



More, Better, Faster: A Conversation with Senators Risch and Wicker on US Support for Ukraine's Defense

TRANSCRIPT

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- Jim Risch, *United States Senator, Idaho*
- Roger Wicker, *United States Senator, Mississippi*
- Rebecca Heinrichs, *Senior Fellow and Director, Keystone Defense Initiative*

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A video of the event is available: <https://www.youtube.com/live/0f912cSYsww?feature=share>

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Kenneth Weinstein:

Good afternoon and welcome to Hudson Institute. I'm Ken Weinstein, the Walter P Stern Distinguished Fellow here at Hudson Institute. I'd like to welcome everybody for both here in the audience and also online for our very special event today. More, Better, Faster: A Conversation with Senators Risch and Wicker on US Support for Ukraine.

Now, Senator Jim Risch and Senator Roger Wicker are of course very prominent voices in the foreign policy debate in the US Senate. They are the ranking members, leading Republican members on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and Senator Armed Services Committee, respectively. They have both have had long and distinguished careers in public service. They represent the heart of our country, Senator Risch from Idaho, Senator Wicker from Mississippi. And most importantly, as far as I'm concerned, as we're concerned today, they have been vocal on the need, first, for the Biden administration to do more in the lead up to the Ukraine War in terms of deterring Russia, and then for the United States to do more in supporting Ukraine in its war against Russia. And have done so in a principled, realistic manner, really making the case that supporting Ukraine is in America's national interest.

In doing so, mastering the details of the debate, and doing so in a way that has garnered even more respect for these two gentlemen on Capitol Hill. We'll begin with opening remarks, first from Senator Risch, then from Senator Wicker. And then the two of them will engage in conversation with my Hudson Institute colleague Rebeccah Heinrichs. She is a senior fellow here at Hudson Institute, directs our Keystone Defense Initiative, and she is also a leading voice on foreign and defense policy issues and has become, as well, a leading voice on the debate over Ukraine here in Washington and beyond. So it's an honor to welcome Senator Risch to the podium, and we'll hear shortly thereafter from Senator Wicker. Thank you, Senator Risch.

Sen. Jim Risch:

Thank you. Well, thank you very much and thanks for having me here today. The toughest part of giving a speech like this is I've been dealing with this thing day in and day out for the last year, and actually to the run up to it for some time. And so as a result of that, it's difficult to stand up here in just a few minutes, but I'm going to do my best to condense this down to a few general remarks, then we'll get some questions. And other areas that you might have of interest, you can drill down with questions and we'll see if we can't get them answered.

It's hard to believe that it's been a year since this whole thing started. And there were arguments as to whether or not this was actually going to happen. I was one of the few people that thought that he might not do this, because twice before he'd accumulated on the border and then not gone in.

And when you get to thinking about it, when it comes to Putin, he had the world by the tail. I mean this guy could be dictator for the rest of his life, had a life that most human beings couldn't even dream of living, and really nothing endangered his status as head of Russia. With one exception, he could choose one thing that could bring that down. Now, I know heads of state of a lot of different countries, the President of the United States being the freest country in the world through a lot of despots around the world, and all of them have one thing in common, one thing that they desperately want and that is to stay in power.

And so certainly that was crossing his mind as he made a determination as to whether or not to do this. And certainly he could have envisioned a situation where the thing would go south on him and he would lose the standing that he had. He didn't make that judgment. He made a tremendous number of mistakes, and misjudged a lot of things. First and foremost of which was the ability of his own troops. What's happened is, of course, this myth we had of this superpower has just evaporated.

I mean, they performed incredibly poorly on the battlefield. And the thing that it makes you wonder when it was so bad, how far does that go up? We know what his ground game is like. It's awful. It's 140 million people against 44 million people and they got beat. And they've gotten beat badly on the ground, even with the possession of modern 21st century weapons.

But in any event, he made that mistake. The other mistake he made is he certainly thought watching the debate, particularly over recent years, that this would divide NATO. He couldn't have been more wrong on that. NATO is stronger today than it's been in decades. We're going to get two new members of NATO. We're having a little dust up with Turkey and with Hungary, but we'll get through that. We're going to come out of this 32 strong, and much stronger than what we were before. The Europeans are committed to, I think as we are committed to, that when the shooting ends, we're going to have to beef up the Eastern flank.

Having those two extra countries is going to be helpful, because obviously there's two new pocket books at the table to help do that. Plus, we'll have a lot more frontage with Russia. And you can argue that it'd be harder to defend. I would argue that it's better to have that much, because it'll be tougher on Russia.

