parties that are in parliament now, especially of the ones such as Ahmet Davutoğlu, the former foreign minister and prime minister of Turkey that was under Erdogan, but also Ali Babacan and Meral Akşener's party who are now in the opposition, these entities are not what I would consider to be the bastions of liberal internationalism as espoused by Turkey's former counterparts in the late '90s, such as Ismail Cem or Kemal Dervis or a much more engaged, liberally engaged, foreign policy ideals.

So, in the short term, I think it's bleak. Although I think some of the — if we have to put some — If there is a light at the end of the tunnel, I think there would be some immediate openings for Turkey to reestablish and rekindle its institutional linkages with some core partners and allies. One area that I think would be right for this, if there is a change of governments in Turkey, especially if the AKP and Erdogan are out for good, would be in the realm of economics. Turkey is in dire need of sustainable and long-lasting financial assistance at this point in time. Some analysts — I think, Aykan, you wrote about this, or you spoke about this recently, which I heard about— a bailout package that would stabilize the Turkish economy would, at this point, be realistic if the IMF were to get involved to the tune of \$100 to \$150 billion, which is twice what Argentina received. It would be the far largest bailout in the IMF's history.

I think policymakers in Turkey in the foreign policy realm would probably like to re-engage at some level with international creditor institutions, because what Erdogan is doing is relying on extracurricular or non-conventional means of securing capital or foreign currency to shore up its economy and that is simply unsustainable. Even though the IMF and World Bank comes with some pretty hefty penalties, price tags, economic jurisprudence and running a tight ship as far as corruption and whatnot is concerned, that is only doable if Erdogan is out of the picture.

ERDEMIR: Thank you, Sinan, for that extra dose of pessimism in an already gloomy arena. Let me turn to John. So, John, what leverage does Putin have over Turkey and Erdogan until 2023 or, if we take Sinan's word for it, for possibly a much longer time? In return, what leverage does Erdogan have over Putin?

HARDIE: Thanks, Aykan. Well, if studying Russia has taught me one thing, pessimism is usually warranted. So, I will take Sinan's word for it. Anyways, in terms of leverage that Putin has, as Sinan and I mentioned in our remarks earlier, Russia is a key market for agricultural products, construction contracts, and the like. So, we could see a reprisal of the 2015 Russian sanctions against Turkey, the so-called Tomato Wars, basically cutting off access for Turkish products, cracking down on Turkish construction companies in Russia.

Syria is another key point of leverage. As you all know, Russian regime forces kind of have the last little bit of Idlib kind of bottled up, and there are tons of refugees there that could go flooding across the border, causing a big headache for Erdogan, if Russia decided to dial up the violence there.

Then, for Erdogan, we're seeing it right now. Links with Zelensky in Ukraine are definitely a good way to kind of stick in Putin's craw, whether it's selling drones, other military technical cooperation, free trade, and the like. In general, Erdogan can kind of balance between Russia and NATO. For example, if there's an invasion of Ukraine, a bigger Russian military presence there, Erdogan can look to NATO for additional support.

ERDEMIR: Thank you, John, for reminding us once again, that, even when and if Turkey would like to pivot away from Russia, it's not an easy task, and Putin has a few cards up his sleeve. Let me now turn to Anna. Again, a million-dollar question for you, Anna. What would be the smart course of action for the United States and other NATO members to take in Ukraine? What is the smartest way to push back against Russia? Do you see any constructive role Erdogan can play as part of this NATO game plan in Ukraine?

BORSHCHEVSKAYA: Sure. Great questions, as always. Well, I think the biggest lesson that we can draw from what is happening right now in Ukraine is that the West for too long has been too complacent and presented itself as too weak. What's happening now, it's not happening out of the blue. It's a result of years of actions that Putin read as weakness on the part of the West. Even if the West may not necessarily have intended it that way, this is ultimately about perception.

Specifically, just in this last year alone, two key things happened. One is the Biden administration lifted sanctions against Nord Stream 2 – by the way, against bipartisan outcry in Congress. Those sanctions were the one thing that halted Russia's main geopolitical project in Europe that is the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

The second was the absolute debacle of how we withdrew from Afghanistan, and you could see from how Putin, personally, and other senior Russian officials have taken full advantage of this and played up the narrative of the failure of American credibility, globally. So, the way to the way to push back most effectively is to deter Vladimir Putin and the hard lesson here is deterrence cannot be devoid of hard power. We are now seeing increased deployments to Poland and to other parts of Eastern Europe and so forth and that's a really important step. I'd argue it's very much overdue.

