

Transatlantic Security After 75 Years of NATO: A Conversation with U.S. European Command

May 10, 2024

Featuring: Lt. Gen. Steven Basham and Ambassador Kate Marie Byrnes

Moderated by Bradley Bowman

Introductory remarks by Ambassador Eric Edelman

EDELMAN: Welcome and thank you for joining us for today's event, hosted by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and its Center on Military and Political Power, CMPP. I'm Eric Edelman, a member of CMPP's board, and I'm pleased to have you tune in for this conversation.

This year marks the 75th anniversary of the founding of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, arguably one of the most successful alliances in history. Members are preparing to meet in Washington this summer for the NATO Summit.

President Putin's continued war of aggression in Ukraine, the largest war in Europe since World War II, cast a shadow over the anniversary and the summit. Even as we see serious threats in the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific, Washington now confronts, and I quote, "a combination of challenges and threats in the Euro-Atlantic area that we have not seen in more 30 years," unquote, according to congressional testimony by EUCOM [U.S. European Command] Commander, General Chris Cavoli.

EUCOM is comprised of more than 64,000 military personnel and is responsible for U.S. defense operations and relations with NATO and 50 countries. To discuss transatlantic security, U.S. interests in Europe, the threat from Russia, NATO readiness, and much more, we're happy to welcome two distinguished leaders from EUCOM.

Lieutenant General Steven Basham is the deputy commander there. He has completed numerous flying staff and command assignments and is a command pilot with more than 3,400 flying hours in the B-1, B-2, and B-52 bomber aircraft. Prior to his current assignment, he was the deputy commander of U.S. Air Forces in Europe, Air Forces Africa, at Ramstein Air Base in Germany.

Ambassador Kate Marie Byrnes is the civilian deputy and foreign policy advisor to the Command, a position she's held since November 2022. She's a 30-year veteran of the U.S. Diplomatic Corps and a member of the Senior Foreign Service with the rank of Minister-Counselor. She most recently served as the U.S. ambassador to North Macedonia.

Moderating today's conversation is Bradley Bowman. He's Senior Director of FDD's Center on Military and Political Power, focusing on U.S. defense policy and strategy. He served nearly nine years in the U.S. Senate, including time as national security advisor to members of the Senate Armed Services and Foreign Relations Committee. He also served as a U.S. Army officer and an assistant professor at West Point, where he taught courses in U.S. foreign policy, grand strategy, and American politics.

Before we dive into our feature discussion, a few words about FDD. For more than 20 years, FDD has operated as a fiercely independent, nonpartisan research institute exclusively focused on national security and foreign policy. As a point of pride and principle, FDD does not accept foreign government funding. For more on FDD's work, please visit its website, [FDD.org](https://www.fdd.org), and you can follow FDD on X [@FDD](https://twitter.com/FDD).

I think that's more than enough from me now.

Brad, over to you.

BOWMAN: Great. Thank you so much, Ambassador Edelman, I really appreciate that. Lieutenant General Basham, Ambassador Byrnes, thank you so much for taking time to join me for this conversation. I really appreciate it.

With your permission, I think I can't improve on that introduction by Eric. So, let me just jump right in, and let me start with, perhaps, the broadest, and maybe the most important, question,

and that is: Why should Americans care about what happens in Europe, and why do you think the developments there matter?

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You know, some might be watching this sitting at home, and saying, you know, we got a lot to be concerned about here at home. We've got things happening in the Middle East. We have concerns in the Indo-Pacific. Why should we care about developments in Europe? I'd love to go to both of you on that.

So, General, maybe we start with you.

BASHAM: Well, Bradley, what a great question to start off with. Thank you very much. I think, first of all, we owe a thanks to the American people for the ability to be able to be over in Europe, to be able to work with our allies and partners, and that's really the key to your answer right there.

The defense of our nation actually starts well outside the borders of the United States. They start in Europe, in the Indo-Pacific, other areas out there to be able to actually share a partnership.

Our true strength actually comes from the alliances that we maintain globally, not just in Europe, and the ability to be able to work closely with those allies and partners. So, it truly is all about, how do you actually become stronger by standing against aggression? That, I know we're going to touch on just a little bit in this podcast. So, thanks for putting this forum together.

BOWMAN: It's my pleasure. Ambassador, how would you answer that question? Why should Americans watching be concerned or interested in what's happening in Europe?

BYRNES: Well, again, I agree with the global impact that General Basham referred to, but I think the United States' relationship with Europe is also a truly special one. It's based on shared history and values and objectives.

We have partnered together in so many ways to better the lives of citizens on both of our continents, but frankly, also around the world, because what we do through the U.S.-European relationship, the incredible trade, security, cultural, even academic exchanges that we have with Europe, and between Europe and the United States, has a huge, transformative impact on the global economy and on global relations. So, in that sense, we truly do believe that American security and European security are synonymous.

BOWMAN: That makes sense to me. Some of our leading trading partners are there, so that's important to our prosperity. And some of our most important, and most capable, allies obviously are there, and we're going to talk about this later. But as we see some of our competitors-slash-adversaries working more closely with their partners. It's a reminder that even they understand the value of partners, and some of our best partners are in Europe.

So, great. Maybe we can structure our conversation here, as I often like to do, headache and aspirin. Let's jump into the headache. I don't want to give you too bad of a headache, but you're an expert on the headache more than me, so I'm eager to hear your assessment of it.

General Cavoli, of course, the commander of European Command, told Congress that we are seeing — it's a different version of what Ambassador Edelman already said, quote, "we see a Euro-Atlantic area that faces more threats and dynamic challenges than in any time in the past 30 years."

Wow, I mean, that's quite an assessment. So, I'd love to hear from both of you, if you're willing, on kind of an overview of the threats and challenges you're seeing in the region.

BASHAM: Well, Brad, if you don't mind, I'll start off. You know, first of all, we have to go back to the unprovoked invasion of Ukraine by Russia, and the change to the Euro-Atlantic and the European defense or security structure that that actually drove, and it's clear that Russia is truly a chronic threat, and they're not going away for quite some time. I think they've made it very clear their aspirations, not just inside Ukraine, but even beyond Ukraine.

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We'll talk about the aspirin just a little bit later on, and we're thankful that we have an alliance here, but it's not just about Russia, and quite honestly, it's not just about Russia in Europe. Russia is a global challenge, and we have to focus on Russia as a global challenge. At the same time, it's about the PRC [People's Republic of China] as well.

