

February 8, 2024

Featuring Clifford D. May and Dr. Celeste Wallander

Introductory remarks by John Hardie

**HARDIE:** Welcome, and thank you for joining us at today's event, hosted by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. It's Thursday, February 8, and today's panel will discuss why Ukrainian victory over Russia is in America's interest and what does victory for Ukraine look like?

I'm John Hardie, the Russia Program Deputy Director here at FDD. We're pleased to have you all here, some in person, some tuning in live for this conversation. Our event today comes at a critical time for Ukraine. U.S. aid remains stalled in Congress, even as Ukrainian forces run low on key munitions.

The U.S. defense industry is ramping up production, but also need funding that's currently stuck on the hill. As Congress deters, Russia has regained the initiative buoyed by growing domestic production and substantial aid from other authoritarian powers. Russian forces have thankfully made few gains in recent months despite heavy losses, but much is contingent on the future of U.S. aid.

Putin hopes that 2024 will be the year Russia turns the war round. He's betting America's political will to support Ukraine will falter. It's now up to Congress to decide whether we'll prove him wrong.

We're pleased to be joined here today for today's conversation by our distinguished guest, Dr. Celeste Wallander, and FDD's founder and president, and chairman of the Russia Program, Cliff May.

I'll note that Bradley Bowman, senior director of FDD's Center on Military and Political Power, was originally slated to moderate this discussion. However, due to an unfortunate last-minute illness, he's unable to join us here today.

Cliff, thank you for stepping in at the last minute for Brad. And Brad, wishing you a speedy recovery.

Our guest, Dr. Celeste Wallander, is Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs in the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Policy at the U.S. Department of Defense. She previously served as special assistant to the president and senior director for Russia and Central Asia at the National Security Council, and the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia, Ukraine and Eurasia.

Outside government, she served as president and CEO of the U.S.-Russia Foundation, a professor at American University, visiting professor at Georgetown University, Director of Russia and Eurasia at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, and Professor of Government at Harvard. She is the author of over 80 publications on European and Eurasian security issues focus on Russian foreign and defense strategy.

Cliff May, our, again, our founder and president of FDD and the chair of FDD's Russia Program, has a long and distinguished career in international relations, journalism, communications and politics. A veteran news reporter, foreign correspondent and editor at the *New York Times* and other publications, he has covered stories around the globe, and more countries that any of you would care for me to list.

Also relevant, he's an exchange student at Leningrad State University in 1972. Putin was also a student at LSU back then, and you can ask Cliff if he and Putin ever shared any brewskis.

Before we dive into our featured discussion, a few words about FDD. For more than 20 years, FDD is operated as a fiercely independent, nonpartisan research institute focused exclusively on national security and foreign policy. As a point of pride and principle, we do not accept foreign government funding.

For more on our work, please visit our website, [FDD.org](https://FDD.org), and follow us on Twitter, [@FDD](https://twitter.com/FDD).

All right, that's enough for me. Cliff, over to you.

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**MAY:** Thank you, John. Thank you, Dr. Wallander, for being here with us. Thank you all of you in the room and all of you who are here virtually.

I would like to — I want to start with some context, some history. I think it's important to understand how we got to the situation. In the podcast, the *Foreign Podicy* podcast, after these *Foreign Podicy* podcasts you do with Brad, back in September, I think it was, we looked at your May 1990, if I may, PhD dissertation at Yale, which was entitled, "Use of Force and the Uncertainty of Power: Soviet Behavior in International Crisis."

So you've been studying and working on these issues for a reasonably long time, not as long as me maybe, but long, and with more effect. I think many Americans are familiar with what happened in Ukraine in 2022 with — February 24th, that was, with Putin's massive and brutal re-invasion, I would say, of Ukraine.

They may be less familiar with what transpired before, in the post-Soviet era, after Putin took power and, of course, particularly from 2000 to 2022. And because they don't know, they're susceptible to misinformation and disinformation, *dezinformatsiya*, as the Russians would say, of which there is no shortage.

So maybe if I can, can you talk a little bit about what happened post-Soviet in terms — and the breakup of the Soviet Union and how Putin saw that and what he began to do once he came to power. I think you know where I'm — what I'm driving at.

**WALLANDER:** OK. Thank you so much for asking me to join you. Thank you, everyone, for this discussion today.

That is a great question then, and I could go on for hours, I will not. I think what is important to understand that when the Soviet Union break — broke apart, Russia and the other independent countries of the former Soviet Union were welcomed into the international community.

And the bottom-line assumption was — not assumption, but there was evidence that the populations of those countries wanted to be integrated in the international system were on a pluralistic — not fully democratic, but pluralistic path sought to develop countries with market economies, sought to be good stakeholders in the international system.

And in particular, Russia was accorded a lot of status in the international system in exchange for basically recognizing the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence of the former Soviet republics, contrary to how, of course, how the Soviet Union had treated those countries.

And Russia went on its path of pluralism and market economy in the 1990s, which was chaotic, disruptive, difficult, and so did countries like Ukraine where they established their own national identities, recaptured their histories, developed their own societies, built their own relations with Europe, with the United States.

Ukraine, in particular, for example, contributed to a number of international peacekeeping missions in Europe, but also abroad, further abroad from Europe. And they were on those paths. When Putin came back to power, he began to move Russia away from that path of pluralism, integration, and market economy towards the kind of authoritarianism, state control of the economy, fundamental corruption in the system which we see today.

And one of the challenges for the Russian leadership, not that I feel sorry for the Russian leadership, is that that is not a path to growth. The Russian economy early in Putin's leadership was growing, but that was basically because of the regeneration of oil and natural gas revenues, the foundations for which had been laid in the 1990s with privatization and the growth of market economy.