I think the question is how are these troops going to be positioned? What form will this deterrence take place with regard to hard power? But I think that's exactly where the key lies. Along with that, we should be playing up our narrative. We have a very serious narrative problem. We've had it for a very long time and again, here, the Kremlin had no problem with – Again, from the Kremlin's perspective, if you look at what they've done, it was basically what we would call a whole-of-government approach. It was everything as one package, with hard power, propaganda, cyber attacks, cyber

warfare. You're talking about all elements of statecraft being deployed, whereas we mostly focused on diplomacy and sanctions if Putin invades Ukraine, rather than – Even here, we could have enacted sanctions earlier.

But, still, I think, if we finally, now, at this very critical stage, learn that lesson and we put Putin in a position where it's a lose-lose for him – You see a lot of commentary right now saying that Putin has backed himself into a corner and one of the big debates right now among military experts, experts of the Russian military or military overall, is whether or not Putin has put himself to a point where he has no choice but to act militarily because, otherwise, if he doesn't, it'll look humiliating. It'll look weak.

I'm not sure if he's reached that point yet, but he could, if we finally play our cards right at this very late stage in the game. What we need to do is discredit him and we haven't done that yet, especially because the Russian narrative on this issue, domestically, has been all about being defensive and not wanting to go to war. If you look at Russian polling, for example, by the most trustworthy Russian pollster, the Levada Center, you're seeing a perception formed among the Russian public that it is the West that is pushing Russia to war, which Russia does not want to fight. So, the idea that a retreat might necessarily be humiliating – He hasn't quite reached that point, but he could and that's what we need to be doing.

Can Erdogan play a helpful role? This is a very tough question because ultimately if you look at how Erdogan has handled himself, he has not been, unfortunately, a good ally even as his frustrations with Putin quite clearly are real. It all goes back to again, how Putin has set up all these forces of leverage against him. The other arena there is the South Caucasus, by the way and Libya. So, the question is, can we compel against Erdogan – Can we compel him to be more helpful? I think, here, the issue would have to be compellents as opposed to incentives and perhaps that might still be an option.

I also remain, as John and Sinan, more in the pessimistic side, because I think, when dealing with countries like Russia and Turkey, that is probably a more prudent approach. But again, I do think, if we finally relearn some of our Cold War lessons, maybe we can still come out of this, if we realized what a dire situation, we're in. We're talking about a fundamental revision of the U.S.-led post-Cold War world order. It's a world that brought us an unprecedented era of peace and if the United States loses its leadership position, you're talking about a return to an incredibly unstable and dangerous world that we used to have, and I hope there is a realization that that's not a world that we want to return to.

ERDEMIR: Sinan, I think you would like to follow up?

CIDDI: Yeah, just a comment and a question. So, the comment is just to latch on to what John was articulating. It's an interesting question of what leverage does Erdogan have over Putin. I think I ultimately fall on the side of saying that he doesn't have enough leverage, basically, to constrain any Russian action should Putin decide to act because, whether it's in military or diplomatic or economic terms, the Russians have the upper hand, ultimately.

That being said, I think one of you touched upon it. I can't remember if it was John or you, Aykan, but this drone business that the Turks have developed, deployed, tested, and utilized in two notable theaters, is the biggest worry that I can raise with anybody interested, which would suggest that Turkish drone capacity has proved to be highly effective and caused significant damage, particularly in the Nagorno-Karabakh war in undermining Armenian military capabilities, and also in Libya, very much counter to the Russian-supported fighting forces.

So that is something that the Russian military is probably, likely keeping an eye on. But again, that being said, if that was Erdogan's main chip, I'm sure the Russians have something to counter that, and mainly in the realm of – whether it's cyber attacks or any other sort of military deployments – to basically render Turkey ineffective, should this conflict go ahead. So, something just to pay attention to.

The question or a couple of questions, for Anna, actually. I agree with everything she said. Do we think this is also a pivotal moment, if I may ask this? One of the things that the U.S. seemingly could do, in addition to or independent of lending military assistance in any substantive manner to Ukraine should an invasion happen – Is this not a golden opportunity for the Biden administration to really press its thumb in really backing the development of the European Defense Initiative once and for all?