There's a lot of influence inside Europe — by the PRC in Europe, just as there are many other places, and again, the PRC can be a global challenge that we need to deal with. The good thing is, while the PRC deals with, primarily, information, economic, and maybe a lot of the diplomatic, it is certainly trying to bolster their position, but we've had a great opportunity to be able to, maybe, work closer with our allies to show them exactly what's going on, and I have to offer, we can't forget, there's still a level of violent extremists that's going on out there.

And of course, there are other nations that are supporting Russia, such as Iran and DPRK [Democratic People's Republic of Korea], that we have to pay close attention to. So, I think the landscape, unfortunately, has been set by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Now, it sets the — as we'll talk about maybe later on — kind of, some of those aspirins. How do we deal with this headache that's been given to us by someone else? But in the end, I think we have a great alliance that's going to help us get through that, but let me go to the ambassador and see if she's got a few things.

BYRNES: Right. Right, and it's important to remember that Russia's attack on Ukraine wasn't just an attack on another neighbor's sovereignty and territorial integrity. It really was an attack on all of the rules that we have governed our relationships by in Europe for a long period of time. It was manifested, also, in things that we didn't necessarily see in a physical sense, but attacks in cyberspace, and information narrative that has had a really destructive impact across Europe, and exposed vulnerabilities.

And while Europe is dealing with this incredible, as you say, unprecedented threat from Russia, at the same time, in addition to dealing with the terrorist attacks, we've seen quite a significant number just in the past few years, it's dealing with the traditional crises that have been exacerbated, including the impacts of climate change, the levels of regional instability that have forced migration to the forefront here in Europe, raised issues of concern with food security, export markets, all of these things which, for economies that are still struggling to recover from the effects of the pandemic, have made it a very, very difficult problem set we can only face together.

BOWMAN: Thanks to both of you. I think that's a great overview. One thing that I want to, kind of, drill down on, if I may, is the Arctic. It's probably — you know, maybe, for those of us who live in the lower 48, if you will, and maybe not the first thing you spend time thinking about, you know. If you're in Alaska, maybe you spend a little more time, but I noticed, again, that General Cavoli in his testimony said, quote, "The retreat of the Arctic ice cap has been opening waterways in the high north, a phenomenon Russia and China are eager to exploit." So, I'm interested in hearing from either of you, kind of, an update on what you're seeing in the Arctic.

BASHAM: Well, Brad, if I could start off, I'll say, first of all, as General Cavoli highlighted very well, the fact that, actually, there's now greater access to the Arctic by not just Russia, but by other nations which wouldn't traditionally be seen as Arctic nations, such as China, taking advantage of being able to exploit that.

It also creates an opportunity for many other nations to be able to now gain access to that through freedom of navigation, but then, there are challenges, potentially, to that freedom of navigation.

I know as we talked about maybe some of the solutions, it's gonna be important that many nations come together to actually understand the norms that actually should operate as far as being able to, certainly from a military perspective, but also, the economic gain that can actually be realized from the Arctic area.

So, I think there's a lot of opportunity in the Arctic North, and quite honestly, we look forward to working with many nations.

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BYRNES: Yeah, and I would just add to that, I mean, there are real impacts on infrastructure there as climate changes some of the seaports and access issues, and then, of course, that competition for resources that General Basham referred to.

BOWMAN: Great, thank you. I want to, as we — kind of, do a tour around the region here before we jump into the second portion, Ambassador, I would love just to get an update from you on the Balkans. You know, we've seen some concerning ethnic violence. We've seen some violence against NATO peacekeepers, some were injured, and we've seen the Kremlin up to no good in the region, nothing new there.

I would love just to hear from you what's happening in the Balkans, what concerns you have, and how the U.S. government, European Command, and NATO are trying to respond.

BYRNES: So, I mean, we've talked for years about the importance of a Europe whole, free, and at peace, and the western Balkans has always been, sort of, the last puzzle piece to that integrated picture.

And as you said, we've seen some increased political tensions, economic struggles, and even interethnic tensions that have been exacerbated by some malign influence and opportunists seeking to increase that tension and instability. So, it is a major concern to us, because we have U.S. and NATO forces engaged in the region, but also, more broadly, because we believe in the importance of fully integrating this region into Europe. That has a practical impact as well, because the Balkans, the western Balkans included, but all of the Balkans, play such a critical role in the protection of NATO's southern flank, and in providing a deterrent effect on NATO's eastern flank. It's also very important as a mobility corridor, not just here in Europe, but for our support to other regions, and other parts of the world.

BOWMAN: Right, thank you.

So, you mentioned China earlier, General, and again, I think a lot of Americans, when they think of Europe, they don't think of China as the first thing to come to mind in terms of a threat or a challenge. They may think of it as — the PRC as an issue that's far away from NATO. And yet, the more I study the issue, the more I see that that's — maybe China is far away geographically, but in terms of some of the domains that you focus on, and I used to focus on as a military officer, I'm thinking space, cyberspace, and then also, information warfare, the PRC is not a faraway threat for Europe. It's right up there in your dish, if you will, a challenge.

And we've seen that NATO is an alliance in periodic... joint statements talking about China. You've seen members of NATO being more outspoken on China, I think — I'd say, being candid in their assessments of the challenges emanating from the PRC.

So, I'd love to hear, kind of, from your perspective, as the deputy commander there in European Command, what challenges you're seeing from China in your area of responsibility?

BASHAM: Well, thanks again for, kind of, touching on the global nature of China. I think there, as you highlighted, many would say that it's a real regional problem in the Indo-Pacific area of operation, but in reality, no, it's a global challenge, and not just Europe, Indo-Pacific, Africa and other nations we've been focused on.

You know, there is a clear, in China's Belt and Road Initiative, there's a clear vision of being able to provide resource, gain access to resource, but also, to gain access to infrastructure that will benefit China, not necessarily to benefit European nations, if we focus on that.

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And so, the best thing we can do right now, and I think many of the nations are doing the same exact thing, it goes to the information sharing. So, when we talk about information operations, it's the ability to be able to make sure that we're highlighting appropriately some of the malign influence by the PRC in the European AOR [Area of Responsibility], and then, of course, when we start talking about space and cyber, we've seen a significant advancement of China in space, but actually, that truly is a global challenge that we're all going to face.