Quickly, over the first 10 years of Putin's rule, the Russian economy began to bump up against the effects of being an authoritarian system and increasing state control and ownership of the economy. So where were those resources going to come from?

February 8, 2024

Featuring Clifford D. May and Dr. Celeste Wallander

Introductory remarks by John Hardie

Increasingly, the Kremlin was counting on not just relationships, but corrupt relationships with leaderships in the former Soviet space. And increasingly on Ukraine. The Russian defense industrial base was dependent on a lot of inputs from the Ukrainian defense industrial base because of the legacy of the Soviet economy.

Ukraine is obviously an egress through the Black Sea for a lot of — potentially for Russian commerce. Ukraine itself has an energy sector, which is a potentially lucrative playing field for Russian oligarchs close to the Kremlin.

And just at that moment when Ukraine was looking at signing E.U. association agreement on Ukraine's genuine sovereign choice towards becoming a successful European country, the Kremlin paid attention to the fact that not NATO enlargement, but a closer economic and social relationship between Ukraine and the EU was threatening to pull Ukraine away from those corrupt relationships and those assumptions of influence and domination that the Kremlin had been building as Putin's leadership began to mature.

And that was the reason, in 2014, for the Russian interference, first, in internal Ukrainian politics, bending Viktor Yanukovich away from his commitment to sign that E.U. association agreement. And then when Yanukovich failed to negotiate successfully on a transition, a peaceful transition away from his own corrupt rule to what the Ukrainian people wanted, which was a new leadership, that's when Russia intervened in February of 2014 to stop — to put — in the attempt to put an end to Ukraine's aspirations for a European future. And those are the roots of the re-invasion — I agree with you, the re-invasion of Ukraine by Russia. The job wasn't done.

And the period from 2014 to 2022 was the Kremlin seeking again to keep Ukraine weak, to press hard to have those sources of influence, to press for Ukrainian agreement to not continue on that European path.

But over the period of the post-Soviet era, Ukraine had become that pluralistic democracy, and Ukrainian society remain committed to those goals, and see Ukrainian leadership remained on that track. And so that was what led to Putin's decision in February 2022, to try to finish the job.

**MAY:** There's a lot of history here. I'm going to highlight a couple — just a couple of other things that I think are important. You get to say I'm wrong.

One would be 2008 when Putin decided to carve a couple of provinces off Georgia, which also became — was part of the Soviet empire, was part of the Russian Empire, became an independent state. Maybe just talk a little bit about that. I think precursor for the Ukraine invasion.

**WALLANDER:** Fully. That's why I could talk for hours but I wanted...

**MAY:** I know.

**WALLANDER:** ... But it's a very important marking point. And what unfortunately — so here — the frame for this to think about is that Russia had managed to continue to influence national decisions, not only in Georgia but in Moldova because of unresolved conflicts on the territories of those countries.

It's hard to move towards Europe when there are territorial uncertainties because one of the conditions for making sovereign decisions is controlling all the territory of your country. So Russian occupation in Transnistria, in Moldova, and in South Ossetia, and Abkhazia, were ways to in effect hold those two countries back.

And when — under President Saakashvili, and the — again the strong societal support in Georgia, Saakashvili had begun to successfully move towards negotiating with different separatist movements in — within Georgia, first in the south of Georgia but then began to talk to the leadership in Abkhazia, and to set his sights on ejecting Russian so-called peacekeepers in South Ossetia.

And so Russia was going to lose that — this — kind of that — those tentacles...

February 8, 2024

Featuring Clifford D. May and Dr. Celeste Wallander

Introductory remarks by John Hardie

**MAY:** Yes.

**WALLANDER:** ... inside of Georgia. And Georgia was fully on track to talk with the EU for also a closer association arrangement. So in that sense it was very much a precursor.

And the — and just to lash it back to Ukraine, the reason — the initial reason for the Russian invasion of Crimea was to create a similar unresolved conflict. It wasn't...

**MAY:** In Donbas, particularly there.

**WALLANDER:** ... well no. In Crimea...

**MAY:** Oh, in Crimea? And...

**WALLANDER:** ... then...

**MAY:** ... Luhansk yes, yes, yes.

**WALLANDER:** ... after Putin changed his mind and decided to, illegally, annex Crimea, they lost that leverage over Kyiv, right because they were claiming now it's ours. That unresolved conflict which holds countries back in the form of Soviet space by the Russian-owned narrative wasn't there. And that's when the invasion of Donbas and Luhansk started. And that's when the negotiations around Minsk were designed to give Russia a veto over Ukrainian decisions about foreign policy, economic policy, by creating autonomous regions within Ukraine by which they could veto national decisions about foreign and security policy.

**MAY:** I remind people that Putin was using what they call "little green men" which were soldiers without insignias on their uniforms so they could say oh this is an indigenous — an...

**WALLANDER:** Right.

**MAY:** ... indigenous rebellion against Kyiv, and in favor of Moscow and the Kremlin. And that's — and then and then for years you have a sort of bubbling insurgency in Donbas and Luhansk.

**WALLANDER:** And the Kremlin which isn't so big on granting rights to its own regions all of a sudden became you know, a champion of the rights of certain Ukrainian regions to have a veto over foreign policy, purely instrumental to Russian control over the foreign and national security policies of Ukraine.

**MAY:** One more landmark in history, and then I promise move on but I think it's important. And that's the Budapest Memorandum, which I want you to explain a little bit about. And the reason I say that is because as we'll also talk about I think it's very much in the American interest that Putin not succeed in Ukraine, that Ukraine be free, and independent, and retain its sovereignty.

