The Next Move in Ukraine: A Conversation with Michael R. Pompeo

TRANSCRIPT

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A video of the event is available: [https://www.hudson.org/events/next-move-ukraine-conversation-michael-r-pompeo](https://www.hudson.org/events/next-move-ukraine-conversation-michael-r-pompeo)

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Peter Rough:

Well, punctuality is a virtue. So I suppose we'll get started. My name is Peter Rough. I'm a senior fellow here at Hudson and director of our Center on Europe and Eurasia. And this is Mike Pompeo, a distinguished fellow at Hudson, the 70th Secretary of State, former director of the CIA, representative from the great state of Kansas, entrepreneur, cavalry officer, and graduated first in his class from West Point in 1986. I also learned recently, former Baskin-Robbins employee.

Mike Pompeo:

Yes, Assistant Manager. Yes, exactly. Don't short me.

Peter Rough:

If you were a Democrat, I suppose we could spend the next 30 minutes with me grilling you on your favorite type of ice cream.

Mike Pompeo:

Yes, exactly. That's exactly right. Sadly too many. Yes.

Peter Rough:

But we'll instead turn to more pressing topics. Today's event is about the war in Ukraine and what's next. And really, the genesis of this conversation goes back about six weeks ago when you went to Ukraine. And I thought I would just start by asking you what moved you to go, what did you see on the ground, and what messages did you bring back to the US?

Mike Pompeo:

You bet. So a number of months ago, I was asked by President Zelensky and his team to come visit to see what was going on. I think frankly they wanted to have a conservative voice come visit, see what was really taking place there. I think that was their intention. That's why they wanted me to come visit. I had a mission set of my own when I went. I traveled along with some business people who are deeply interested in trying to help be part of the reconstruction process when that time comes. And then I traveled with folks from a couple of humanitarian organizations who were actually on the ground, Samaritan's Purse and a couple others as well. So that was the group that traveled alongside of me. I had a couple of my old friends from the CIA as well. So it was quite the gaggle.

My objective really was to get a chance to go see someone who I had dealt with when I was a Secretary of State. Everyone remembers the perfect phone call with President Zelensky. So he and I had become good friends, but I wanted to see what had happened, what caused him to have become such an incredibly successful wartime leader. Something I don't think any of us would've ever imagined he would have to do, or would've predicted he would be so successful at. So I wanted to go see him, but I wanted to be with him and wanted to pray with him. I wanted to help him think through the American political landscape as well, just from a civilian's standpoint, as someone who was a former and who had served. And then I wanted to meet, I'd
known some of the folks there, the senior military leadership there, from when I was CIA
director, and I wanted to go see them, too, and see how they were doing and encourage them
as well.

Peter Rough:

Well, in anticipation of this conversation, I went back and watched part of the press conference
you held with President Zelensky as Secretary of State when you were there last, I think in May
of 2020. And there, striding to the cameras is President Zelensky, clean-shaven, suited up, with
a tie on. Today we know him as this grizzled, bearded, always in almost camouflage fatigue
style clothing, wartime leader. As a graduate of West Point, as a major American political
leader, A, how have you seen Zelensky change, and the Ukrainian leadership adapt over time,
but secondly, perhaps more abstractly, what are the important principles of wartime leadership?
What really makes for a good, strong leader in crisis moments like this?

Mike Pompeo:

Yeah, it's funny you mentioned that. He pulled out a picture from that day from the press
conference and he pulled it out to say, you weighed 320 pounds-

Peter Rough:

I don't want to raise that point. Back to Baskin-Robbins.