And obviously, if we start looking at the cyber domain, that becomes a global challenge for all of us, and the more that we're able to highlight what China may or may not be doing inside of European nations' information networks, it at least starts to expose, again, as I mentioned, some of that malign influence.

So, we'll continue to focus working closely with NATO, and certainly willing partner nations, to highlight some of the key challenges that PRC proposes to [sic], or poses to, Europe.

BOWMAN: No, thank you. General Cavoli also commented on the relationship between China and Russia in his testimony, and one of his quotes really jumped out at me. Something we've been focusing on here at FDD, and in our Center on Military and Political Power, is the growing relationship between what I, and perhaps some others, have called an "axis of aggressors": Russia China, Iran, and North Korea; and the quote from the general was, "Russia, the PRC, Iran, and the DPRK" — of course, referring to North Korea — "are forming interlocking strategic partnerships across the world's largest landmass. The bloc of adversaries is more cohesive and dangerous than any threat the United States has faced in decades," talking about this group of four autocratic or authoritarian nations.

Would love to hear from either of you on how you see the China-Russia relationship evolving.

BASHAM: If you don't mind, I'll start off.

And then, Ambassador, I know you have just great thoughts on this. I think we need to acknowledge that, you know, for Russia, a country that used to be — pride themselves as a defense exporter, they seem to be importing an awful lot of — not only equipment, but also technology, and a lot of that technology is actually coming from China.

The challenges that Russia faces in their own equipment, they're actually making up for by developing that relationship with China, which, by the way, one would question, who does that benefit more? Does that benefit Russia, or does that actually benefit China in the in the long run?

And of course, we see the same challenge with Iran providing capability — the DPRK, North Korea providing capability to Russia, and I think, ultimately, you align yourself with certain international norms, the right of sovereignty, that borders actually matter, and for those countries that are actually providing assistance to Russia who, again, through the unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, is truly the aggressor here, you start to align — even if you don't say it openly, you start to align with that norm that may not — you may not agree with when it comes to integrity of international borders.

BOWMAN: Thank you.

Ambassador, anything to add to that?

BYRNES: Well, I'd just go back to the point that General Basham made about the importance of sharing the same common picture, sharing the intelligence that — you know, we've done a lot to make sure that we have a common picture of how these relationships are developing, and then making sure that we look at the instruments that we have, whether those are international sanctions and export controls, that we're applying that wider perspective as we look at the problem set, and that we're doing that in partnership with our allies and partners.

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Also focusing on the fact that their level of resilience, our level of resilience, is important. So, investing in infrastructure, investing in investment screening mechanisms, investing in those export control systems that will help prevent that, kind of, really unhealthy partnership taking place, or at least affecting our societies, is critically important.

BOWMAN: No, I agree. And I'll make a comment, and neither of you have to respond unless you want to, but I just — I think for Americans not focusing on this full time, let me just foot-stomp some of the things that were just said here, and some of the things based on my analysis.

I mean, we have the worst, the largest invasion of Europe — in Europe since World War II being conducted by Vladimir Putin. We have Iran providing Russia drones, artillery, and missiles, according to General Cavoli, to support that war effort. We have North Korea providing missiles and artillery to support Russia's invasion. And you have China, and you don't have to comment, but according to the administration, providing dual-use technologies to support that as well.

So, you have a war of naked aggression in Europe happening right now, the largest since World War II, and you have China, Iran, and North Korea tangibly, in one way or another, supporting it. That's a big deal. Either of you want to push back on that, or comment on that, or I can move on?

BASHAM: Nope, no pushback.

(Laughter)

BOWMAN: OK, a little unsolicited commentary there.

(Laughter)

OK, moving on to the next one. All right. So, for fans of children's literature out there, if Rip Van Winkle were asleep for a couple of decades, I used this with ASD Celeste Wallander in our podcast last year. I'm a fan of Rip Van Winkle. He wakes up, he rubs his eyes, and looks around.

He might think this whole Russian invasion of Ukraine thing, hey, well, that's kind of new, but any student of recent history, I would say, would understand that this pattern of aggression from the Kremlin is not new. This is not new at all. Yeah, it's the biggest we've seen, but it's part of a broader trend.

General, I'd love to hear from you, if you're willing, just, kind of, give the — maybe since 2007, 2008, quick overview of what we've seen from Russia in Europe to help people understand that this isn't some anomaly; it's an escalation and a trend that was, arguably, underway for many years. And obviously, push back on any premise that you don't like.

BASHAM: Well, I'm not going to push back. Well, I'll actually — I'll just, kind of, tag on to. Let's be very, very clear. What we're seeing right now, in many ways, was even being forecast by Putin himself to us as to what was going to happen.

Obviously, triggered in 2007/8 time frame with Georgia. Now, we go back to 2014 with eastern Ukraine, Crimea. And it should have been clear to us, and I think in many ways, it was, and, so, certainly clear to Ukraine, certainly clear to the US, and to Western nations that there was going to be a level of support that was required for Ukraine, because clearly, Russia was going to come back, and I would say Putin was going to come back, and he did.

And make no mistake: No matter how this ends in Ukraine, Russia will not stop with Ukraine unless they're stopped in Ukraine. That becomes the real challenge that we face. Russia is also, if I were to, kind of, fast forward to where we are right now, Russia, they've shown a level of resiliency in their ability to reconstitute, but it's not a reconstitution because of their industrial capacity; it's a level of resiliency, because they're actually, as you just highlighted earlier, with China, with DPRK, with Iran, and, quite honestly, unfortunately, on the backs of their people. The number of lives that have been lost, Russian lives, as well as Ukrainian, of course, and the number of casualties for, again, a war that makes no sense to anyone except for Putin himself.

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So, I think what we see right now as we, kind of, bring everyone up to where we are, the fundamental — the world order has changed in many different ways, from the standpoint of the peace and security that we thought we had, and what we thought was an international order. And actually, Russia is actually, they're challenging that right now, and countries that support them are challenging that right now.

I think this is actually the opportunity we have, going forward, to solidify with other like-minded nations that, you know, sovereignty matters, borders matter. And, by the way, there are ways to solve disputes, and it doesn't have to be through conflict.

BASHAM: So well said. You know, I've seen some folks here in the US say, you know, "It's just a territorial dispute." Well, yeah, I can think of a couple incidents in the first half of the 20th century that started out as territorial disputes, so I would not dismiss those too lightly myself.