So anyway, Putin made those mistakes and now he's got the tiger by the tail and can't let go. He's lost this war. Ukraine has not won this war, but Russia has lost it. Now, that doesn't mean they're going to quit shooting, that doesn't mean they're going to stop destroying cities. But think about what he set out to do. What he set out to do was to bring down the administration in that country, and then occupy the country and turn it into a Belarus sort of situation. That's over. That's done. He will never, ever occupy Ukraine.

I deal with the Ukrainian people, everybody from Zelenskyy on down, and I'm telling you, they will fight with broomsticks in the streets to see that they are not occupied. So I'm convinced that Russia has lost. And how it ends, of course, is a different situation. But Ukrainians are doing their best to win and we're going to do everything we can to help.

So we get here? We're getting pushback from you see some of the commentators, particularly the far right commentators, and for that matter the far left commentators are saying, "What are we doing within Ukraine? What the heck do we do here?": Well, I would argue that we have not only a moral responsibility to do this, but we have a legal responsibility to do this. This starts with Ronald Reagan. Ronald Reagan spent eight years trying to bring down the Soviet Union, and he did that, and the Soviet Union collapsed. The various countries that were in the orbit got their freedom. They were set free. A lot of them took democracy and looked West. Some of them didn't.

But what happened when the Soviet Union broke up into the various countries, four countries came out of there with nuclear weapons. Obviously, Russia did, Belarus did, Kazakhstan did, and of course, Ukraine did. It was the policy of the United States of America then. It's the policy of the United States of America now that as few countries as possible have nuclear weapons.

So what do we do? We sat down with the Ukrainians on December 5th, 1994 in Budapest and talked them into giving up their nuclear weapons. We made an offer and we said, "If you will give up your nuclear weapons, we will give you security." And they said, "Fine." They give up the nuclear weapons. Now a lot of people say, "Oh," they poo, poo that. And say, "Well, they did that because they couldn't afford them any way, blah, blah, blah." Do you think they would make that decision today if they were given the opportunity to give up the nuclear weapons? Of course, they wouldn't.

So we made a commitment at that time, that makes it, in my judgment, a legal commitment, but it's also a moral commitment. And certainly, finishing up the work of Ronald Reagan to keep the Soviet Union from rebuilding again, which is what Putin wants to do.

So let's talk about the prosecution of the war. I've been a not real vocal, but vocal proponent of giving them as much as we possibly can. My view is, if it shoots, they ought to have it, other than nuclear weapons. And that starts with, I'm perfectly fine and have urged the administration to give them F-16s, for a lot of different reasons, not the least of which, recall, that the Russians flew their MIGS against us. They gave MIGS to the North Vietnamese and to the North Koreans and trained their pilots and ran them and flew them against us. Here's an opportunity to return the favor. Not only that, I'd like to see how the F-16s compare to the Sus when they get in the sky together. So it's an opportunity there.

Look, I am so sick and tired of hearing people say, "Oh, we can't do this. It'll be escalation." I want Putin to start waking up in the morning, worry about what he's going to do that might cause the west to escalate. So in any event, I'm not a great fan of this argument though, "Well, we can't escalate." If you don't escalate, you're going to lose. You got to do more and better than your opponent does to win the war. So you need to talk about what you're going to do to escalate. So I'm all in for escalation.

Well, let me get to the end here as rapidly as I can. Look when this is over, it's not over. There's going to be fallout from this for a long, long time to come. Like I said, I deal with the Ukrainians all the time. These people are hurt. They're angry. Before Putin invaded the Crimea, the polling in Ukraine was about 85% of the Ukrainians felt either neutral or actually pretty good about Russia. Today, that is flipped and flipped way beyond that. They're angry at Russia.

There is not going to be a reconciliation commission when this is over to where they sit down and talk about things. And to that end, the world really needs to seek justice for Ukraine, for the Ukrainians. And look, we did this after World War II. We need to do this now. Putin has gained the same notoriety and as far as I'm concerned, the same status on the planet is Adolf Hitler had. And I'm convinced they're going to be playing checkers together pretty soon.

But look, the United States and the world really needs to hold the Russians accountable for this. We've all seen what they've done to the Ukrainian country. We've got \$300 billion in assets frozen. I'm trying to get that unfrozen to where we can give it to the Ukrainians to start rebuilding. That really needs to be done. But look, the Ukrainians are doing what Americans did in 1776. They are fighting for their freedom, for their independence. When you talk to them, they say they will die before they will go back and be serfs of again of the Russians. And I believe them.