Mike Pompeo:

So there you go. So yeah, it's good times. Look, I'll start with the last part of this. We all know
that good wartime leaders often surprise. They are deeply good at communications about the
things that matter. So for President Zelensky, it's communications with his own people
explaining why it is they're sacrificing so enormously. What matters. They can see it all around
them. They know, they have family members there, but I'm sure there are times even inside
they're like, "Can we just call this thing good?" Right? It's still a massive confrontation, and
devastatingly bad for the Ukrainian civilian population. So you still have to continue to remind
people about why it is the cause is just, and what you're doing. He's done a phenomenal job as
well, communicating with the outside world, making the case for why nations should support
Ukraine from Ukraine's perspective. And then the last thing is, and one should never
underestimate this, it's a three ring circus.

You are managing the external forces. You are managing a war. You are managing an economy
that is trying to continue to provide the basic resources that your own people need when you
can't get grain through the Black Sea. And then you are also trying to manage a military, each of
whom has their own vision for how the actual, strategic execution of how the kinetic part of the
conflict should proceed, and the cyber part of the conflict should proceed. And anybody who's
ever dealt with any Department of Defense in the world knows that those are not unitary objects
that are easily moved. And so he has each of those, where you have to do... And he has done a
remarkably good job in each of those three theaters of leadership, which I think has given him
respect globally, and most importantly, respect amongst his own people. Knowing that this isn't
about him, but this is about Ukraine, and its history, and why what they're doing matters.

Peter Rough:
Did you get a feel for the intangibles? Are they encouraged? How's morale? How are they at this state in the war? And this was already in the run up to this anticipated counter offensive, which-

**Mike Pompeo:**

It was. Everybody thought we were six weeks out and now we think we still may be a handful of weeks out, but certainly coming, it's hard to know. I just did get to see... I was on the ground for only a day, so I don't want to overstate what I was able to observe, but I did have the chance to speak to three or 400 young people, all of whom reminded me that they'd never been part of the Soviet Union, right? So when they hear President Putin say, "You know you were part of this," they never lived that. They're my son's age, and that just wasn't part of their growing up. Their parents and their grandparents were, but they weren't. And so they view those statements as just ahistorical, and not something that touches them at all. Second, I didn't meet anyone, and I was not shielded from whom I could go see, it may be that I didn't see a random group, but there were lots of different voices heard when I was there.

I didn't see anyone who didn't think that restoring all of Ukraine was the ultimate objective. They were dedicated to it. Many of these had lost family members. All of them had lost either family members or friends. Everybody knew somebody who'd been killed in the war, and they were just determined as heck to vindicate that, to proceed in a way that delivered a victory for Ukraine, in the broadest sense of the idea of victory. That was uniform. Morale was good amongst the senior leaders. In fact, when I ended up meeting with the most senior leadership team, it was 9:30 at night. They'd had a very long day. They looked a little bit tired. I mean, years of war do that to any of us. But there was no doubt that they were still very focused on the resources that needed to be accumulated to be successful, and the ultimate objective.

**Peter Rough:**

And long nights too, given the almost nightly barrages-

**Mike Pompeo:**

Sure.

**Peter Rough:**

Coming from Russian bombers, and attacking cities like Kiev. I had the good fortune and opportunity to visit Ukraine a few months before that, in November and December. And one of the things that struck me, visiting Bucha in European, and it's since come up talking with the Ukrainians about strategy around issues like whether to pull back from Bakhmut or hold their ground, is that they have, as you put it, really experienced such catastrophe at the hands of the Russians. They don't want to cede territory, because if they do so, number one, they insist they're going to liberate it again in the future. So why give it up?

And two, every time a city is liberated, torture chambers are discovered, women tell stories of being raped, children are being taken back into Russia in a form of modern, almost genocide. And so they're very, very guarded of their territory because the Russians have behaved so awfully. Maybe let's take you then to the Russians. And you obviously also dealt with the Russian leadership, also, I believe, once traveled to Minsk, and met with Lukashenko. Tell me a
little bit about the Russian performance in this war. I think the general agreement is they vastly underperformed, and have not managed this conflict well, but how do you see it?