But I also think there is a moral obligation that the United States has. And I see that very much encapsulated in the Budapest Memorandum. So maybe tell a little bit about that was?

**WALLANDER:** Sure. The — so at the close of the Cold War, when there was this issue of what would happen with the 15 constituent countries that had had been part of — unwillingly mostly, of the Soviet Union. What are you going to do about the nuclear weapons, Soviet nuclear weapons. And the very — the weapons of the Soviet Union.

Under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty the Soviet Union is recognized as a nuclear weapons country, under International Law. And so — but there were nuclear weapons deployed within the Soviet Union, not only in the Russian Federation but in Ukraine, in Kazakhstan, and in Belarus.

February 8, 2024

Featuring Clifford D. May and Dr. Celeste Wallander

Introductory remarks by John Hardie

So the compromise — the negotiated compromise of — at the time, the Bush — the first Bush administration with the European allies including the United Kingdom, was to negotiate a resolution in which Russia would be recognized.

Again there was these negotiations in which Russia was privileged under International Law. Russia was recognized as the sole nuclear successor state to the Soviet Union. And in exchange for international recognition of their territorial integrity and sovereignty, and in exchange for Russian recognition of their territorial integrity, and sovereignty, Kazakhstan, Belarus, and Ukraine, agreed to — over time — to transfer those nuclear weapons back to the Russian Federation and not assert a status as nuclear weapons states, and instead to join the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty as non-nuclear weapon states with all the rights responsibilities and protections under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Kazakhstan and Belarus pretty rapidly returned their nuclear weapons. Ukraine got concerned that this was a source of leverage that they'd — I don't want to speak for Ukrainians — but sort of given away too easily. Second thoughts about the fact that you had Russian military on Ukrainian territory, because there was at the same time a separate negotiation about Russia retaining control of most of the Black Sea Fleet, in Crimea, and Sevastopol. And so they wanted to — Ukraine raised again, 'was this the right decision and that they needed guarantees or raise the possibility that maybe they should retain those nuclear weapons.

The negotiations focused on trying to preserve the agreement that had been made at the end of the Soviet period. And the resolution were political assurances from not only the United States, and the UK, but also the Russian Federation guaranteeing the territorial integrity and security of Ukraine in exchange for Ukraine actually executing the agreement that it had been made three years before — I think it's three years before, maybe two years before.

So not only the United States but Russia as part of that Agreement has a special obligation under International Law to recognize and protect Ukraine's security, and territorial integrity and sovereignty, which of course didn't last long starting in 2014.

**MAY:** And if I understand correctly the Budapest Memorandum, it's not a treaty but it still is an international obligation...

**WALLANDER:** Yes.

**MAY:** ... on our part and on Russia's part, that...

**WALLANDER:** Yes.

**MAY:** ... we do have. I mean they signed it. They gave up nuclear weapons. In retrospect maybe they wish they hadn't but they did it. And they did it because well the Americans are behind us.

**WALLANDER:** Which is one of the reasons why we have made — the Biden administration has sought to make clear. And let me use the opportunity to make it clear, that much as we support Ukraine, we want Ukraine to be sovereign, independent, secure. We want the Ukrainian people to be able to live the European life they have chosen in security and prosperity.

Our support for Ukraine is about more than Ukraine. It is about the International Order that keeps all countries, and all populations safe, including Russia, including the right Russia has to nuclear weapons is at stake because it is Russia that is shredding the terms of the International Order in which agreements mean something, in which especially powerful countries have credibility, to not bully their neighbors.

But the larger stakes are not — and this is something important to understand, it's not just a European security issue. It is a global security issue. The fabric of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in which nuclear powers agree to respect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of other countries, agree to support their peaceful use of nuclear energy for their prosperity, all of that is at stake in Russia's invasion and occupation of Ukraine.



February 8, 2024

*Featuring Clifford D. May and Dr. Celeste Wallander*

*Introductory remarks by John Hardie*

**MAY:** I want to spend a few minutes talking about how Putin and how the Kremlin justifies what it's doing in Ukraine because there are plenty of people in Africa, in Latin America, in America who buy these arguments. And I think it's important to understand what those arguments are. And Putin is — I'm sure with some help written about this at some length in — very quickly, my view is that Putin sees himself as a 21st century czar, and the czar's responsibility, his mission, and he has everything else he could possibly want, is to expand the empire in good times and restore the empire in bad times.

And that's how he — that's my quick interpretation of how he sees his role. What else does he want in his life? That's his mission.

But there's justifications that they make, maybe just talk a little bit about it. And — because again we debunk them if you will but they have been convincing to well too many people in my view.

**WALLANDER:** I hate to repeat unjustifiable justifications but I think it is important. I agree with you.

So the fundamental argument of course is that actually Ukraine is not an independent country because Ukraine is part of Russia because Russia was founded in Kyiv.

Going — and I mean beyond the absurdity of such a claim, obviously Russia and Ukraine have a history together over time. And the Ukrainian people and the Russian people have a long history of interaction, trade, movement, and all of that is factually true.

What it doesn't mean though is that that history determines borders and the — and living up to the rules of the International Order. No country in the world today exists within borders that are direct throwback to 860s which is a — which is you know, the founding of Kievan Rus.