Something that the Europeans became more aware of under the Trump administration, the pursuit of strategic autonomy, mainly because they cannot rely on the United States to have their back all the time., but this seems to be a golden opportunity and we know that the Germans aren't necessarily on board, but this seems to me at this point, given what you are highlighting in terms of the very present real dangers that Russia presents at this point, this is the one time where Europe can very much fully go down further the road of integration in the realm of defense and foreign policy because I don't think there's a clearer motivation to do so. I mean, we shouldn't be undermining, to start off the first question. And second one is – Well, it's not a – Yeah, I would agree with you. At this point, a colleague of mine just basically said today that an ounce of prevention is probably more effective, or an ounce of deterrence is more effective than trying to deal with a fallout of a military invasion incursion. That's unbreakable.

BORSHCHEVSKAYA: Good. Sure, Sinan. Thank you. Thank you, again. Great question. I must admit I hadn't considered it at length, but now that I listen to you speak, I think what you described makes a lot of sense. I think what it comes down to is, will the Biden administration muster enough willpower to do this? I think that's really the key question, because if we look at what happened with Germany, again with Nord Stream 2, it seems that the reason why Biden ultimately lifted the sanctions was because he wanted Germany's cooperation on China and he believed that in order to be a good ally, this was a way to be a good ally, if you will. I think this was incredibly flawed, especially because China of all countries is watching very closely what's happening right now in Ukraine and how we act here is very much going to matter for how China acts through vis-à-vis Taiwan.

But I agree with you. I think that's an excellent point, frankly. I think maybe we should be making it more and it's your comment also about deterrence being worth a lot more than that pound of cure, of course. The issue here too, keep in mind that the reason why this is so dangerous also is because if you look at how the Russian military is conducting itself, how the Russian military doctrine has evolved, they've studied us. They've studied us and they've fundamentally restructured their approach to conflict and if you look at how they handled Syria, this was a primarily aerial campaign with a small naval component and a small contingent of ground troops. So, when many commentators thought that Russia would find itself in a quagmire in Syria, we all saw quickly that the Syria campaign was designed precisely to avoid a quagmire.

If Putin goes into Ukraine, there's a long history in Russian military thought that every conflict is weak. There's no one size fits all, but what they will attempt to do, I think, if they go in is, they will attempt to do it quickly with limited casualties and it's all going to be over before you know it. So, the issue is not whether there's going to be a very full-on conventional war, but whether or not they're going to move in really quickly and really grab certain chunks of Ukraine and render it paralyzed. That's incredibly dangerous.

ERDEMIR: Now we're about to move on with some journalist questions, unless John, would you like to respond to any of the comments?

HARDIE: I think I'll save it for later.

ERDEMIR: Okay. So, Sinan, it's great that you brought the drone issue once again, because now as we turn to a few questions from our journalist colleagues, we'll touch on the drone issue. In fact, Anna, let me begin with you. We have a question from Elizabeth Cook, a freelance journalist based in Ukraine with bylines in *Foreign Policy* and *The Guardian*, and she asks, "How is Turkey's growing drone diplomacy likely to affect its relationship with NATO? Will it tip the balance in its relations with Russia, given how key a role Bayraktar drones played in Nagorno-Karabakh and can potentially play in Ukraine?"

BORSHCHEVSKAYA: Great question. I'll try to answer it as best I can because my knowledge on this issue is somewhat limited. It's clear that the Kremlin is not happy with this drone issue. It's an irritant. It's a very big irritant. I think it's ultimately going to come down to, again, because as John and Sinan had mentioned earlier, ultimately Erdogan doesn't have as much leverage over Putin. Eventually, the Kremlin might find ways to push back against this in a way that hurts Erdogan. I think that's the way it's going to go down, in broad strokes.

ERDEMIR: John, would you like to weigh in as well?

HARDIE: Sure. I would just say that in terms of the Ukraine conflict, yes, the TB2s do give Ukraine some additional capability that's significant in the Donbas against the Russian-led proxy separatists forces. However, when it comes to going against the full strength of Russia's military, the TB2s will play no significant role. In fact, they'll probably be destroyed also on the runway if Russia does end up moving on Ukraine. So that's just one point. The second, I'd say that Turkey is very good with its, like you say, drone diplomacy, taking good videos in the Nagorno-Karabakh war, Libya, et cetera. But I would just caution against viewing this as some sort of major shift in the balance of power between Russia and Turkey. Russia itself has been making strides in this area after historically lagging behind. In terms of Turkey's relationship with NATO, I'd say that it could be a bright spot. We've seen I believe, reports of potential contracts with Eastern European countries for drone capabilities. So that's some way that Turkey could make a positive contribution to the alliance.