And this is going to take generations for any healing to take place, that's with the Ukrainians. As far as the European continent is concerned, I think the Russians may think that when this is

over, everybody can say, "Well, it's over, we'll go back to buying gas and oil again from the Russians." That is not going to happen. The Europeans are fully cognizant that they made a real mistake getting as embedded with the Russians as they have. They're not going to let that happen again. It's going to be generations before you see these things healing. So with that, Roger, you're up.

Sen. Roger Wicker:

Good. Well, Jim, I agree with everything you said, and you said it well.

Yeah. Look, I've this flag every day that I've worn a lapel, since February 24th, 2022, I noticed a lot of yellow and blue colors around the Kennedy Center and whatever, some of them have faded. I'm going to keep this on till we have a Ukrainian victory, as far as I'm concerned. So that's where I stand on this issue. I think Jim is right on point. Jim was worried about going on too long.

He gave one reason and it was a good reason. We gave a promise and the world watches whether the United States keeps a promise. We've made commitments in the past, and I'm sorry to say we didn't always follow through on them. The world watches what we do. They watched what happened in Afghanistan, and I wish the Afghans had been a little more stalwart, but honestly, we didn't give them a backing that they needed to be quite frank. And we sent every signal for years and years that, well, the main thing we wanted to do was get out of there.

So the world watches what we do and we did give our word. We did give our commitment. And this is one that we ought to keep, "If you give up your nuclear weapons, we will be there for you." They need us now and we need to be there for them. I would also add there's, there's the matter that it is in our national interest as Americans for the Russians to lose, for the Russian military to be weakened, and for Ukraine to be strengthened. People are watching, as I said. China watched what happened in Afghanistan. Russia watched what happened in Afghanistan. The world watch what happened in 2014, when we really didn't come to the rescue of our friend.

And so it is in our interest that China see the United States stand firmly behind an ally and help them to be successful. If Taiwan is attacked by China, I really don't think we have any choice but to step forward and be an ally of theirs. You can look at what our friends in the Indo-Pacific are doing and see that they believe this is in their interest. Japan, the Philippines, Australia are beefing up not only to take the part of Taiwan if that happens, but also to help Ukraine, because they think it's in our interest.

And then there's a difference of opinion about whether we should talk about the rules based international order. Some people like that and some people don't. I don't think it's the number one reason. But let me tell you this, we have had a pretty peaceful 75 years, because we established some rules and most people have been willing to follow that. And now here comes Vladimir Putin showing that he doesn't really believe in the rules with regard to invading South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

And he obviously has designs on Moldova. He went in 2014, again. We prosper when the rules are abided by internationally. We have had a peaceful and our children and our fathers and grandfathers and great-grandfathers have had a successful run of it, because we have followed the rules-based order. So they're all kind of reasons why it's in our interest for Ukraine to win this and I think they can win this.

And I would submit to you three little tidbits of news. I don't know how much y'all rely on the Wall Street Journal, but it's the first thing I want to read in the morning. I don't know if I could do without the Wall Street Journal. And did you read the article on the front page today of the Wall Street Journal? The Russian economy is faltering. Now, the first year of this, they were selling a lot of oil and they were making a lot of money. That's not the case anymore.

And young people are fleeing the country. The ones that have the means to do that and realize how wrong this is and also what a suicide mission it is are leaving the country by the tens of thousands. And so, the Wall Street Journal article today, read that if you haven't. Also, I'm trying to get ground truth on this, but the information that I have is that the Wagner Group is sending every signal that they were about to pivot back to Africa. So we'll see about that. But let me just say the Wagner Group is down to four figures in terms of the number of troops they have. They have been bogged down in a fight for Bakhmut, and really a fairly meaningless strategic piece of ground.

But both sides are dug in there, and they've lost really most of their personnel there in this fight, which the what's the Ukrainians have decided to take a stand on just to show that they can do it. And I think they probably were correct in doing that. But if the Wagner Group is about to pivot back to Africa, that is a real signal that Putin and his troops are about to be in trouble there.

And also, the third thing I would mention to you is that President Putin has now changed the conscription rules within Russia. The conscription age has now been lifted entirely. So we're going to have 35 and 40-year-old guys drafted that that'd like to have three or four shots of vodka at night and are totally out of shape. This is not a recipe for success in Ukraine.

On the other hand, the Ukrainians have just been exemplary. And, yes, they're fighting for their own country as our patriots were back in 1775 through 1778. The only difference is our colonies were divided back then, Jim. A lot of folks kind of still like the king and wanted to go to Canada, and a lot of people just scraping for a living, there was only about a third trying to help back then. And yet they were fighting for their soul and for their country just as the Ukrainians are.