Mike Pompeo:

Hey Peter, I think that's true. They certainly underperformed to the world's expectations and Vladimir Putin's expectations. I think that's unequivocally true. In absolute terms, they probably performed about like you'd expect a Russian military to perform. In America, we've watched these amazing multiple cores advancing along an axis in Iraq. There's only one military in the world that can pull that off, just so we're all clear about the difference in capabilities. The Russians are never going to achieve what the US Army can do with its allies and friends. And so in absolute terms, I don't know.

I think they've probably performed about like I would have expected. I think the Ukrainians performed better than any of us would have expected, in terms of being able to counter the initial attacks, and the cohesion that the nation was able to build. That you have people who are running grocery stores and sweeping streets all say, "Nope, hand me a hand me a rifle, let's get after it. Let's go build Molotov cocktails. Let's run vans taking wounded back and food forward," things that you just don't know if the nation will rise to do that. And so I think that vastly exceeded, the resistance vastly exceeded, what would've been the expectations of all of us. And in absolute terms, exceeded I think what anybody would've expected as well.

Peter Rough:

I was at a conference last week in Europe, and one of the questions, one the participants asked of a senior military commander is, why haven't the Russians hit a resupply coming from NATO, Poland, other bordering countries to the Ukrainian forces? And the military officer responded, "Because the Russians can't hit moving targets at this point," which gets to your point about their performance. Maybe taking you back to the US, because you spend not just time going to Kiev, but a lot of time traveling around the US and meeting with voters, also have plenty of connections on Capitol Hill, given your time there as Secretary of State and as a congressman. There are some Republicans who will say that the war in Ukraine is important. We would like the Ukrainians to win, but we also have pressing problems at home. Our national deficit and debt are metastasizing. And so every dollar spent on Ukraine, so to speak, takes away from a dollar for baby formula, if you will. What do you say to those Republicans about our strategic picture here and what we should be doing?

Mike Pompeo:

So the impulse is correct, the math is just wrong. That is, I completely understand as someone who ran for office and was elected four times. I completely get the fact that we should always put American interests first. I think the mistake that gets made, and by the way, this impulse has run through our party forever. Think Pat Buchanan. Think Ron Paul. I could go back even further. So this impulse that under appreciates the benefits of American leadership in the world is buried in a fraction of our conservative movement, and I think that's actually fine. What's not fine is misunderstanding and just counting the costs.

So I don't know, 25, $30 billion of American equipment provided to the Ukrainians today. It's not nothing, that's real money for sure. The costs, had we not done that, would be multiples of that. And the cost of failure, the cost of Vladimir Putin sitting, not just in Kiev, but in Warsaw, would
be staggeringly bad for Americans, for every American family. And I think that's what they miss. They get the liability side of the balance sheet, but they forget the enormous benefit of American leadership in the world. Think about this. There are thousands of people trying to break into our country as we sit here in this room today. Why are they trying to come here? They're not trying to break into Russia. Anybody seeing border wars of people clamoring to get into China?

We chuckle, but it's the reality of American leadership in the world. The world can see and we benefit, our economy benefits, our families benefit from this. It is of staggering importance that the US dollar remain the reserve currency. These are things that impact each and every family, and they're easy to overlook because you can see the costs. By the way, the same would've been true in Afghanistan as we lost lives. You can see the costs. But the benefits that we had of taking down terror plots here sometimes just simply don't get accounted for. And last thing I'll say is I get the politics of it too. If you're in a town hall in Wellington, Kansas and somebody says, "Gosh, we need a new dam, or we need the roads fixed..."

... gosh, we need a new dam or we need the roads fixed. It is very easy to say, "I'm for fixing roads." Me too. I'm for fixing roads as well. The resources to fix those roads come from the fact that America has a dominant, powerful place in the global economy and our capacity to deter aggression around the world depends on the United States to deliver that system that benefits the United States America. And I think we should all demand that our leaders articulate their understanding for how it is that those benefits to America are delivered or consecrated by our willingness to do, in this case, nothing more than provide American equipment. Zelenskyy has not asked for our Marines. He hasn't asked for our young men and women. He simply said, "Help us give the stuff."