So every country in the world, every citizen of the world would be at risk of having their lives disrupted, their — to be possibly the target of cruise missiles, ballistic missiles, and armed UAVs [unmanned aerial vehicle] if the argument that countries get to just decide, "well, we're going to — we don't like where we are in 2022 so we're going to go back to some other date when we had an advantage." Including the Russian Federation. If we're going to start unraveling history, a lot of the Russian Federation didn't belong to Russia over history.

And so that's one of the great achievements of the U.N. Charter, is the U.N. Charter said 'countries will recognize borders that exist in the moment, they can be changed but not through the use of force.' Borders and territorial adjustments need to be made through diplomacy, through agreement, through international law. So that's one sort of justification — and again, I hesitate to use that argument.

The other justification is that somehow Ukraine is a threat to its own people. This was more of an argument in 2014 than it is now ...

**MAY:** Yeah.

**WALLANDER:** ... but that the Russian invasion was because the Ukrainian state was going to threaten citizens in Crimea, in Donetsk and Luhansk. There is no evidence that Ukraine was getting to — ready to assault citizens on its own territory.

What Ukraine did was it took action to fight Russian-sponsored individuals or actually Russian soldiers with their insignia pulled off — which, by the way, is also a violation of the Geneva Conventions — in order to defend their territory.

There — the claims in 2014 of — of genocide, of fascism, of Nazism, you know, none of those have been established by any international tribunals or any investigations. And of course, now the international community is very much involved in laying the groundwork for establishing that the — actually, the country that has been committing war crimes on the territory of Ukraine is not the — is not Ukraine but in fact is the Russian Federation.

February 8, 2024

*Featuring Clifford D. May and Dr. Celeste Wallander*

*Introductory remarks by John Hardie*

**MAY:** Two points over here. One is I think Putin actually believed that in eastern Ukraine, a city like Kharkiv, because people were more Russian speakers than Ukrainian speakers, they would welcome him. And of course, they didn't. There were plenty of Ukrainians in the east who didn't speak that much Ukrainian who nonetheless said "I am a Ukrainian and I don't want Russian soldiers telling me I have to kiss Putin's ring and bow to the Kremlin." That was an interesting thing that I think he may not have quite understood.

The other justification they use — we — and I see it on Twitter all of the time, not least to me — is this is a — the result of NATO expansion, as if NATO is this imperialist power trying — and of course, that also is absolutely false. And maybe you want to say a bit about how NATO is not that at all, it is simply open to those who want to join?

**WALLANDER:** Well — and in fact, Russia agreed to that in the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997. Russia agreed to have a cooperative relationship with NATO to recognize that NATO membership was open. At the time, there was even discussion of would Russia ever qualify for NATO membership if it continued on the path that it had started in the early 1990s of pluralism and market economy.

So contrary to the myth that's NATO enlargement was directed against Russia, it was actually executed in the 1990s, in full understanding that Russia needed to be — have buy-in to and be part of European security structures, as well.

And when Putin came to office and his leadership came to office in the early 2000s, they were actively floating the idea of when would Russia be a member of NATO? I was in many of those conversations. It was later that —when the crackdown within Russia really ossified and became more about authoritarianism, control of the economy, that the Russian leadership started to see the outside world as threatening because it threatened control inside Russia, not military attack on Russia. But then NATO became that convenient, external enemy to justify the growing authoritarianism and state control within Russia itself.

And I'll also point out that in 2014, it was in the Ukrainian Constitution that Ukraine was a neutral country. So Ukraine was not on the cusp of NATO membership, although even if it were, under its obligations under the U.N. Charter, Russia is obligated to recognize that countries get to choose their own foreign policies.

And if the Ukrainian people seek a European future, whether that is the EU or NATO, underneath — under international law, that is something that Russia, as a UN Security Council permanent member, is actually on the hook to respect, but of course we've seen it doesn't.

**MAY:** I want to pick up on something you said and have you elaborate, and that's Russia's actions on the battlefield since — over the past two years — the — February 24th will be the two year anniversary — how Russia has conducted itself under the laws of armed conflict.

**WALLANDER:** I think we all know that — and we've seen this repeatedly. We saw this not only — we see this not only in how Russia conducts its operations in Ukraine but we saw a precursor of that with how Russia conducted operations in Chechnya, that the idea of proportionality, of avoiding civilian harm, of making choices about military operations, that sometimes accept disadvantage in the execution of military operations in order to avoid civilian harm is not something that the Russian military has been trained in, it's not something that the Russian leader — political leadership holds dear or, you know, abides by. So we saw a precursor of that, even more than in Georgia, we saw it in Chechnya.

So yes, with — this is a brutal leadership which does not care much about the wellbeing of its own citizens and certainly not the citizens of a country that it has identified as an enemy, and that is something that the Ukrainian people have been enduring.

February 8, 2024

Featuring Clifford D. May and Dr. Celeste Wallander

Introductory remarks by John Hardie

As — I want to highlight this one too — I — to me, one of the most horrifying aspects of Russia's conduct over the conflict in Ukraine is not merely targeting civilian infrastructure — you know, bringing down a maternity hospital in the early days of the war, targeting a theater in Mariupol, killing civilians lined up for bread, you know, in eastern Ukraine — but it is the taking of Ukrainian children ...

**MAY:** Right.

**WALLANDER:** ... from their — either from their families or orphans and sending them to Russia in this sort of almost Nazi-like idea of ethnic purity, that they need to be educated as Russians, that they are somehow going to be re-educated ...

**MAY:** Yeah.

**WALLANDER:** ... and brought back to benefit the Russian Federation. It is just astonishing to think that a Europe which faced the horror of such a leadership to do that to populations in the 1940s, is now confronted with another leadership that is doing that against a country — against the Ukrainian people in the 2020s.