ERDEMIR: Sinan, let me turn to you with a second journalist question. We have one for you from Şebnem Arsu, a Turkey based correspondent with bylines in the *New York Times* and *Der Spiegel*. She asks, "A recent survey indicated a growing public expectation for the Turkish government to improve relations with Russia and China instead of the country's traditional allies, the European Union and the United States. What is your reading of this finding? Is this about the Turkish government's strategic preference to establish a mutually beneficial relationship with Russia or a natural outcome of Turkey's alienation by the West?"

CIDDI: Yeah, that's a very good question. I suspect the truth lies somewhere in the middle. I haven't seen the data that this is drawn from, not to doubt its veracity, I just haven't seen it, but it makes sense from a whole number of perspectives. First of all, the discourse that's been pushed by Erdogan and his government, at least since the coup attempt, if not longer, but particularly since the coup attempt, really relying on the demonization, delegitimization, and alienation of Turkey from United States, its Western partners and the presentation of the European Union and the U.S., particularly in pernicious terms as sort of hostile to Turkey, has really trickled down into the mindset of the ordinary Turk. I'm sure your colleague who asked the question, Şebnem, as well as many independent journalists that are very

familiar with what's going on in Turkey, that if you watch and observe a lot of these street interviews with the average citizen, when asked why Turkey's in such a dire economic or foreign policy situation, there is no shortage of individuals that voluntarily just say, "Turkey's been undermined on purpose by the West, George Soros, or CIA-led plots."

CIDDI: This is very much in line with other proto-authoritarian quote nationalist populous regimes, not least of all in Hungary, Poland, but also in places like Venezuela or Brazil, where similar narratives of delegitimizing the rule of law governments and international observers seems to sort of reinvigorate and shore up the baseline of domestic voters. So, it doesn't surprise me that that is a perception in the mind of most Turks. Whether it's a strategic preference of the Turkish government, I would hold off on that not because I necessarily disbelieve it, but simply because I think the Turkish government lacks strategy or a strategic discourse of any sort of traceability at this point, right? I recently came across this snippet of non-attributable information that suggested that the present Turkish ambassador very much thought, in Washington that is, Ambassador Mercan, who was appointed quite recently, seems to believe that Turkey's position and ability to work with the United States will be much better, and all problems will be resolved if Turkey makes nice and reminds ties with Israel.

If you think, what's the relationship between the two? I think it's based on an understanding or the supposition that there are a certain number of Jewish or Israeli intellectuals, financiers or government personnel that influence and control the United States government and how it perceives Turkey. So, this is the kind of mindset that we're, I think, working with when seeing how Turkish officials and Turkish government behaves. I don't think it necessarily has a strategy of where its strategic interests lie, because if it was Russia and China, it wouldn't make sense from a perspective of strategic pivoting. Neither China nor Russia possess the economic capacity to bail Turkey economically out of its current malaise. They're not interested necessarily in investing and basically working with Turkey for any prolonged manner and Turkey's trade in economic ties and business ties, whatever you want to call it, people-to-people diplomacy, none of this is historically grounded in these two realms, but it's conversely rooted in Europe and the United States. It's strategically under the NATO umbrella. So, if there was a marked shift in more militaristic and diplomatic alignment with Russia and China, it's not through as a result of strategy, it's more a reflection, I think, just full hardiness, not necessarily well thought out plan.

ERDEMIR: Sinan, some argue that Erdogan's strategy is fence sitting, that is leveraging one block against another block to maximize his or Turkey's gain. Do you agree that this is a viable strategy, or this is a strategy?

CIDDI: That's a really good question and I was going to raise my hand, but then I forgot. An emerging senior moment in my aging years. So yes, it is interesting for one particular perspective. I've been thinking about this. For Erdogan to move substantively in concert with its European partners, concerned European partners and allies as well as NATO over the Russia issue presently, I think he needs to be given a reason, right? What I mean by that is there needs to be decisive action, whether it's military, diplomatic, or a confluence of both on part of NATO in the United States, right? To act decisively, there has to be a clear game plan for Erdogan to essentially weigh in on that. That would be my first point. A sort of divided Europe or a divided NATO in terms of, what do we do about this? Should we just wait around if there is an encouraging model response? I wouldn't be surprised at that point if Erdogan just sits this one out.