Last piece and then I'll stop, but this is important because it does get to the centrality of freedom here in America and why Ukraine matters to America. I was a young soldier patrolling the East German border from 1986 to 1989, the last time we had a global adversary that rivals what Xi Jinping is doing today and frankly what Vladimir Putin had intended to do in Europe as well. There were days I wondered why it wasn't an Estonian kid out there. There were days I was at the bar and by right, I was glad it was me, but there were days that you just said, "Gosh. The European should be doing more." And that is an impulse that rings true for someone like me.

In the end, the free rider problem doesn't excuse the obligation that we have to protect America by providing American leadership. And so we should urge the Europeans to do more. We should demand them. We should be difficult. Goodness knows, I had made no friends in Europe when I was Secretary of State because we were constantly harping on this issue, excoriating them, embarrassing them, whatever tools we had in our kit bag to convince them to for goodness' sake get to 2% of GDP like they'd promised they would do as their defense budget. But in the end, to do the right thing for America doesn't turn on the decisions that other nations make. We have the responsibility to get that right.

Peter Rough:

I think that gets at a core difference between how, to put it crudely, Republicans and Democrats practice foreign policy, which is, as I read it, Republicans like to stake out positions, sometimes if necessary, alone and then create a slipstream for partners and allies to move in behind it, so the Americans are in the lead. Democrats and I think the Biden Administration's Europe strategy is emblematic of this, look for lowest common denominator consensus in policymaking. So they will not cajole and nudge but really hug the European allies, even if they think they're
underperforming in the hopes that will engender them to move further. And I think that's probably a core difference. Would you agree with that? Is that part of what distinguished maybe your approach to Europe and that of Secretary Blinken or the Democrats?

**Mike Pompeo:**

Yeah. I think that's right. I think that's probably right in practice as a pragmatic method. I think that's how that is a difference in how we operated. I think it actually stems from a different understanding of how it is you keep America safe. I think they truly believe that without these global coalitions, without a successful United Nations, without... I think they actually believe this. I mean, it's just false. In the end, these things rise and fall based on how America is. And so our theory of the case was, "We're going to do this. We're going to get it right for America. We're going to be unashamed about it." We were convinced that while we didn't get thing every day, we were a force for good in the world.

I never once apologized for anything America had done for 1000 days as Secretary of State, not because I didn't think, "Oh, yeah. We kind of got that wrong," or, "We should have done X and we did X plus two." All fair. But the quintessential understanding that America's actually trying to get it right, not trying to screw things up, I think the Democrats are not prepared. I think they think, "Gosh. A lot of these things are just our fault. If we hadn't messed with that, it would've been better." That's just I think historically inaccurate, but I think that leads to the very outcome that you're describing, that we were prepared to, when it mattered to America, to put... By the way, sometimes that was withdrawing from particular places, reducing our footprint in places if we didn't think it made sense for America, but when it did, we were prepared to do it and then we were going to bring everybody along. You described it as a slipstream. Maybe that's the right way to think about it.

**Peter Rough:**

You've already raised Xi Jinping in China in passing. And so in addition to those who are, as I said, pitting maybe baby formula against Ukraine aid or generally have more of an isolationist view of the world, the Rand Pauls of kind of the Republican ranks, there's another, I don't want to call them faction, but part of the party that thinks Taiwan and Ukraine are at odds with one another insofar that every bullet, every bit of American hardware that's sent to Ukraine is no longer available for us in a Taiwan contingency. I will say that in April, Admiral Aquilino, the Indo PACOM commanders came out in testimony very strongly saying that he does not think it impacts deterrence over Taiwan. And just yesterday, Secretary of Defense, Austin, in testimony before the summit similarly said, "We're learning lots of lessons in Ukraine that could be applicable to Taiwan." I think of this week, the Patriot battery taking on a hypersonic missile attack. That will send shudders down the spines of some PLA officers. But how do you see the so-called trade-off debate between China and Ukraine?