**MAY:** Yeah. Putin wants more Russians. And one — that's one way to get them after all. The other way is to conquer and subjugate them and make them do his will. Okay, now, perhaps the most important question, because all the wonks in this room and watching, they understand why all this is important. But if you're somebody out anywhere in America, you may think, you know, "why should I be giving billions of my tax dollars to Ukrainians?" That's how they see it.

We can talk about how that's not exactly the way the money works, but I understand, and this is very prominent, hey, we have an insecure — we don't have a secure border in this country, and we're worried about Russians coming over the Ukrainian border. Let's get our border secure first, and then we can worry about the Russians.

I would argue that homeland security is vital and foreign policy and national security are vital, and a great power can do both at the same time. But more to the point, why should Americans outside Washington, DC care about this and want to spend their tax dollars in any way on this mission?

**WALLANDER:** So, just take you back two years ago, almost two years ago, when the invasion started, the extraordinary generosity of the American people and many of our European allies and partners coincided with the courage and the ingenuity of the Ukrainian armed forces and the Ukrainian people. If there hadn't been that support for Ukraine in February, March, April, May of 2022, in all likelihood, at least part of the Russian war plan, it would have worked in two important respects that I want to highlight for you to think about.

One is, to have taken the city of Kyiv, the capital, and the goal there, the Russian objective, was to take the capital, not to necessarily occupy it with Russian forces per se, but to put in a government, back to my original point, put in a government that would be controlled by the Kremlin, so that Ukraine was not an independent country. And another major objective was to take territory all along the Black Sea coast, from Crimea, to Odessa, to Moldova, to the borders of NATO, to Romania, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia — to the borders of NATO.

How well the Russian forces would have succeeded, that's pretty ambitious. Not clear, but they clearly had a plan to control the Black Sea coast. And the stakes were not just the government in Kyiv, but also Russian access to controlling the Black Sea. The Black Sea is an international waterway with NATO members as literal states, states on the borders, including Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey. Russia would have been able to close off the Black Sea. That is a direct threat to NATO allies and therefore to the United States.



February 8, 2024

*Featuring Clifford D. May and Dr. Celeste Wallander*

*Introductory remarks by John Hardie*

Russia would have been able to move its military occupation further west than it has succeeded in doing with Ukrainian defenses and our support for two years. What does that mean? Those UAVs that you're watching the Russians use from Crimea to strike at Ukrainian cities would be able to range European capitals. Those cruise missiles that the Russians are using against Ukrainian critical energy infrastructure could threaten European allied, NATO allied, and U.S. personnel and military forces, and businesses, and citizens, and exchange students in Europe.

That didn't happen because of the courage and the skill of the Ukrainians and because the American people were willing to support security assistance in the range of about \$45 billion over those two years. And European partners and allies have provided about \$43 billion in security assistance over that same period. So, those are the stakes because Russia's not done fighting. And Russia has certain disadvantages in its economy. It is subject to sanctions and a really substantial amount of technology exports.

But Russia has developed relationships with North Korea, with China, and Iran to get around some of those restrictions. And so, you're seeing Iranian provided UAVs striking at Ukraine, which again I highlight, could be in a different world, could be further forward deployed more towards Europe. And so, those — that's part of the stakes. So, that's what's at stake right now with the supplemental proposal.

Because right now, the Ukrainians have learned to fight. They've held off the Russians. They've actually taken back half the territory that the Russians first occupied in those early months. They've disrupted Russian operations in the western Black Sea so that the Russians have not been able to seize Odessa, and the Ukrainians have been able to reestablish some of their commercial shipping and get some of the grain out, provide the global south with much needed agricultural products, among other benefits of Ukraine's military operations.

And the Ukrainians are fighting every day. But if we cannot supply the Ukrainians with ammunition, air defense interceptors, spare parts, in order to be able to sustain those front lines as they have done so well, we could well be back in a scenario that we were facing in 2022. And that's why I highlight for you to remember what the stakes were in 2022. This is not over. The Russians are not done. Putin hasn't achieved his objective.

If anything, Ukraine is stronger, more unified, and the international community is stronger behind it. He hasn't quite figured out yet that he's failed. He needs to understand that he's failed. And so, we need to sustain the support to Ukraine through 2024 so we can build a Ukraine that can defend itself over the long term and is able to succeed on that European path.

**MAY:** I'm going to go further. And you don't need to nod your head and say that Putin believes he's going to win. My reading is that he thinks that America doesn't have the resolve to be steadfast and to continue to support Ukraine. And I know what evidence he sees, but we'll leave that alone because there's one other question I want to make sure you address, and that there is an influential faction within the foreign policy community who says, "okay, I see why Ukraine would be important. But you know what? Taiwan is more important economically in all kinds of ways. We have to defend Taiwan. And I don't see we can do — we can't do both. So, let the Ukrainian battlefield go the way it goes, and we'll worry about Taiwan. That's more important."

What's interesting there is that Taiwanese leaders do get why Ukraine is important. They do get why this would be seen as a precedent in the eyes of Xi Jinping. You want to talk a little bit about that, just briefly?

**WALLANDER:** Sure. Let me address that. But let me first address the notion that we can't do both. In fact, the U.S. military is better positioned in capabilities than it was before this started because the mechanism by which we have provided capabilities to Ukraine, there's two of them primarily. One is called USAI, Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative. That's procurement for new capabilities. But most of what flowed, especially early in the conflict, is presidential drawdown authority.