Ambassador, anything to add on, kind of, this broader context of Russian behavior toward its neighbors in the last decade or two?

BYRNES: Well, I would say, I mean, in addition — to add on to the fact that they signaled some of these geopolitical ambitions dating years back, what also has happened during this period of time when Rip Van Winkle was sleeping is a real change and a constriction within Russia, a control over systems, over media, over civil society, a shrinking of the space for any kind of opposition that has allowed Putin to take over the kind of authoritarian control that he now has, and is able to exercise.

And so, I think it's important to remember that just as they were signaling these things on the international stage, we were watching things happening internally, and just weren't prepared to respond.

BOWMAN: Thank you. So, obviously, there's been a lively debate here in the United States, in Washington, in Congress, in the House of Representatives, and other places, regarding Ukraine. And, you know, my comment, not yours, we saw the delay in additional supplemental appropriations, and much of this revolved around the debate regarding Ukraine.

I'd love to hear from either of you, or both of you, on, do you believe — I think I know the answer, but why — if you do believe, why is it in the American interest to support Ukraine, and ensure that Russia is not successful in its invasion? What is the American, the selfish, core American interest here, with respect to Ukraine, either of you?

BASHAM: Well, if you don't mind, Ambassador, I'll start off, but I would like to hear thoughts from you as well. I think that the first thing we ought to talk about is, what's the right thing to do?

I mean, the reality is, Ukraine was, and is, a nation that was recognized, and is recognized, by the United Nations. It's a nation that was actually recognized by Russia, a nation that was recognized by others.

We actually believe in history, not rewriting history, and right now, there may be a level of Russian people that they are being taught a different history than is actually occurring right now.

It does not stop with Ukraine, and if we do not stand up to this type of tyranny, then, by the way, we know, and I'm reminded all the time, it's my responsibility wearing a uniform at this point in time, to ensure that we have a level of safety and security for all nations out there, to the best of our ability.

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And it's important, if I could just capture on this one time, there is no military member that actually wants to go into conflict. Their goal is to always avoid conflict. But make no mistake that once, actually, conflict occurs, then it's our responsibility to defend as much as we possibly can, and in this particular case, we ought to be doing the same thing with Ukraine, and I think as Ambassador Byrnes said earlier, we are tied to Europe in many different ways. And by the way, I'm going to highlight our State Partnership Program, because what our state partners, in California and others, not only do inside Europe with all the different nations, but also, what they were doing with Ukraine since 2014. Thank goodness that we were able to support Ukraine at that point in time.

Here we are, day 806. Day eight-hundred-and-six. Who would have thought that the Ukrainians would still be defending against Russia? By the way, their tenacity, we ought to applaud, and quite honestly, it's something that we need to continue to support, and we really do appreciate not only the support that the US provided, but more than 50 nations have provided to keep Ukraine in this fight.

So, again, I think we ought to stay the course, and I'm so proud that we are.

BOWMAN: I'm glad you mentioned the State Partnership Program. That's something we've done a little research on here, and I've published once or twice on. I had a conversation with the chief of the National Guard Bureau a year or two ago, where we talked about the State Partnership Program. Obviously, I worked those issues when I was in the Senate.

And we specifically talked about, with the chief there, with the general, about how our State Partnership Program activities with Ukraine yielded important benefits that have helped the Ukrainians after Putin launched his massive reinvasion.

General, I just do want to follow up on one thing. And then, Ambassador I'd love to hear — I definitely want to hear from you.

But two or three times now, General, you said some, don't let me misquote you, but you said some version, Putin will not stop in Ukraine. You said that two or three times.

I really want to follow up on that, because that sounds like something that a think-tanker like me would say, and then people who disagree with me, they'd all be, you know, that's hyperbole, you know, what was he talking about? Doesn't really mean it.

You're the Deputy Commander of U.S. European Command, and you have said here, two to three times, don't let me misquote you, that Putin will not stop in Ukraine if we don't defeat him there. Can you give us more detail? Why do you say that? Why do you believe that's true?

BASHAM: I — first of all, those are the things I said, and so I think we have to accept the fact that, by the way, this is not a one-off. If we say that he will not stop with Ukraine, then we're basically saying, this is just an anomaly. It's not a different mindset. Actually, you don't go full committed into something of this magnitude unless you have aspirations that follow. If I were a nation that maybe was not aligned with NATO, I would be very concerned about that, and you've heard many of those nations actually speak out about this.

Certainly, the eastern flank nations of NATO, so the Baltics area, you've heard them also very, very concerned. It is our responsibility to make sure that if we can assist Ukraine, so that there's a successful end to Ukraine, for Ukraine, with a free and sovereign state, that we actually continue to work closely with our alliance to ensure that if Putin has aspirations after Ukraine, that not only do we have NATO secured, but we are working with other like-minded partners to ensure that they are secure from meeting the same fate that Ukraine did.

So, I think it's important. While I would obviously say I have no intelligence that says that's exactly what his plan is, it is only prudent that we actually make sure that we do not create the conditions that were created that allowed Putin to go inside Ukraine back in 2022 — actually, back in 2014, and now, in 2022. Thanks for asking that again.

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BOWMAN: No, no, it's really important, and here's my take.

And then, Ambassador, I'd love you to, if you're willing, to tell me where I'm right or wrong in this. You know, it'd be pre-supplemental, according to our research here, you know, well, the Pentagon has said we had provided about — we had committed about \$44 billion in security assistance to Ukraine. According to our math, I'm a poli-sci guy, but according to our math, that's less than 3% about — at the time, was about 2.6-2.7% of what the US spent on the Pentagon over the same time period.

And so, we're helping the brave Ukrainians defend their homes, providing them the means of defense. No American service members are fighting in Ukraine. OK, so when I hear people in Washington about endless wars, like, give me a break. There's no Americans fighting in Ukraine. Ukrainians are wanting to defend their homes, and we're passing a baseball bat over the back fence so that they can bruise the home invader, so the home invader reconsiders his line of work, and doesn't consider hurting our home next.

So, that's my take. And if he does hurt our home next, aka, attack a NATO member, then you will have U.S. service members fighting. So, for me, helping Ukraine is a wise investment and not charity. That's where I stand.

Ambassador, so kind of — sorry, two questions here on the table. One is, what is the American interest in Ukraine? And then, two, respond to anything that the general or I just said, if you're willing.