And so I don't know what's going to happen, but my information is that our friends, the Ukrainians, really are about to have a great deal of weaponry that they have lacked so far, and that's going to make a difference. So we'll undoubtedly, it's no secrets, it's not top secret or a confidential law there will be a spring offensive, whether it will begin tomorrow or four weeks from today, I don't know. But there will be a spring offensive.

And there's every reason to believe, based on what I've just told you, these three little incidents, but also based on the fact that there's the weaponry and we've seen the determination of this country and their leadership, there's every reason to believe that the Ukrainians can have great success this year. The Secretary of Defense testified yesterday before the Armed Services Committee that he believes the Ukrainians have the upper hand. Now, he tried to qualify it somewhat and obviously predictions are only predictions, but I feel good about it.

One word about defense in general, we have plused up the President's defense budget considerably for the past two years. And if you think about it, we've done it on a bipartisan basis. We went up \$30 billion in '22, the '23 omnibus bill, the pass in December, we went up \$45 billion. And that was done when the Democrats had control of both the House and the Senate. Now, there is a Republican majority in the United States House, and we still have a very close majority depending on who's well and who's sick in the United States Senate.

I think the chances are that we can plus up the President's inadequate budget again for fiscal year 2024. The budget the President submitted to us assumes we're going to have two point something inflation for the next fiscal year. Raise your hands if you think we're going to have only two point something percent inflation for the next 12 months. That's not going to happen. It is a cut in terms of our capability. It is a real cut in real buying power. It would require the retirement of an entire class of amphibious ships.

There is no stomach for doing that in the United States Senate Armed Services Committee. We'll see what can be done with a very, very small Republican four vote majority in the House of Representatives. But I do believe in terms of where the majority of Republicans are over there and the majority of Democrats are over there, you're going to see the same kind of realism, and the Congress will step in as we've done the last two fiscal years and rescue the President from a very inadequate defense budget. So thank you very much. Glad to be here.

Time to go.

Rebeccah Heinrichs:

Well, that was wonderful. Thank you so much both of you, not only for those remarks but for your consistent leadership on this issue. And I'm going to get right into it, I'm going to pair a couple of questions based on your remarks and then you can take either one as you want and as you want to comment on it. The first one is both of you mentioned the slowness of weaponry being provided to Ukraine that you want to give them more. And I've noted that you've both been in favor of ATACMS, when the administration is still not willing to provide those.

Senator, you mentioned F-16s. You're both in favor of HIMARS-

Sen. Jim Risch:

HIMARS.

Rebeccah Heinrichs:

... and now you've supported publicly to PCAMS to get them to Ukraine to be able to fight back on the Russia. So really the criticism from your leadership role has not been that the United States does not have a stake in Ukraine, but that we need to help them win. So can you talk about that, about the administration's approach to this slow weapons? And do you sense that that is going to change? Or how do we finally get to the end of this conflict and helping Ukraine actually prevail over Russia? And then my second one was, what kind of threat does Russia still pose to NATO? You hear some people say, "Listen, Russia can't even take on Ukraine. Do they still pose a threat to NATO?" So either one of those questions, if you want to comment on. Senator Risch, I'll turn it to you.

Sen. Jim Risch:

Well, I'll take a run at it to begin with. First of all, I've been critical of the administration, because they're not moving fast enough. The fact of the matter is they've done the right thing. The problem is how long it took them to get there. And in defense of the administration, every time I've sat down with them, and they do make themselves available to talk from time to time, they

really haven't pushed back that hard. And you're able to get them along to the point, but we shouldn't have to do that.

Look, this thing needs to be over with. We need to give them everything that we can possibly give them now, and let them bring this thing to an end. That's the way this thing's got to go. Again, I don't want to be overly critical of the administration, because they have done a lot of things, tanks and everything else, when we've pushed them. But it's been a year and they should have a lot more.

The second question's more interesting and that is what position are the Russians in right now? And are a threat to NATO? There's a joke going around in the capitol that says, "Right now the Estonian Army could march on Moscow and they couldn't do much about it." I think that's probably overstating the case. But look, they have proven themselves to be just absolutely incompetent on the battlefield. And like I said, you wonder how high up that goes, whether it goes through air power, whether it goes through nuclear power, they claim it's corruption that has done this. The money that they were supposed to be spending has gone to the oligarchs and what have you. Maybe that's gone up, we don't know.