February 8, 2024

Featuring Clifford D. May and Dr. Celeste Wallander

Introductory remarks by John Hardie

Presidential drawdown authority allows the US to give existing stocks of capabilities and U.S. stocks to other countries as well. But the focus right now is on Ukraine because of the conflict. But the budgets that were passed in the past two years that Congress passed in support of Ukraine include replenishment funds. So, the United States military, in donating capabilities to the Ukrainians then has been able to buy new production — more recent versions of those capabilities — to restock itself, in order to use the opportunity to modernize by newer versions of ammunition platforms, all these capabilities.

So, a lot of the money that Americans generously provided to support of Ukraine actually has gone to the American Defense Industrial Base to replenish U.S. stocks. And we can do both. And every decision that Secretary Austin recommends to the White House on what to provide Ukraine is balanced against a number of factors, including making sure that the United States can absolutely support and supply our allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific. So, we can do both. We are doing both.

And in many respects, we're doing it even better because of that particular feature of what presidential drawdown authority is. On the geopolitics of your point, there is very good reason to believe that the Chinese are watching very closely and have a huge stake in Russia's success. Because if Putin is successful in shredding the U.N. charter and benefiting from it and renegotiating by action and by the use of force, the terms of European security, what's to stop China from following that path when it is ready on Indo-Pacific security?

And that's one of the reasons why China has had Russia's back in the U.N. Security Council in votes, condemning Russia's intervention. It's one of the reasons why China has been eager to benefit from Russia's sort of isolation, in benefiting from lower oil prices, in all kinds of commercial advantages, in dealing with Russia.

It's partly to bolster Russia's operations in Ukraine because the Chinese leadership doesn't want Putin to lose because of what that would mean about the strength of the international community and pushing back against a bully. But it's also taking advantage in the meantime to build its own capabilities, taking advantage of Russia because China's watching and planning for the coming decade for itself as well.

**MAY:** I want to be respectful of your time. And I want to make sure we go to audience questions, but at least three questions I want to try to get in the next five minutes or so. One is ATACMS [Army Tactical Missile System]. Why is the administration persistently refused to provide the longer-range army tactical missile systems and special unitary warheads, which our analysts here at FDD, Mark Montgomery, Brad Bowman, think would be very helpful and that they really need?

And as you know, the criticism of the Biden administration has been that, yes, supplying weapons to them enough so that the Ukrainians don't lose, but not enough so that they win, and ATACMS would be an important — not the only one, but an important component in that —in winning.

**WALLANDER:** Well, let me be very clear, no decision on what to provide the Ukrainians is calculated in the realm of let's just give them enough to fight, not enough to win.

Our first — from — in these two years, the first decision metric for what are — it's — what was a biweekly, every — twice a month, provision of capabilities to Ukraine was first and foremost what the Ukrainians said was their priority, and second, what the shape of the battle was in the moment.

So at first, it was Javelins, then it was HIMARS [High Mobility Artillery Rocket System], then it was air defense, then it was armor, then it was mine-clearing capabilities.

February 8, 2024

Featuring Clifford D. May and Dr. Celeste Wallander

Introductory remarks by John Hardie

So we are — the DOD has been generously provided resources by the American people to support Ukraine, but it is — you know, it's not infinite, and so you have to make decisions. So we've been driven by the Ukrainian priorities and by the shape of the battle and what they need in the moment.

We have provided Ukraine with longer strike capabilities, including — I can't get into too much — some UAV capabilities, some modified longer range strike from air-to-ground capabilities. And so they have been able to take strikes at places — in places like Crimea.

As the battle shifts now to thinking about the importance of Ukraine holding the Black Sea, we're looking again at options and looking at how to ramp up our defense industrial base in producing more and better, longer range capabilities so that we might have the option to provide Ukraine with longer range strike capabilities.

All of our decisions have to be also measured against readiness requirements. Readiness in EUCOM, but also readiness in INDOPACOM. And now, as we're seeing every day, readiness in CENTCOM. So global availability of some capabilities play a role in decisions about what kinds of capabilities to provide with the Ukrainians, but that is also an evolving situation.

And we have been able to provide the Ukrainians with some longer range capabilities that early in the conflict we didn't think we would be able to.

**MAY:** OK. And then this question in a way it's unfair, how are the Europeans doing? Are they stepping up and bearing their burdens as they should? And again, that's something that people tweet at me all the time when I support Ukraine.

And it's an unfair question in a way because you're saying Europeans that French, the Germans, the Latvians very different in terms of percentage of GDP that they're giving over. But just give a few minutes on what the Europeans are doing and how you see it.

**WALLANDER:** So the United States is 16th in rank in terms of the percentage of GDP contributed in security assistance to Ukraine. We're 16th. Now, our GDP is bigger than a lot of European countries, in fact, all European countries. So the numbers, the, you know, sort of — the headline number is big.

But countries like Estonia are way ahead of us in terms of how much of their security assistance that's taken out of stocks and contributed. The United States has contributed about 30 advanced tanks to Ukraine.

European countries together have contributed 200 modern tanks to Ukraine, Leopard tanks, and many hundreds of refurbished T-72 tanks that the Ukrainian — and refurbished at their own expense, at European countries expense. Sometimes the United States help with those expenses to provide to the Ukrainians so they could fight for the last two years. That's, you know, an example.

The United States has not provided a presidential drawdown authority package since December, because we're out of money. The Europeans in the last Ukraine Defense Contact Group continue to announce new security contributions to Ukraine. The United States can't do that right now.

Europe is sustaining Ukraine in early 2024 in a way that the United States hopefully will return to once we get the supplemental passed. But Europe absolutely has worked with the United States to plug gaps, to provide capabilities that the United States doesn't have.