BYRNES: Sure. So, I mean, the perspective I would take is, we are, in just a few weeks, going to be celebrating the 80th anniversary of D-Day. And again, our president has said that we are at an inflection point, and if we think about what brought the United States into Europe in 1944, it was the recognition that the very freedoms, the way of life that we wanted to achieve, and we aspire to, was at threat.

We here are [sic] today, as General Basham pointed out, watching Ukraine take on the Russian fight, and be that front line, and be that forward defense, not just for the countries of Europe or the United States, but for everything that we have stood for in this partnership, the 75 years of NATO.

So, it is critical and it is important to recognize that what Ukraine is doing is confronting this moment in time, this moment in history, and doing the right thing, and that we are there to support them in their effort to do that.

So, I think it is critical as we think through this, and you mentioned the importance of security assistance, but I would say all of the assistance that we're providing Ukraine. In addition to the security systems, of course, there's the economic assistance, because it's vital that Ukraine not only be able to survive as an independent country, but that our economies, Ukraine's economy, Europe's economies, are able to survive and to continue to live the way that we fought so hard, so long ago, to ensure we could do.

BOWMAN: Thank you.

General, I'd love to, if you're willing, to get an update from you, just a battlefield update. So, you know, we're talking a lot about Ukraine. I saw Zelensky's comments yesterday that — my paraphrase of his comments, that he felt like the Russians have the initiative, but that he was cautiously optimistic that as weapons arrive, including the weapons that are coming as a result of the passage of the supplemental, that he believes that the Ukrainians can begin to stop some of that initiative. And so, would love to hear from you, obviously, being the deputy commander there, on what you see happening on the battlefield.

BASHAM: Well, the first thing I will say is, make no mistake that as — just as soon as from the U.S. standpoint, the supplemental was passed, and we were able to start providing additional assistance to Ukraine, it was moving right away. So, we have taken every effort to, one, have it prepositioned, ready to go, and then, of course, to get that moving.

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BOWMAN: I was asked by reporters before, at the supplemental, they said, “How long will it take?” And I said, “I think some of it’s going to move in days.” So, you’re telling me, was I right on that? Did some of it start to move in a few days?

BASHAM: You’re exactly right —

BOWMAN: All right, good.

BASHAM: This is what the American people expect of us. If you’re going to allow us to be over here to defend with other nations, then it’s our job to actually move just as far forward as we possibly can, staying in lockstep with our nation, so that when our nation makes a decision, we can execute very fast.

I will offer to you that the forward line is always moving. So, for anyone that talks about a static line, there’s no such thing as a static line in this particular conflict. It is always moving. There are gains made by Russia, there are gains made by the Ukrainians. There are opportunities for Ukraine to continue to build up their defenses, and then to be able to push back on Russia. There are opportunities for Russia to do the same exact thing.

I would offer that because of the providing — the security assistance that has been provided by the 50-plus nations, but certainly, the continued focus by other nations, that provides a clear picture that Ukraine has more than enough people that are actually — countries that are willing to provide that level of assistance. We’ve just got to continue that flow forward, so that we can give them the best opportunity to be able to meet the challenges that Russia throws at them from every different angle. So, without necessarily going into any operational specifics as to what’s going on, I would offer that, again, the line is always moving, but thanks to the security assistance provided by so many, Ukraine is still — again, as I said, day 806, they’re still in the fight.

BOWMAN: Thank you for that — and for my part, and you don’t have to respond if you don’t want to, I think what the Ukrainians have done in terms of pushing the Russians back in the Black Sea via creative, asymmetrical means is incredibly admirable. The way that they’ve held the line during this period, where they were actually having to ration some of their munitions was incredibly impressive. So, it seems to me they definitely have the will to fight and to defend their homes, and they can do so more effectively, obviously, if they have weapons from us and our allies, and so that’s great.

I have a question here from Tom Bowman at NPR [*National Public Radio*], and you may or may not be able to answer it, General. But what do you see — is there anything you can say about, just, the coming weeks, or months, in terms of what we should be watching, or what we might expect? Anything you can respond to Tom on that?

BASHAM: Well, again, without going into any operational specifics, I think what you will see is, again, as more assistance flows to Ukraine, as Ukraine continues to build out a defensive position against Russia, as they continue to build their force, build their capability, build their overall capacity, I think what you’re going to see is a continual challenge faced by Russia. No matter where they probe, the Ukrainians will, again, rise to the occasion to be able to push them back, but let me also be clear: This is not going to be quick. It’s going to take time. We’re going to see — through 2024, we’re going to continue to see the Russians try to probe. You’re going to see the Ukrainians continue to push back. We want to set the conditions, obviously, for them to be able to continue into 2025 with this fight. So, without, again, going into any specifics, I think you’re going to see much of the same of right now, with probably a little bit of aggressive probing as the weather gets better by Russia, just taking advantage of the timeframe.

BOWMAN: Great, thank you. I have a question here from Noah Robertson at *Defense News*.

I’ll paraphrase it with your permission, Noah. Basically, the question is regarding Russia’s defense industrial base, and the degree to which Russia can sustain the war effort, and something we already touched on a little bit, the help that Russia is getting from some of its partners. Anything you can say about the Russian defense industrial base vis-a-vis the war in — the invasion of Ukraine?

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BASHAM: The only thing I'll say right now about the Russian defense industrial base is, it's a lot easier to take control of your industry and to accelerate defense capability, taken away from your economic capability, taken away from other things that your nation actually needs; but if you're the decision-maker, and you have an autocratic system that owns the state, then you can actually take from the people to create this defense industry. But let me offer, when we look at the defense industrial base from the West and like-minded nations, it might take a little bit longer for that defense industrial base, and you've heard a lot of discussion about how, do we accelerate the Western defense industrial base? Make no mistake, it's picking up speed. It will continue to accelerate past the capability of Russia. So, the time that is being spent by Russia inside Ukraine is also time that we have to get our industrial base to where it needs to be, to continue to grow past, certainly, what Russia — and, of course, we're talking about many different nations — it will be interesting to see what Russia has to take from its own people, to maintain its own industrial base, to continue this illegal war inside Ukraine.

BOWMAN: Thank you for that. Yeah, my comment, no need to respond unless you want to, is that one of the reasons why I feel like U.S. support, in particular, security assistance, is so important in the short-term, is because a lot of our European partners are taking positive steps to increase their defense spending, increase their investments in the defense industrial base, but as all three of us know, that takes time, right? You've got to establish the production capacity, and then, you've got to start to produce and deliver it. So, it seems to me there's a real window of opportunity where the US has a unique role to play, particularly in terms of security assistance.