But I think there's two things that Putin is smart enough not to do. Number one, I don't think you'll use a nuclear weapon. That's all saber-rattling, I'm convinced of it. But number two, I think you'll go through great pains not to attack a NATO country. Because we have said from the beginning, Article 5 means exactly what it says, and we're not going to give up one square inch. The Baltics came in to see me right after the thing started, and they were looked like deer in the headlights. And he said, "well, we're right there on the front lines, 1.5 million, 1.5 million, 2.5 million, if he wants us..."

And we said, "Look, I don't care whether that's square inch is on your border or whether it's in Los Angeles or London, Article 5 means exactly what it says." And I think Putin believes that, I really do.

Sen. Roger Wicker:

If we were fighting a war in Europe against Russia, which we are not having to do, thankfully, because the Ukrainians haven't asked us, they're willing to do all the fighting themselves. But if we were there, we would want the F-16s, wouldn't we? We would insist on that and the ATACMS. We would insist on everything possible to defeat the enemy. And that's what Senator Risch and I and others have been urging on the administration to give them the tools they have to win and win quickly.

And yes, there has been a grudging delay, but yes, for example, the tanks that were announced maybe three weeks ago, they will not be available for a spring or summer or even fall offensive. But they could have been had the administration acted when they should. So yes, I would do ATACMS. And who was it Milley yesterday who basically said, "We are not giving F-16s, because what they really need is long range fire." Well fine, let's give them ATACMS. So that's the answer to that question.

Now with regard to NATO, here's the point we need to make, we are reserving some funds and some capability for the traditional defense of NATO against Russia. My view is that there's not a chance in the next few years that Russia would take any move against any NATO country. They are really tied up with this ill-conceived venture in Ukraine. And so we should think of

persuading our NATO friends to work with us and move some of the capabilities, say, to defend Spain and France and all the other countries, and move that capability to where we really need it. And that is defeating Russia by these valiant Ukrainian fighters. And Jim is right, and I want to emphasize this Article 5 is sacrosanct, and it would be an abomination if the United States did not abide by that and our NATO commitment.

Rebecca Heinrichs:

And I think another point, just to think both of you, that was very compelling, and it's also one of those things where Senator, because the United States says have this commitment to Article 5, that part of deterring Russia is that we would have troops there in the Baltic countries. I just got back from Lithuania, and they're-

Sen. Jim Risch:

Well, then we do have troops there and we've actually bolstered the troops on the Eastern flank. And like I said, I think that Eastern flank is going to get beefed up when the shooting's over with. And of course, I mean, Putin would love to have the Baltic countries, they actually divide Russia. He's got a piece of Russia that's on the other side of the Baltics.

Rebecca Heinrichs:

Yeah, to Leningrad.

Sen. Jim Risch:

To Leningrad.

Rebecca Heinrichs:

No, that's exactly right. So it's kind of one of those questions where, no, we think that Russia wouldn't dare to do it, but it's because the United States has this strong commitment and that's demonstrated by troops there by support for our Baltic friends.

Sen. Jim Risch:

Well, and the enthusiasm of the Europeans too. He really thought the Europeans would be split on this, that they would, Europeans aren't... I got to tell a story. For years have been doing this and the Europeans would come in and say, "You American cowboys, slow down. Take it easy." They're coming in now saying, "You Americans need to toughen up!" These are the French talking to me, okay. So you say, "Well, you know." But it's in their backyard, and so they have a real commitment to this and have been vocal about it. They're not split.

Rebecca Heinrichs:

Great. And then Senator, one of y'all, maybe both of y'all brought up China. So I want to talk a little bit about Xi coming in and chatting with Putin, and talking about potential negotiating some kind of peace agreement. And there's been some accusations from some saying, "Look, that US

support for Ukraine has brought these two individuals together." One, is that true? And what do you make of this growing alliance between these two countries?

Sen. Jim Risch:

Well, to open with, that is not true. They were fast friends during the Cold War. I mean two autocracies that are authoritarian governments, communist in nature, they were friends then. They're not natural allies. They don't really... Remember before Russia was a senior partner, China was the junior partner. That's reversed now, China's the senior partner in Russia's the junior partner. But I'll tell you, the thing that has surprised me to a degree is that the Chinese, when they first met with the Russians, remember they had this press conference and said, "Oh, they had this unlimited partnership."

Well, they're standing there holding the hands and they've held hands throughout, but what have they really done? They really have not done much. They bought gas and oil, no question about that. But as far as providing the Russians with either troops or for real honest to goodness weaponry, they just haven't done it. So they loved-

Sen. Roger Wicker:

... become the next emperor of China. They can make a decision not to go forward with reuniting with Taiwan, and they can decide to be prosperous and continue to provide jobs and economic opportunity for their people who really are not doing particularly well right now. And they will make that decision if we and Japan and the Philippines and our allies in the Indo-Pacific, send a show of strength, that they will not be successful, and so they won't try it. Peace through strength gave us peace during the Reagan years, and strength is the best antidote for what Xi Jinping wants to do.