And they are leading, of the eight capability coalitions that we've now formed looking at immediate but longer-term requirements for Ukraine. They are leading all of those capability coalitions in one way or another.

February 8, 2024

Featuring Clifford D. May and Dr. Celeste Wallander

Introductory remarks by John Hardie

We are co-leading with the Europeans on an air force capability coalition and an artillery capability coalition. The coalitions like armor, air defense, maritime security are being led by our European allies and partners. And that includes not just operational planning, it includes providing platforms, sustainment, maintenance and building infrastructure as well.

**MAY:** All right. The title of this conversation is meant to be “Victory and Defeat in Ukraine.” Hard to do maybe, but you're up to the challenge. Can you define victory and define defeat for the US and for Ukraine, as briefly and as succinctly as you can?

**WALLANDER:** Unfortunately, defeat is easier to define. It is a Ukraine that is not sovereign, independent, democratic, able to continue on its chosen democratic path. I want to highlight, though, that isn't measured in how much territory the Russians occupy, because as I pointed out, Russians don't have to continue to occupy all that much territory to control a country.

At least that's their experience in — I think that experience is slightly changing in Moldova and Georgia where leaderships and populations are increasingly concerned about the continuing Russian occupation. But the Russian play is not to directly occupy all of Ukraine, it's to have a compliant leadership in Ukraine.

And they've not succeeded. And they've not succeeded because while they do occupy territory of Ukraine, they are being fought, they are being pushed back and they do not control enough territory to be able to influence, manipulate, and succeed in their efforts to overthrow the Ukrainian government and put in place a compliant leadership.

That's what defeat looks like. So don't measure it in terms of how close to Kyiv they may be, although that would be bad. Whether they get all the way to Lviv in Western Ukraine, that would be very bad. They're objective — they're more — the Russians are more adaptable and flexible in how they would execute that domination of Ukraine.

What does victory look like? Victory is a Ukraine that is, first and foremost, its national security policy, its foreign policy, its economic policy is determined by the Ukrainian people and their democratically elected leadership in which Ukraine continues to be a sovereign country, recognized within its internationally recognized borders as an independent country, and that is the objective we are working to.

I know there's a lot of speculation about what kind of negotiation could there be. In the end, that's Ukraine's decision about what a negotiation would look like, but we are absolutely firm as the United States that we support Ukraine's territorial integrity as it defines that, its sovereignty, independence, and its right to choose its own future. That's victory for Ukraine.

**MAY:** OK, we're going to go to audience questions, so raise your hand and we'll get a microphone to you. While we do, is there anything I should have asked you that didn't — that you want to respond to? Any point that you want to either say or just emphasize before we go to the questions from the audience?

**WALLANDER:** No, I don't have any questions.

**MAY:** OK. I got through a lot of it.

**WALLANDER:** Thank you.

**MAY:** Go ahead. Yes, Mr. Schmitt.

**SCHMITT:** *New York Times* — Eric Schmitt from the *New York Times*. Thank you very much.

Two part question. One is, could you just address the news of the afternoon that President Zelenskyy has formally fired General Zaluzhnyi? What impact do you think that will have on the campaign right now? And what's your assessment of General Syrskyi, his replacement? That's question number one.

February 8, 2024

Featuring Clifford D. May and Dr. Celeste Wallander

Introductory remarks by John Hardie

Question number two is, many analysts feel that 2024 should be a year where Ukraine holds what they have and then builds up capability, both in their terms of manpower and materiel for any extensive — whether it's another major counter offensive, not wait until later this year or even into 2025, perhaps striking selectively at places like Crimea and their supply lines into Ukraine.

Do you share that assessment right now? Is that the most realistic assessment that you see going ahead in 2024 for Ukraine? Thank you.

**WALLANDER:** Good — first, thanks. On President Zelenskyy is the president of his country. And Ukraine, unlike Russia, has a democratic civilian control of the military. And President Zelenskyy gets Russia — obviously Putin controls the military, but has a, notice I said, democratic civilian control of the military.

President Zelenskyy is elected by his population. And he has the right to choose who he believes the commander in chief in the war is, and he has decided to choose General Syrskiy, who's an experienced, successful commander. He has led bravely, well, and really to good effect Ukrainian forces in Luhansk and in Donetsk.

So in the — the United States will respects and will work with whoever the democratically elected government and leader, President Zelenskyy, chooses to be his commander in chief. And we will work effectively with General Syrskiy. We already have because of his role already.

On the question of 2024, we are in close consultation with the Ukrainians about their objectives for 2024. In order to be able to shape our security assistance, which again, I highlight, hopefully we will be able to again reinvigorate with a successful resolution of the supplemental decisions in Congress, we will shape that security assistance to resource the operations to meet the objectives, which are going to be politically defined by the political leadership in Ukraine, and then validated through best military advice within Ukraine and through our discussions as we have again for the last two years.

I don't — I'm not going to speculate about what specifically the shape of those military operations would look like, partly for operational security reasons, but partly for — because we need to work with the Ukrainians, they get to define how they should conduct their operations and we'll give them our advice.

We have a very strong, I think, relationship. We have a lot of credibility and trust built between the U.S. political leadership and the Ukrainian political leadership and military-to-military relationships. But — so I can't really speak any more detail.

**MAY:** Yes, please.

**DOZIER:** Kim Dozier, CNN analyst. You mentioned that after Russia had occupied and annexed, illegally annexed Crimea, that it had to create another autonomous region of friction inside Ukraine hence the operations in Donetsk, et cetera. Does that mean that if the Ukrainian army could push Russia back to just Crimea, that there was, would be a possibility of joining NATO, or as long as Kyiv says Crimea is still part of Ukraine, that would trigger Article 5, which would then block them from joining NATO?