Last question in the headache section here, then we'll move to the more fun aspirin section. Ambassador, General, either one of you: What do you think the Ukrainians most need right now in terms of defending their homes? Any comment on that? And it can be weapons, or something else. What do you think they most need from the West and others?

BASHAM: Well, Ambassador, I know I'm taking up too much time, but I'll give a very simple answer: our continued support. They're defending their nation. All they're asking for is our continued, unwavering, consistent, continuous support.

So, I think that's actually what they're getting right now. We've just got to stay that course. And I think we need to do a much better job of explaining to, certainly the American people, what we're actually doing here, but let me go to the ambassador. I think she'd provide a little extra commentary.

BYRNES: Yeah. No, I mean, the assistance is real, right? If you're going to protect your population, you need air defenses, you need munitions, you need artillery, you need all of those things. So, that is real, but the psychological impact of having so much international support for their cause, for security assistance to continuously flow to the Ukrainians, has a profound effect, and again, to go back to what we talked about earlier, you know, here we are, this far in the fight, and the Ukrainians are just continuing to innovate, to draw from their own internal strength, and to recognize how existential and important this is for them, and they do that because we stand in support of them.

BOWMAN: Excellent. Thanks. So, let's transition to some of the things we're doing here to protect our interests, and work with our partners and allies, and so I'd love to jump to NATO and NATO expansion. It's my take, and I'm eager to hear from you, that, you know, NATO is more unified and more strong — and stronger than it's been in decades, and part of that, I would argue, is the accession of Sweden and Finland.

So, I'd love to hear from either of you on — maybe, Ambassador, we'll start with you. I mean, there was, kind of, a history here with both these countries, going back decades, or centuries, in some cases, where, you know, like, hey, we're friends, we like you, but we want to, kind of, maintain our special status; but here they are, both these countries, politically, the people and their representatives jumping in with both feet, to the alliance.

How big a deal is — why did that happen, and how big a deal is that, Ambassador?

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BYRNES: Well, it happened because of Russia's actions in 2022. I mean, very clearly, that was a determinative effect. But as you pointed out, we've had a longstanding and excellent relationship with both countries as partners in NATO, and I'll let my military colleague speak to the capabilities, but there's no question about the capabilities that they have brought, and we have seen and exercised, and benefited from, over the course of the years, but in addition to that, they bring that strong set of democratic values, strong voices within Europe with other European partners, and a comprehensive security mindset, because they have been on the border, on the face of this challenge, for a long period of time.

Their societies are conditioned to understand the need for comprehensive, whole-of-government approach to security, and they bring that, and a very principled foreign policy position, into the alliance, in addition to the capabilities.

BOWMAN: That's great. You often hear — I often hear Putin, or other folks — or talking heads — espousing the Kremlin line, expressing concern about NATO enlargement, or NATO combat power in Eastern Europe. It's like, you know, note to self, stop invading your neighbors, and then maybe, people — I don't know, I mean, just respectfully, you know, like, there's maybe a lesson there for you. You know, if you conduct invasions, people tend to respond, I don't know.

And speaking of the High North, I mean, what great value do Finland and Sweden bring, in terms of experience of operating in cold regions?

General, my sense is that, you know, we've — NATO has long worked with Sweden and Finland and, as the ambassador said, exercises with them. So, that's not new. But it seems to me that once they're in the alliance, you can work them into war plans and contingency plans, and you can make assumptions, and that increases deterrence, and makes the Kremlin think a little extra few seconds about whether they want to do something silly, because you have a more robust deterrent, because you have Sweden and Finland in the alliance. Disagree with any of that?

BASHAM: Brad, I don't disagree with that at all. As a matter of fact, let's just take it to that next level. It's exactly what's going on right now. It provides a greater level of information sharing. We should be very, very, very upfront in saying, too, by the way, it also creates more opportunity for us to learn, for the other NATO nations to learn; but from the U.S. perspective, whether it's how we operate from the air, how we operate from the land, how we operate inside the Arctic environment, and the ability to be able to now have Finland, Sweden, of course, with Norway, Denmark, and, kind of, those more northern nations, how it brings them into the fold.

But you touched on it so nicely. When you talk about deterrence, it really is what you do on a day-to-day basis. Deterrence isn't a switch that you turn and turn off. It is exactly how we actually work together, how we train together, how we learn from each other, how we make it very, very clear, that for an adversary, you will not be better off tomorrow than you are today, because of the coalescing of these nations together.

So we just can't — we can't emphasize enough how important it is that Sweden and Finland have come in. And even more so, obviously, one of the things that Putin would have wanted was to break the alliance apart. Well, actually, it had the opposite effect. The alliance got stronger, and it got bigger.

BOWMAN: Yeah. No, thank you. We had the Vilnius Summit a while back, and it seemed to me that there were some important decisions there. We had the regional plans, we had some important decisions related to force structure, specific geography and tasks, as well as some decisions related to exercises.

Would love just a quick, kind of, overview of what was decided at Vilnius at the top-line level, and any progress or milestones related to those, if you're willing, General.

BASHAM: Well, you touched on the regional plans. Let me just touch on that a little bit, and —

BOWMAN: Sure.

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BASHAM: — their real value. Every single day, EUCOM takes that next step in working closer with the SHAPE, or NATO's Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, their ACO [Allied Command Operations] headquarter.

The ability to be able to work closely with the alliance, from a headquarter to a headquarter standpoint, but the regional plans, they really have actually created an opportunity for us to actually now, also, not only plan around, but also, to resource to, and then to exercise to.

It gives you a clear vision, shared by all nations, how we bring our individual parts into the whole, and we become much stronger, and it also provides a very clear picture. This is what it's going to take to defend every inch of NATO, and the nations — and they all can provide just a little bit — something different to the regional plan. Some may provide that high-end capability on the front line. Some may provide that mobility network that is required to move things to the to the front line.

So, every nation is able to give into that, but again, until you have a plan that you can actually visualize what is needed, and how you have to train to that, or exercise to that, it really is at a loss.

So, I would offer to General Cavoli, and actually, what his SHAPE headquarters has done, along with their Joint Force Command's amazing work in getting to where we are today on the regional plans.