What is in his interest to really push back against that, knowing well that Turkish agricultural exports to Russia could be stopped within a day? That would be crippling already, so that would be one. Two, I think it would also be in his best interests as he conceives it, that in return, even if Europe was united with NATO, to pushing back strongly against Russia, what does he get out of it, right? So, I think that he might be interested in horse trading and bargaining, and that's not outside the realms of Turkish diplomatic trading in the past. Turkey made largest demands of the United States prior

to the 2003 Iraq invasion, to the tune of demanding 80 to 90 billion dollars of offsets, simply because it was going to be saddled with a pretty nasty cross-border trade climb down. So, I think there are two components to that as far as I can see, but initially, if there is not a clear consensus of what is to be done against Russian either deterrence or actual post-invasion, I think Erdogan is more than willing to just sit that one out.

ERDEMIR: Thank you, Sinan. John, the last journalist question we have is for you from Mindy Belz, an independent journalist who until recently was the senior editor of the *WORLD Magazine*. She asks, “Why do you think the United States, as the de facto leader of NATO, has been unable to reign in Turkey’s cross-border exploits and pivot toward Putin? Can you describe some of the leverage points the United States could apply, but has been unable or unwilling to?”

HARDIE: Yeah. So, the first question is a good one. I guess I can give my perspective. Perhaps Sinan will have smarter things to say about it, but as we discussed in our report for Erdogan, I think his goal really is sort of independence from the West. He does not want to remain just a part of the Western alliance. He wants to kind of reassert Turkey’s role within his region and sort of be an independent actor. In terms of things the U.S. can do is tougher CAATSA sanctions for Turkish arms purchases from Russia and really getting serious about confronting the democratic backslide in Turkey, I think, would be something we should absolutely do. That could take the form of Global Magnitsky sanctions. It could take the form of joining with European allies and calling out the Erdogan regime for cracking down on human rights activists and the like.

ERDEMIR: Anna, you are an expert on dealing with autocrats. Do you have any suggestions that you can import from U.S. policy toward Russia to U.S. policy toward Turkey?

BORSHCHEVSKAYA: Oh, well, I completely agree with what John said. I think the only thing I have left to add is when it comes to dealing with autocrats, again, it all comes down to pressure rather than incentives and what John described is a type of pressure. I think the other key issue is that both Erdogan and Putin seem to be quite happy with the role Erdogan himself plays at NATO as a wedge and this presents a big problem for us because we don’t have a lot of tools to change this dynamic. I think that makes both of them very happy, because Turkey essentially would have to vote itself out of NATO. It’s not going to do that. So, I think employing all elements of pressure would be the way to go.

ERDEMIR: Sinan, any ideas about how to push back?

CIDDI: No. But just to follow up on Anna’s point here, one of the concerns that’s put out there suggesting a strong European response in concert with NATO seems to fall back on the notion that it’s not an ideal time for European nations because they’re beleaguered by COVID or economic hardships, downturn in sort of GDPs, whatnot, and a variety of inflationary pressures. That’s understandable, but I would just say to sort of reinforce Anna’s sort of this is a moment sort of action, right? If we think back to the eve of World War II, no European state was in an ideal position to take on Nazi Germany, not really, right? I would very much push back against the notion that we’re somehow going to reach a plateau of economic stability and growth whereby a whole bunch of European states, as well as the United States can be saying, “Well, okay, we’re in a good position now. Yes, we can push back against Putin because we’re” –

That’s not how things work right? Putin’s keenly aware of the divisions and the weaknesses in European economies. It’s not something that he has to deal with. He does not care if the Russian economy’s in a precarious position. He’s not accountable to the electorate in the ways that his sort of adversarial counterparts are. So, this is something that European governments should weigh within the realm of there is no ideal time other than to push back against this in a

very forceful manner, in a language that he understands. Otherwise, I think he'll find a way to make those sort of land grabs to possibly establish that land corridor.

Something else also, how the United States is positioning itself. If we take it back to the Obama years and leading from behind over Syria as a sort of responsible way to undermine ISIS in opposition to putting boots on the ground and a significant troop commitment, we already know that's not the American way anymore. There is a huge amount of reticence, both militarily but also just ideationally. If Obama and Biden, quote, unquote, can be deemed as sort of "strategic thinkers" about the U.S. position in the world, I don't think they're interested in committing 10s of 1000s of troops to this. The Trump administration also made it very clear, saying they weren't interested in countering Russian aggression for one reason or another. But it's precisely because of this that the European states in NATO should volunteer to take the lead in this, even if they're not militarily as capable as the United States, with the United States lending a military hand.