**Mike Pompeo:**

Yeah. It has as its predicate a falsity of these being a zero-sum game, that we can only have so many artillery rounds. We can't have infinite, but it's not the case that an artillery round used in Ukraine can't be replicated and built. This is a separate issue, the industrial based problem. It would exist even absent Ukraine in that conflict. We saw it in the Trump Administration. We began to move in the right direction, but we didn't begin to address the scope and scale of the shallowness of the industrial base to actually build out a deterrent model that would be
respected by Xi Jinping. And so lots of work there to do, I hope bipartisan work to be done there.

Second, I do think Xi Jinping potentially sees Ukraine as a distraction for the United States of America. So while I will agree with Secretary Austin, I didn't hear these remarks, but there's no doubt we are learning things, technical things, things in cyber, kinetic things as well, operational things about what capabilities can actually deliver, training levels that need to be achieved, I'm sure the Chinese are learning as well. They're observing this as well. So I think everyone will take away lessons learned from this. But I do worry a bit that... Imagine Vladimir Putin launches a nuclear weapon. Imagine he goes down that path and launches a tactical nuclear weapon. I think Xi Jinping would see that as an opportunity to move. I think he would absolutely see that as something that would deter American focus. And I worry about that. I think it's one of the primary arguments for why the Biden Administration's policy of dribbling out equipment to the Ukrainians and allowing this to continue to drag on is so risky.

This didn't happen on our watch. I'm convinced that we deterred Vladimir Putin's aggression for our four years. Takes a fifth of Ukraine in 2015, not an inch of it for four years, and goes right back at it. Putin didn't change. Only thing that changed was his perception of risk from America. I wish today we were providing real equipment, not just, "Here's a Patriot system. Here are seven HIMARS. Here's two and a half training crews. Here's a little bit of intelligence." We should provide crushing... We should end this thing. We have the capacity to provide them with the tools to stop the death of Ukrainian civilians. And instead, this drags on. And I can't tell you exactly when and how. By the way, I've heard President Trump say he can stop it in 24 hours. God bless him. I hope he's right. I don't know how that happens. I think it takes longer than that.

**Peter Rough:**

He needs a good Secretary of State.

**Mike Pompeo:**

He may well need one. So much to say. But the truth is, we were slow. We were slow in September of '21 when we knew this invasion was going to take place. Just like with today is the day to arm Taiwan, September and October of '21 were the day to arm Ukraine. And the fact that this drags on, I actually do think is in Xi Jinping's best interest. And so it's in our interest for Ukraine to be successful. It's in Xi Jinping's best interest to tighten the relationship with Russia and to have this thing drag on for an extended period of time.

**Peter Rough:**

I'd like to get into all of that. That's very interesting. And maybe we'll just start with the breakdown of deterrence, because I do think the administration tends to congratulate itself for having seen the war coming, but the fact that there's a war is an awful reality and a whole country is being pulverized as a result. You mentioned the original intervention in Crimea took place in 2014, breakdown of deterrence in 2021 leading to the invasion in 2022. But that intermission, granted there was constant fighting and the Normandy Format and the Minsk agreements weren't really resolving issues, but can you run us through that history? Why do you think deterrents broke down? And more importantly, what is needed to restore deterrents in Europe?
Mike Pompeo:

Oh, goodness. You can't do the counterfactual. So I get asked all the time, "Would this have happened if you all were still there?" I stay away from... I can't prove it. I can only observe what happened and I described what happened. You're right. There was continued... Along the line of conflict, there was artillery exchange. There were advances of 10 feet or 20 feet and back. But you didn't have a Russian invasion of Europe increase their space. By the way, not just in Ukraine. We've seen this before. It happened in Georgia. It happened in other parts of Europe. I'm not describing Ukraine and what happened in 2014 as unique. Putin's had this objective.