BOWMAN: Thank you.

Ambassador, I'd love to go to you on — related to NATO member contributions to regional security. You know, one of the — kind of, one of the political narratives, sometimes, I pick up emanating from some portions of Capitol Hill is that you're like, "Oh, man. Here we go again, helping the Europeans. What are the Europeans doing to help?" You know, what the heck are they doing, right?

And so, you're an expert on these. You've worked these issues for many, many years. What are Europeans doing to protect their own interests, which happen to be similar to our interests, both in terms of, kind of, increasing defense spending, and building their own militaries, and helping Ukraine? What's the European contribution right now? How would you characterize it?

BYRNES: So, the European contribution is increasing. We have seen more and more countries reach the 2% level, some of them going beyond it. And in this — what I think is most interesting, it's many of the European allies who are now pushing the other allies to increase their defense investments and modernization.

And to go back to the comments that General Basham made, this is another beauty of the regional plans. I mean, in addition to what it provides for the warfighters and for our military experts, it provides the political leaders here an understanding of where these defense investments and expenditures will go.

That is absolutely critical, as so many of these countries shift their mindset to a more defense-focused, comprehensive security approach, to be able to understand where why these are investments in their national security, as well as NATO security, and why that matters to their citizenry.

So, what really happened at Vilnius was not just a military win, but a political win in many respects. It goes back to the political military value of the NATO alliance, because this has to be a whole society effort in order to maintain, and sustain, the kind of defense investment and modernization that is gonna be required for NATO to meet those political commitments.

BOWMAN: Thank you.

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My sense, General, is that it's important that Europeans are stepping up and spending more. They're carrying a larger portion of the security burden there in Europe, as is appropriate. We see a lot of very significant contributions by European allies to strengthen our defense posture in Eastern Europe. That's all positive.

But I, for one, believe that even as the Europeans step up, it's in the American interest to defend our interests there, to defend forward. In December 2020, I was proud to edit a *Defending Forward* monograph here at FDD. Former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta wrote the forward for that.

We had five sections. One of the three regional [sections] was on U.S. European Command, General Ben Hodges wrote a chapter there. Can you talk to us — can you just provide a quick update on what the U.S. military posture is in Europe, and how it's changing?

And as someone who believes we should retain, myself, retain a robust American posture there for the sake of deterrence, I also understand that our resources are finite, and we have commitments, and things we want to do elsewhere. I'm of the view that we need to strengthen our defense posture in the Indo-Pacific. We have continued interest in the Middle East. So, how do you think about maintaining an important American defense posture there, but where possible, where appropriate, without reducing deterrence, where can we, where should we, start to hand off some of that to our European partners, particularly in Eastern Europe?

BASHAM: Well, let's actually just cover a couple of things here, because I think what you just teed up — if we were to look back in the late-1990 timeframe, shortly after the Wall comes down, we're probably 300,000 then. We're now down to a steady state of about 65,000 U.S. And then, of course, that's the military. And then, you've got their families that are in Europe —

BOWMAN: So, let me just foot-stomp that. 300,000. When was that roughly?

BASHAM: Well, that would have been back in the 1990 timeframe.

BOWMAN: OK, and now, we're at 65,000. So, 300,000 to 65,000. OK.

BASHAM: But to capture —

BOWMAN: That's my verbal highlight there. OK, very good.

BASHAM: 65,000, that's our standing state. We are actually above that right now, and we have been since Russia invaded Ukraine. We've been as high as 105,000 inside the theater now. It also — it ebbs and flows depending on, of course, what we have rotationally inside theater.

There are times when we have a carrier strike group in here, which we absolutely value. There are times that we actually demonstrate our ability to bring U.S. forces, in large number, quickly over to the European continent, so that we don't necessarily have a permanent presence of that size that we had back in the '90s, but it shows that we actually still have to maintain that capability in our nation to be able to quickly move, whether it's actually to move land force, maintain a large bomber force that actually, on a daily basis, can reach adversaries throughout the world, and of course, we have to pay great tribute to our naval forces, as I've already talked about, the carrier, the land force, but also, the air posture that we have to have. But if I were to — and the Marines, space, by the way, Coast Guard, even inside the theater, and our cyber experts that are out there, but I need to capture something. We talk about by, with, and through. All three of those have to be — we have to do by, with, and through allies. Presence matters. You have to be with your allies to be able to integrate.

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You have to be with your allies to campaign, to exercise. And, by the way, it can't be just episodic, where you just come in at the last minute, because that's actually not working toward deterrence. The ability to be able to not only help our allies, maybe in the areas that they are seeking assistance, but at the same time, for our US, we get a much better U.S. military member by the time that we spend understanding those that we are culturally from, working closely with, and then, the ability to be able to seamlessly integrate and operate with.

You can't do that at the last minute, so this is the posture that we're actually focused on right now, and we'll continue to highlight that which is needed to campaign, integrate, and certainly align with our alliance.

BOWMAN: I just think there's so much great content there. I mean, a lot of people use the word deterrence, and I'm not sure everyone knows exactly what they mean. Deterrence, as you know, both of you know far better than me, is our adversaries' perception of two things, right? As my colleagues hear me say too often, it's their perception, not the reality, it's their perception of our military capability, and our political will to use it. It's basically those two things, right?

And so, forward presence demonstrates both, right? It demonstrates, hey, we've got the military capability. Look at this exercise. We have a stick, and we, by the way, we don't want to use that stick, but if you attack, we will, which demonstrates —and that's why we're here, we're demonstrating our political will to use that military capability. That's deterrence.

And the point that you made is that by being there, we're building the capabilities of our partners, thereby reducing the burden on ourselves over the long term, and, by the way, increasing our ability to operate together. So, I think that was so well said.

Ambassador, I see that we're running short on time, but I want to go to you, and then hear from the General as well. What does U.S. European Command, in your views, either professional or personal, most need from Congress? What do you most need from Congress?

BYRNES: Well, we're very lucky that we've had a robust series of visitors from Congress come through the headquarters in the Command. So, number one, to continue that dialogue with the command, absolutely critical. It's an opportunity for us to share what we're learning here with our congressional members, and I think we owe them that information as they do their best to represent us, and to represent the American people's interests. And so to have that conversation going, that's the number one thing that we need from Congress.