Rebeccah Heinrichs:

Well then on that point, there's this argument out there that says, "Because China is the bigger problem and because some Europeans have stood up and we've got wealthy European nations, then why not just leave Europe to handle the Ukraine problem? Because we are depleting our own weapons and we need to focus on China." You mentioned Senator, the defense budget, we've got to increase the defense budget. Is that to make sure that we can deter both Russia and China, and successfully prosecute a war in US interests if deterrence fails? Or do we need to pick one theater over the other?

Sen. Roger Wicker:

No, back when I came to the Congress, that was our position that we could win two major theater wars at the same time. We've gotten away from that, because we didn't think there would be one. But if need be, we would have to gear up in a very quick way, like we did in World War II, and make sure that Russia and China don't take over their spheres of influence.

So I think it is a false argument to say we don't need to help Ukraine defend against Putin, because we need to be more concerned about China. Spending \$130 billion so far, and undoubtedly there will be more expenditure, is a bargain if we prevent the trillion dollars that the United States and the West and our allies would have to spend to contain China, if they decide to take over Taiwan.

Rebecca Heinrichs:

And that's a great point, Senator. And the other thing that I kind of push back on folks too, I say, "If this war does expand, I mean, the EU is still the United States' greatest trading partner, and so just the economy and the wellbeing of the American people is directly tied to the security and the prosperity of Europe. And so there is a clear tie there. And if the United States is going to be moving some of our goods and supply chains from China, it's going to have to go to other friendly areas, which would be Europe. So you can see the two connected there as well." What about this question of weapons oversight and how the United States has done on that to be able to steward the American taxpayers dollars well and to give them confidence that we're doing a good job?

Sen. Jim Risch:

That's a really good question, and I get that all the time from taxpayers, and a legitimate question on their part. Look, we have 64 different enterprises going on overseeing the expenditure of funds and the delivery of weapons in Ukraine. This is not Afghanistan, that was almost impossible to keep track of. We are able to keep track of this. We're doing a good job. They report to us regularly. There's been absolutely no siphoning off of either weapons or cash beyond what it's supposed to go for.

But more importantly, there is a more important thing in place to see that this doesn't happen. I sat down with Zelenskyy, and I had a frank conversation with him that that country had a real reputation, well-deserved, for corruption before this war started. He admitted that. The Ukrainians will admit that when you talk to them. I explained to him in clear terms that there's no better way to stop the United States from assisting than finding stuff going in the wrong place. He understood that. The Ukrainians understand that. And I truly believe that that corruption was so endemic in Ukraine, I didn't know how you could ever contain that.

I think this is going to be a cleansing operation, because now they view any theft or siphoning off as being very unpatriotic when they're fighting an existential war for their existence. I think this is going to change Ukraine. I really do. And I didn't think there was much out there that could turn that around.

Rebecca Heinrichs:

It's a really interesting point. So many people haven't updated their facts and information from the course of the war is that, yes, Ukraine had this problem of corruption, still not as bad as Russia. Russia is far more corrupt. But that because of this war, you're actually going to get rid of a lot of corruption that has plagued that part of the world.

Sen. Jim Risch:

Well, the corruption, most Americans don't understand how ubiquitous corruption is around the world, and it's a mindset as much as anything else. If a culture accepts corruption, they accept corruption and it grows and it spreads. I think it's a mindset. I really do. And I think that the mindset is changing here as far as how important honesty is and correct acting is to the success of a country.

Sen. Roger Wicker:

I'm glad Jim made that point. Corruption has been a problem in Ukraine, but it's all over Eastern Europe. And regrettably among some of the countries that were behind the Iron Curtain under the control of the USSR, and I'm not going to name countries, but just a whole lot of the Western Balkans of Eastern Europe is just shot through with corruption. And it's something we need to work on. But right now, our top priority is making sure Putin doesn't take over a sovereign nation with established borders.

Rebecca Heinrichs:

And one thing on that, too, the corruption exists to the extent that these countries are trying to get out from underneath the former Soviet influence and become part of the West. So one of the best things we can do to help some of that is do what we can to strengthen NATO and make sure that it's moving in the right direction. And I want to talk about another, you made me think of it, Senator, when we talked about it might be silver lining that the Ukrainians have kind of had this moment where it's really against their interest to have any kind of sign that some of this stuff isn't going in the right place, because the Americans and the whole world are really watching.