I think we were successful at deterrence for a couple reasons. And by the way, not because... Putin certainly didn't think that Donald Trump was going to send the 82nd Airborne. I mean, if you look at our policies over four years, it was pretty clear. We were not about adventurous... We were not going to go put a land force in Ukraine to defend it. But I will tell you what. I'll give you an example of how you get to deterrence. We're starting to lose deterrence on Iran. They'd shot down a UAV. They'd fired ballistic missiles directly from Iran into Abqaiq in Eastern Saudi Arabia. And we went and killed Qasem Soleimani. The entire Department of Defense would've said would start World War III. Not the entire. There were probably three guys in the basement who said, "I think there's a..."

Peter Rough:

But it already started with the embassy move, to Jerusalem, right?

Mike Pompeo:

Yeah. Right. No. We were in their 9th... World War 13.

Peter Rough:

Got it.

Mike Pompeo:

Yes. Exactly. The whole world noted. Wait. So President Trump says if you fire some more chemical weapons in Syria, we put 79... I can't remember how many Tomahawk missiles we landed there. It did good stuff, but mostly what it said is if we say we're going to do something, we're going to do something. We told the Ayatollah. We had told Soleimani. I had written them letters saying, "You attack our embassy in Baghdad. We're not just going to whack the knuckleheads on the ground. We're coming for you. We're going to find the decision makers." And when we actually went and found the decision makers, the whole world went, "Oh, my goodness. These guys are either different or nuts or some combination thereof. And they are serious about the things they say they'll do."

You should note. If you go back and look at this... In my second book, I'll write about this. If you go back and look at the things we committed to, it's fewer than other administrations committed to. Our promises were smaller and fewer, but the things we promised, we were ready to go do and in some cases were required to actually do. And I think that's the deterrence model. President Biden talked about a minor incursion being okay. He said, "We're going to get all our folks and all our equipment out of Afghanistan," gets 13 folks killed by setting a date certain in
Afghanistan. We forget. Months into the administration, the entire southeast gasoline pipelines were closed. Remember this? The Russian cyber attack? It seems like a long time ago. What did we do in response? President Biden met with Putin several weeks later and said, "Don't do that again."

If you're Vladimir Putin, those are tells. And by the way, how many times had Vladimir Putin met with President Biden on CODELs? Did anybody know the answer? I'll give you the answer. Lots. How many times had Vladimir Putin met with Donald Trump on a CODEL? It was a glorious thing to be a Secretary of State. Nobody knew him. And so when they'd ask, "Tell me about this guy," I could-

Fair stick. Nobody knew him. And so when they'd ask, tell me about this guy, I could explain him in the way that I needed to explain them. Always truthful, but by explaining, here's our theory of the case. Here's how our deterrence model is going to work. You may not see it, but when you see it, you'll know you've seen it. And maybe you can go back to walk softly and carry a big step. But it was a model that was unmitigated in its desire to build a military that was capable and a policy perspective that didn't reach past the things we knew we could actually achieve. And that's how they lost. That's how these guys lost deterrents. That's how I worry that we will lose deterrents, not just in Taiwan, but throughout the Pacific in ways that are truly detrimental to the American people.

Peter Rough:

So let's go to contemporary policy, then the Biden team's strategy. I've realized in the drawdown press releases that come out from the State Department when a new aid package is announced to Ukraine, there's this phrase that the administration has adopted, stemming from the President and all of his aids. "We will support Ukraine as long as it takes." But they never quite define it. What is the Biden administration's Ukraine strategy and why is there such hesitation on behalf of the President to go out and regularly explain to the public what the American interests are at stake? Do you have a theory behind why he's been so reticent to do this?

Mike Pompeo:

Yeah, I don't know. Well, I think one of the big mistakes, and one of the reasons I think the American people are confused a bit about what we're doing in Ukraine is because President Biden hasn't taken the time to articulate why it matters to them. If you're sitting in Arizona, I was in Utah yesterday, why is Ukraine matter to you? He should have been in the Oval Office at eight o'clock at night for 15 minutes reading from a script articulating why it matters to America. I can do it. I can rip through. I can tell you exactly why. I know why this matters to every American. I hope that they do, and I wish they'd articulated.