**WALLANDER:** Membership in NATO is a political decision. It's not a technical decision. So as we work with Ukraine so that Ukraine — when — by the way — thank you, let's be clear, Ukraine now, in addition to wanting join EU is very clear that it wants to become a member of NATO. We support that.

We are working with Ukraine on programs to meet the standards, interoperability standards, defense institution building and so, we fully support that aspiration and we'll work with them.

The specific terms of what the end of the war looks like, as I suggested is very much something that Ukraine has the lead on. Membership in NATO is something that a sovereign territorial — sovereign country with territorial integrity brings to the table — the terms of that are — you know, it's too early to speculate because that is not the situation that Ukraine is in.



February 8, 2024

Featuring Clifford D. May and Dr. Celeste Wallander

Introductory remarks by John Hardie

There is 2024 to work through and — but we support the aspiration and we want to provide Ukraine with the capabilities, whether that's economic or military, to achieve its objectives in its definition of what territorial integrity and sovereignty is, as it moves towards NATO membership.

**MAY:** OK, thank you.

**GEHRKE:** Thank you. Joel Gehrke with the *Washington Examiner*, thanks for doing this. Two relatively quick questions, I hope, it's common place now to describe this conflict as a war of attrition, and of course, Russia is bigger than Ukraine.

If the funding were in place, is there some — do you have an assessment if there is some combination of military equipment training, ammunition et cetera, that would allow the Ukrainians to break that dynamic — break Russian lines and make major territorial gains? Is that a matter of funding and policy choice?

And then second, you mentioned the Ukrainian children in Russia, what kind of conversations can you tell us about — what does it take to get them back? Is that a matter of battlefield leverage or making some kind of concession, you know, to some other kind of negotiation to get them back?

**WALLANDER:** On the second question, I'm not deep into those negotiations. It's not really a DOD lead on that, but I believe there is a focused international groundwork being laid for a resolution of that and it lays in the tracks of international humanitarian law, holding Russia to account and — you know, by — I don't have the details on that.

On the issue of do — is the U.S. assessment that Ukraine can change the dynamics of the war of attrition — your characterization, not mine, yes, we do. We think the Ukrainians have the capability, we think they have the training with the capabilities we've already provided, those — only 30 tanks the United States — we've provided a lot of Bradleys and Strykers, so we're not slackers.

But with the armored capability, the artillery capability, what we lack right now is a steady flow of ammunition to be able to provide to the Ukrainians — that's why we need the funding, the prepare, the maintenance. And there are plans for new rounds of training to help the next step towards an even higher level of capability in training, as they bring new soldiers in, as they retrofit and — and prepare for what's ahead of them in 2024.

So, yes, we do believe that Ukraine could seize the initiative, could seize advantages. I won't get into specifics about where they could take territory, again of kind of operational, it's to be determined by the Ukrainians themselves but yes, absolutely, we do believe that they can change the dynamic of this conflict if they are resourced properly.

**MAY:** I think we have time probably for one more question, maybe two — I don't — let's see how it goes.

**WEEKES:** Hello, good evening, thank you very much for a fantastic explanation of many things. And I'm really excited by the use of the term “re-invasion,” because it sets a context that many times some of us seem to have missed. My question is this comes from the Russian playbook. It is not significantly different from skirmishes we have seen in the past.

What have we learned and we — not lessons observed, but lessons learned, so that there is an actual application of something a little different this time around to leverage what Russia sees as their right, but we look on — look upon in horror and say, “oh you know, what sort of behavior is this?”

What are we doing differently? And I'm not just speaking about the hard power approach, what kind of combination of the several types of powers that we think could bring some decisive conclusion to all these various definitions of victory?

## Victory and Defeat in Ukraine: A Conversation with Assistant Secretary of Defense Celeste Wallander

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*Introductory remarks by John Hardie*

**WALLANDER:** Great. Thank you. It's a great question. And the basic frame, I think, the common element of a frame to answer your very good question is resilience. Not being dependent on Russian energy imports, not being dependent on Russian financial flows, not being subject to corrupt relationships that can influence our politics, not being vulnerable to election interference, not being dependent on — this isn't a lesson for the United States, because we aren't dependent on Russian military hardware.

A lot of countries are looking at their stocks and going it's — it probably isn't a good idea for us to be that dependent on Russian military sales because first of all, their sales have dropped because they're kind of using the stuff themselves, but also, a lot of the old Russian military capabilities that was the core of their military sales hasn't performed very well in Ukraine, and the Russian defense industry has had on places like Iran.

So, working with allies and partners and vulnerable countries that the Russians may have next in their sights, the Moldovas, the Georgias, the Kazakhstans, continuing to keep hope alive for Belarus and Belarus' future, I think that is something that we knew generally, but now that we've seen the extent to which the Kremlin is willing to use all the instruments of its power to try to subvert, subjugate and dominate an important neighbor, I think that that's been heightened and the seriousness of that has really been elevated.

**MAY:** All right, I want to — let's thank Dr. Wallander for sitting down with us today.

I want to thank all of you here, thank all of you at home, and I want to say — I want to thank Brad Bowman, who directs our Military Center for his tireless work on this issue, for arranging this discussion and for all of you, for more information FDD and our Center On Military and Political Power and the latest analysis we have of issues, please visit [FDD.org](https://www.fdd.org).

Thank you for joining us in person and virtually on the livestream.

And again, thank you very much.

**WALLANDER:** Thank you.

END