We need to do a better job of explaining to them, as well, how the whole-of-government piece plays together. So, what we're doing on the military side, what we're doing on the foreign policy, on the interagency side, how it all comes together and strengthens our national security posture. It's very much an under — I guess, an under-communicated message on how all of these things come together to feed that broader security picture.

And I'll stop there, and give the General a chance to add some more.

BASHAM: Well, I can't say it any better from the standpoint of — I'm going to offer a thanks again to congressional members and staffers. We need to always give a great thanks to the staffers, who do a lion's share of the work, but again, to make sure that their members are able to fulfill their oversight responsibility, but it's incumbent upon us to make sure that we create that opportunity, that venue, and not just down at our components, but actually, up at the headquarter. And then also to help them to understand what the allies are doing as well. So, first of all, I'd say the commitment they provide so far, but certainly, we owe them a thanks.

BOWMAN: Great. No, CODELs [Congressional Delegation] are important.

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As a recovering Senate staffer, I love the shout-outs to staffers. You're right, they do a lot of work. They're in the second rows in the hearings, for sure. But if I were a former staffer, and we have a lot of staffers tuning in, honestly, here's the one question I used to love to ask as a staffer, as I advised the senators that I worked for, is: If you could receive one additional dollar, where would you spend it?

I'd love to hear from both of you. If you had one additional dollar, where would you spend it?

Ambassador?

BYRNES: I think — Well, that's a tough one, but I would say, one of the areas where, again, from the civilian —

BOWMAN: OK, two dollars. I'll give you two dollars. How about that?

BYRNES: From the civilian perspective, one of the things that has been absolutely critical here is building in the whole-of-government piece to the exercises that we do. So, as we have looked at the changing situation and security environment in Europe, we are increasingly looking at contested logistics, the importance of government-to-government relationships, having the agreements in place in order to enable movements in advance, and then, taking into account, increasingly, some of the climate concerns, changes that we might have to integrate. So, when we look at the exercise program and the warfighting, making those as realistic as possible by including all of the factors that we would be dealing with in an Article 5 environment, I think that is a hugely important investment worth making.

BOWMAN: I think that's an outstanding — I'm so glad you mentioned contested logistics. If we had more time, that's something I'd love to dig into. I know that's a big issue in the Indo-Pacific as well, of course. And it really goes back to, I think, our previous conversation about the value of American forward posture, right? Because some people that have assumptions based on the 1991 Gulf War, where we can send our forces anywhere, take as much time as we want, they're not going to be challenged, build up a mountain of steel in the desert, and they commence operations and have a foregone conclusion. Arguably, those days are gone, or going. And we can't always assume that we're going to be able to get forces from CONUS [Continental United States] to where they need to be quickly or uncontested. So, for what it's worth, from my humble perch, I can completely agree with you on the importance of emphasizing dealing with a contested logistics environment.

General, where would you spend one, or two, additional dollars?

BASHAM: Well, it's a little bit in the same area, but I'm going to say it just a little bit differently. Some will talk about how long it takes to make a decision. By the way, NATO can make decisions very fast. The challenge is always with execution. And if you do not have the industrial complex in place, if you do not have the infrastructure in place, if you do not have — from the prepositioned storage to the posture, to the processes, and how we do command and control, how we actually operate with other nations. If you've not done all that, then execution will not occur quick. So, if you gave me two extra dollars, I'm going to put one into the — to the infrastructure across the eastern flank to continue to build that out, where we have, maybe, under-invested. And then, the other dollar, I'm going to put back in that more permanent presence for the U.S. to be able to work alongside, shoulder-to-shoulder, with our allies and partners.

BOWMAN: Thank you for that. You know, infrastructure, you know, a lot of times, weapons get the attention, because they're sexy or exciting, but the longer I do this, the more — you know, I advised Senator Kelly Ayotte. She was the one of the leads on the Readiness Subcommittee of the Armed Services Committee, so we focused on military construction, right?

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And the longer I do this, the more I think those investments in infrastructure are just fundamental. If I look at some of our partners, like Germany, for example, where should Germany spend their next dollar? I go first to infrastructure issues, often, for countries like that, where we really need the most help, and a lot of that doesn't necessarily fall into your defense budgets, per se. So, I think that's a great comment.

Well, Ambassador, I want to thank you personally for your decades of service to our country. Really respect your career field, and you, for what you've done for our country, and your insights that you've shared.

General, thank you for your decades of service in uniform. Honestly, it makes me feel pretty good knowing that we have two individuals like you protecting our interests there, and doing such important work in Europe.

I want to give you a chance to say anything that you'd like to say before we conclude.

BASHAM: Well, Bradley, I'll go first. Let me say again, thank you to you for, one, putting together this forum to be able to have this dialogue. I want to say, first and foremost, thanks to the American people, because they're the ones that actually provide their sons, their daughters, their loved ones, to actually come over here and live in Europe, which, by the way, this is a challenging environment that we're living in right now, and many understand that. So, thanks to them, because that's a sacrifice that they make, also, by allowing them to serve.

But then, I have to actually say, thanks to our host nations as well. We are actually — in Germany, UK, Italy, and many other nations, we have forces, both present, and rotational. And, by the way, they're such great hosts, to be able to support the U.S. military members and their families. So, again, I'll close with just saying, thanks to the American people, and even more so, thanks to the nations that host us inside Europe.

BOWMAN: Great.

Ambassador?

BYRNES: That was beautifully said. I would add my own thanks to the FDD and the Center on Military and Political Power for, just, having this conversation, and showing how important it is that we are talking, both on the military and the civilian side, about the importance of being prepared to protect and advance our national security objectives. That's exactly the kinds of conversations that we're seeking to help our European allies and partners have with their citizenry. So, it's a great contribution, and a wonderful opportunity. Thank you.

BOWMAN: That means a lot. Thank you. If we're going to protect our interests, we've got to have robust defense, diplomacy, and development capabilities, all those tools of national power synchronized and coordinated. Completely agree.

Well, thank you both for your insights, sincerely, for making time. I've enjoyed it. I think I could have gone for two or three hours, but obviously, you can't. You've got probably a busier inbox than I have.

So, I also want to thank everyone for tuning in. For more on our work, please go to [FDD.org](https://www.fdd.org). and check out FDD's Center on Military and Political Power, or CMPP. We'll hope you'll tune in for future events.

And General, Ambassador, thank you again. I look forward to our next conversation.

BASHAM: Thank you.

BYRNES: Thank you.