Your point about the it, I get. I understand why they've been just a little bit ambiguous about this, but the flip side of not defining it has a adverse effect. The adverse effect is, it doesn't explain with clarity that however it is ultimately defined, it will be in America's best interest. That outcome, the end state, wherever this end state goes, it actually matters to America that we get to that place. And then you see the policies, the actual execution, put aside the words, and I talked about this, the execution doesn't demonstrate that we'll be with them until it ends. It demonstrates that we'll give them just enough so that it doesn't end and that it goes on.
And I don't know if that's their intention. I don't know if there's some deep strategy there that says, no, we actually believe that the longer this goes on that that's an America's interest for this to continue on. I don't know how they're thinking about that. I'm sure there's somebody saying, well, goodness, it's weakening the Russian military. That's probably true, but that shouldn't be the objective. The objective should be making sure that we do this right for the United States of America. That's how America should think about its place and its role in this conflict.

Last thing I'll say. I think the other thing that when you don't define it is that you forget we're right. You forget the quintessential nature of this was an attack on Ukraine. It gives space to this idea that somehow what's the... I'll try. I try not to mock the other side. I'll try to articulate the argument. NATO enlargement threatened Vladimir Putin. Does anybody think Vladimir Putin actually felt threatened? I can't imagine it. It seems unimaginable that we were going to roll into Russia. I don't think Vladimir Putin imagined that either. This is all made up, but when you won't define it, you forget that it is protecting a sovereign nation that's willing to lose its own boys and girls in a conflict to protect its own sovereignty. And that's a big mistake to miss that.

Peter Rough:

I also think that it's difficult to rally the public if you don't have defined goals that you're able to explain at a regular basis to the public. It is just so ambiguous. And my theory behind this, not that anyone cares, but I'll offer it anyways, is that Volodymyr Zelenskyy and the Ukrainian people generally are very popular amongst the American public and amongst the Democratic Party base. And they would like full liberation of their country. I'm not sure the administration is prepared to support them all the way to that. There are already regular leaks in the press about their concerns regarding Crimea. Perhaps they'll let the counter offensive run out and then slowly begin to signal by withholding this or that weapon system that it's time for a negotiated off ramp. And so for all those reasons, I don't think they want to define their differences with Zelenskyy because it's politically damaging to them at home.

But maybe we'll head there then, which is the third part of your earlier remarks, which I found so interesting. And that is negotiations themselves. You've already raised President Trump saying he would knock this out of the park in 24 hours. I've heard you say in the media and in the press that you don't detect in Moscow an appetite for negotiations. At least you said this some months ago. I don't imagine your opinions changed all that much. How does one, because in the end, this will eventually flow into some sort of negotiation or talks. How does one engender a true spirit of compromise in Moscow? What are the steps? And I suppose this gets at what is Mike Pompeo's strategy for the war? How does one get to that point?

Mike Pompeo:

I don't know that you ever get to compromise until there's risk of loss. In the end, Vladimir Putin has to do the simple calculus of saying that continuing the conflict has liabilities that exceed the benefits associated with that. This is deterrence 101 from my freshman year at West Point. So you have to inflict pain. You have to make very clear that you're prepared to impose enormous costs on them. And so when I watched the sanctions' regime being... I was almost used an adult word, not thorough. There. That's diplomatic, leaving massive gaps in the sanctions' regime. If you don't want to do sanctions, fair enough. But if you're going to do sanctions, they have to be total and complete. And you need to penalize those who violate to them if you're going to put the sanctions in place. But then just watch everybody walk through them. By the way, I'm prepared to say that sanctions won't... don't do it.
But the fact is, what they've done here is precisely what they've done with equipment is here's a little bit and we're going to go now a year and change into this thing and we're going to go to the G7 and we're going to put more sanctions in place. Are you kidding me? Go back and look at the Biden administration at the beginning. Those sanctions take time to work. But just wait. No, they needed to all go on day one and they needed to be ruthlessly enforced or just don't do them.