Another silver lining, Senator Wicker, you brought up that with the amount of money that has been sent over, only about half of that, if my facts are right here, has really gone to military, and the rest of it's economic aid, and maybe that's not quite right. But only a portion of it is weaponry. And in fact, the weapons that the United States are sending has actually had this sort of unintended effect of rebooting the American industrial capacity to get some of these things going for our own sake.

Sen. Roger Wicker:

And it's been a wake-up call-

Sen. Jim Risch:

Real wake up call.

Sen. Roger Wicker:

... no question about it.

Sen. Jim Risch:

It really has, for-

Sen. Roger Wicker:

Because if we are ever called on to fight, and undoubtedly we will be at some point, it's inevitable, then our industrial base is not ready to gear up, as it was not ready in 1941.

Sen. Jim Risch:

We had two back to back wake up calls. One was COVID, when people are saying, "Where are the masks? Where's all this stuff?" "Well, it's in China." And people started examining our supply

chain from top to bottom and realized we had some real vulnerabilities. In my judgment, the number one vulnerability was microchips. We invented that here in the United States, and the industry did what most industries would do, and that is they chased the siren of lower costs, and that sent them overseas. Now of course, we've passed the CHIPS Act. We're trying to bring those back again. Microchips are so essential to everything.

The Russians, they've been reportedly taking refrigerators and other things apart, taking the chips on them, so they can use them for some of the weapons that they make that require chips. So that is important. Then, as Roger made reference to, and that is our industrial complex, one of the shortcomings is our manufacturers are really, really good at what they do. They gear up, when they get a contract from the Pentagon, they make the kind of weapons they want. They're the best in the world. But they don't keep making them. They'll shut down their production line if they don't have another contract.

Roger can speak to this better than I can because he deals with that more regularly. But there's got to be a way of having a sustainable production line. The best example I can give you is the HIMARS. I was after the White House, "Get the HIMARS out there." "Well, we've only got so many and we need them in case this happens or that happens." "Well, come on guys, let's crank up the..." Well, the timeline they gave me to crank up to make HIMARS again was staggering. I mean, we made them and then we shut everything down. Roger...

Sen. Roger Wicker:

The way to make weaponry and ammunition is for Congress to pass a bill to fund it, and for the government to order the weaponry and the ammunition. But your question also gives me a chance in the time remaining, I do want to talk about burden sharing, because you mentioned that much of what we've sent has been humanitarian, and that's true. The fact is we've spent or are prepared to spend now \$130 billion. Our European allies, and I think this is EU and NATO, it's about 80 billion. We certainly wish they were spending at least as much as we are. And that should be our goal to exhort them to help in their own neighborhood to the extent that we are helping.

But let's bear in mind that there's a hidden cost that isn't calculated in that. They're accepting the refugees not only from Ukraine but from other Eastern European countries who've had to go somewhere else. And so Poland, for example, all of the money that they have spent housing refugees and providing for them is not calculated in what we look at in the burden sharing. So really when you look at what Europeans have done to house and feed and care for their neighbors, their contribution, really, in terms of dollars and cents is probably more than ours.

Sen. Jim Risch:

And I want to underscore that, because we do get a lot of pushback from taxpayers saying, "Well, the Europeans ought to be paying there for share." Anecdotally, I can tell you, for years we've been after the Europeans that say, "Spend the 2% on defense as you agreed to do or required by NATO." And for years they said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, don't worry about it. We're going to get to it by 2030." Along comes Donald Trump. Now, whatever else you think about Donald Trump, he said, "Gee, do we really need NATO?" And all of a sudden the European said, "Yeah, I think we do." And he said, "Well, then you ought to pay your fair share." And all of a sudden they started writing checks.

Sen. Roger Wicker:

You've got to pay.

Sen. Jim Risch:

And he got them paying. He really did. Now, of course, with the Ukraine war, that's being looked at even more closely. And as Roger said, there are a lot of expenditures that the Europeans are coughing up. Poland's a good example. When I went to Ukraine, I went through Poland and I said, "Where are the refugees?" And they said, "Well, there's..." The only country I'd ever been to that had millions of refugees, but there was no refugee camp. And the reason was they'd taken them all into their homes. They were living in their homes. So look, if you're going to do an accounting, you need to do a legitimate accounting, where all the costs that are coughed up by the countries are considered, not just the military expenditures.