There is not the appetite in the U.S. military, the DoD, or in the U.S. government at-large to open up a new front and basically, to jump on what Anna said earlier on, the Chinese are watching. Yes, the Chinese are watching mainly from the perspective of what does that mean for us for Taiwan strategy. Sure. But it would be China's golden dream at this point if the United States was to engage heavily in a military conflict with Russia, because all Russia has to do is sit this one out, for the Chinese to sit this one out, and continue to grow economically and look at the chess borders it's evolving. It would be another sort of conflict with the United States' military engaged and stretched in again and that is not something that we want.

So, from the way I look at it is it can't just be limited to a 2% increase in the NATO defense spending of NATO members. It has to be, "What can we do to take a leading role in the defense of Europe?" In a reality whereby the United States is really not interested in doing this or doing the heavy lifting in this militarily, I think it's a golden time.

ERDEMIR: Anna? Would you like to follow up?

BORSHCHEVSKAYA: Yeah. Just this is such a great point that Sinan made I just want to really underscore, because it captures something really critical about the time that we're living in. Exactly as Sinan said, "there's never really the right time." There's hardly ever a time when conditions are right for anything And you can't just think in life, in anything, that, "Unless there's a perfect time, I'm not going to act." And in Europe, exactly as Sinan said, with the rise of Nazi Germany, Europe ultimately was able to pull itself together. What really concerns me is that because we had so many decades of peace and prosperity that we've gotten so comfortable and complacent, that we forgot how tough the world really is and that's a very hard lesson to relearn. I hope we don't pay the ultimate price to have to relearn that, because we spilled so much blood fighting for this better world, for freedom. If we lose that, it means we forgot that lesson again.

ERDEMIR: John?

HARDIE: Yeah. I would just pick up on Sinan's point about America being stretched in kind of two different directions with China and whatnot. Just to add that like we said earlier, an ounce of prevention is much better than the alternative. So, I think Putin absolutely did see the U.S. and Biden saying, "We need to focus on China, COVID, climate, et cetera." Maybe from Putin's perspective, "Maybe now is a great time, with the U.S. distracted, to kind of press my claim." I think that as much as we do need to focus on China as the number one threat, we have to realize that just like with withdrawals from Afghanistan, et cetera, making that move out of Europe can only kind of pull us back in into something that's much more costly in the long run. So again, an ounce of prevention, maintaining deterrence, providing

Ukraine with weapons, actionable intelligence, standing strong with allies in NATO, I think can ultimately save us much more resources, time, and energy to focus on China in the long run.

ERDEMIR: Thank you, John. And now let's wrap up this webinar with my favorite part, which is the lightning round. So, I will ask each one of you a question and I will expect you to give me a one sentence answer and I know that's mission impossible. Anna, let me begin with you. Where do you expect Russian troops to be as of March 1st?

BORSHCHEVSKAYA: Well, if we successfully deter Putin with hard power, it is possible that we will see those troops retreated. If we do not, we can very well see Russian troops having had staged a small but very decisive incursion into Ukraine and that's an incredibly dangerous precedent.

ERDEMIR: Thank you. And Sinan, would Erdogan's Turkey join any Western sanctions against Russia?

CIDDI: It depends.

ERDEMIR: That's a short sentence. It depends, comma.

CIDDI: It depends on whether there is concerted, and decisive NATO and U.S. led actions that are clear, defined with end goals in sight that appears to Erdogan will very much make life difficult for Putin and enough for Putin to essentially backtrack from should those be levied against him. That is the only way I think that Erdogan does this. Otherwise, sit it out, I think.

ERDEMIR: Yeah, and John, in the unlikely case that Ankara joins Western sanctions against Russia, what would be Putin's strongest retaliation against Turkey?

HARDIE: Well, it could be the sanctions we mentioned earlier. It could be cyber. Perhaps Idlib boosting support for the Kurds in Syria and just to kind of give a smart aleck answer to Anna's question, we know that either way, Russian troops will be in Ukraine, because of course, Crimea is Ukraine, Donbas is Ukraine. So that's always the safe bet.

ERDEMIR: Yeah. Thank you, John and thank you all for participating today and for your insights on these important issues. Thanks to our audience for watching. For further insights into Turkish-Russian relations and how they might impact Ukraine, I recommend you take a look at FDD's latest monograph, *Collusion or Collision? Turkey-Russian Relations Under Erdogan and Putin*, which I've had the pleasure of co-authoring with two of our panelists today, Sinan and John. And all three of us were also privileged to incorporate Anna's valuable feedback into the monograph since she was one of our peer reviewers. Thank you again, Anna, Sinan and John. For more information on FDD and the latest analysis from our Turkey program, we encourage you to visit fdd.org. We hope to see you again soon.