Rebeccah Heinrichs:

Great point, sir. When I was in Warsaw a few months ago, it was the same thing. I kind of walked out of the hotel and you see all these women and children walking around, well, they were Ukrainian. All the women and children are in Poland, many of them are. And as you pointed out, the Baltic nations, Poland, it's really been, their whole society has taken on a lot of the burden of this and taken in refugees, just out of-

Sen. Jim Risch:

It's true.

Rebeccah Heinrichs:

... the goodness of their heart. So...

Sen. Roger Wicker:

The Baltic States and Poland and the Czech Republic remember how it was-

Sen. Jim Risch:

That's right.

Sen. Roger Wicker:

... not to be free

Rebeccah Heinrichs:

Romania, yeah.

Sen. Roger Wicker:

And they don't ever want to go back, and they will not ever go back.

Rebecca Heinrichs:

And in the case of Lithuania too, I know, not only have they got the threat right, and their clear eyes about that, but on the China threat too, they've been really leading and trying to push the EU-

Sen. Jim Risch:

They were on the front line on that, more so than a lot of their European neighbors.

Rebecca Heinrichs:

I think we've got time for one question from the audience. I'm so sorry about this. Sir, just state your name please, and then a very brief one so the Senators can...

Alexander Kravitz:

Thank you very much. Alexander Kravitz from Insight. It's great to have such a clear-eyed and strong support for Ukraine. Thank you for that. To Senator Risch, you mentioned the dust with Turkey in terms of the expansion of NATO. Maybe you could share with us how you see what that might take. And just a quick follow up. How should the US see countries, particularly in our hemisphere like El Salvador, who are abstaining on the UN resolutions calling for Russia to leave Ukraine?

Sen. Jim Risch:

Let me separate that in two, by the way, the Turkish question is the next hour, okay. Look, I've met with Erdoğan a number of times and he is a difficult case, to say the least. But look, he's an opportunist. He is using this issue to get some stuff that he wanted. There's four of us obviously that have to sign off every time on weapons sales, myself and Menendez in the Senate and our counterparts in the House. And we put a hold on the F-35s because they bought the S-400s. And Erdoğan did not like that. Still doesn't like that. Now we're fighting over the F-16s.

But he's using this as a tool to get what he wants. And we've lectured him over and over again, "You're using your participation and your membership in this organization to feather your own nest. That's not right." And they get it, and we're going to get there. But he has an election coming up on May 14th, and it's going to be a difficult election for him. He let in the Finland, but not Sweden. Hungary, I wouldn't worry too much about, they're going to do whatever Turkey does. They can't sustain, if Turkey acts. Turkey's let in Finland. After the conversations I've had, I'm convinced they will let in Sweden, eventually.

I don't like the way it went down, but you know, do what you got to do to get from point A to point B. I'm going to let that other question go because I think we're out of time. But getting votes in the UN is always a problem. Linda Thomas-Greenfield, who's our ambassador there, I think, does a really good job of trying to round up votes. But look, we've never been the fair-haired child of the other members of the United Nations.

I fight all the time with... He comes in and tells me what a great job the UN's doing. And I says, "Look, you got a war going on. There's 200 countries in the world, all but about six of them say, 'This is a really, really bad deal.' You can't stop it. Not only can't stop it, you can't even ratchet it back. You can't even pass a resolution to condemn it. And we're sending billions of dollars to the UN. Come on, where are we?" Well, then you get votes and China goes out and does their thing with money. So...

Sen. Roger Wicker:

Jim said, "Turkey's the next hour," South and Central America are then-

Sen. Jim Risch:

The hour after that.

Sen. Roger Wicker:

... the second hour. When it comes to intelligence sharing and military to military, the Turks are friends of Uncle Sam.

Sen. Jim Risch:

They are. We're allies.

Sen. Roger Wicker:

And we just don't like everything they do. And there is an election coming up. We don't know what'll happen, but they're a valuable friend to us.

Sen. Jim Risch:

They are.

Sen. Roger Wicker:

I worry about South and Central America. And you mentioned one example, but we've just got problems. And while we're working on all of our problems that we've talked about, we need to pay attention to South America and Central America, where a lot of countries are going the wrong direction.

Rebecca Heinrichs:

Well, senators, thank you so much for coming here today and for being great and strong, clear voices for US leadership in the world, engagement, and for making the case that the security and the freedom and prosperity of Europe is directly tied to America's. So thank you so much for all the work that you've done. Thank you all-

Sen. Jim Risch:

Thank you.

Rebeccah Heinrichs:

... for joining us here at Hudson.

Sen. Jim Risch:

Thanks being here.

Sen. Roger Wicker:

Thank you.

Sen. Jim Risch:

Thanks for having us.