This is the challenge when they try to defend their position. It's like, well, yeah, the fact that we're letting so-and-so buy this stuff and we're letting the Chinese off the hook, either you mean it or you don't. I'll go back to Iran again. No one would doubt that we were doing our level best every day to enforce those sanctions. They were imperfect. They were incomplete. But there was some chance your boat was going to get pulled out of the water if you did it. And we were working the crap out of it. We didn't give anybody a free ride. Even our friends, the Japanese Koreans, they all wanted Iranian crude all. I cannot tell you the phone calls. Mike, our industry depends. All right. Totally get it. And by the way, the Chinese are cheating so your adversary is benefiting and your friends are being armed. Up and down the road on all of this. But we were serious about it. We didn't intentionally give anybody a free pass. And these guys are just... So it's half measured. And that's the communications problem.

Peter Rough:

You can't announce you're going to do the harshest sanctions of all time.

Mike Pompeo:

That's right. And if you're the Biden administration and you say, this really matters, but we're going to let 15 countries buy crude oil from Russia, or we're going to set, better still, we're going to set a price cap. What's the Russian GDP growth this year? Anybody know what it's going to be? Here's what I'll say. I don't either. But if it's not larger than America's, I'll buy everybody here a cocktail. That's not remotely serious that America can't execute a campaign to impose real costs on the Russian leadership. We absolutely can. And the Biden administration has just simply chosen not to do it, suggesting somehow that they don't believe what they're telling us, that this really matters. This is the conundrum of being unserious about your actual execution wholly apart from the language you use when you send your UN ambassador to the floor at the United Nations.

Peter Rough:

Well, I also think, taking me back to the loyal opposition as it were, view of the war, there are isolationist voices China prioritizes, if we want to call them that, but the majority of members in Congress and of the Senate are critical of the Biden administration strategy. But from the hawkish right, that they're not doing enough on sanctions. They're not doing enough on weapons deliveries. They're not empowering Ukraine to victory. Instead, we seem to be boiling the frog over time as if we have all the time in the world to take on Putin. And I think Putin calculates, if I can hang on long enough in this contest with the west, eventually the west will break. And for those reasons, you would think moving quicker would be smart. I've promised to take a few questions from the audience, and the first goes to Dan McKivergan again of Hudson Institute.

Dan McKivergan:
Thank you, Mr. Secretary.

**Peter Rough:**

Got it.

**Dan McKivergan:**

I had two questions, but I'll keep it to one. One was on China, but I will ask you, you brought up NATO with the NATO Summit coming up in Vilnius in July. How would you like to see NATO evolve in the years ahead, both to maintain long-term support, long-term security and peace in Europe, and also political support here in the United States?

**Mike Pompeo:**

I don't have a single original thought on that, but I have lots of good old chestnuts that actually work. NATO has a mission set. You can go read it in the charter. It should be really good at that. What does that mean? It means that each nation gets to choose. It pays a little bit into the general fund. Every country does, but mostly we rely on security budgets in each of the member nations of NATO. So I am heartened by the fact that we have won, I hope soon, two new NATO members. I think that makes sense. I actually think it proves when you asked a question, I actually think it proves the risk of being in the mushy middle.

I think there’s lessons for Taiwan there as well. We have this policy of ambiguity. Really? We're pretty ambiguous about the Budapest memorandum. How'd that end? Just something to think about. And so I think NATO ought to think about being really excellent at the things it does as well. And then NATO was designed largely to protect these NATO nations, mostly from what we then viewed as the post World War II threat, Soviet Union for most of NATO’s existence. NATO’s conflict space has increased greatly. We haven't spent much time on it, but most of this conflict is economic today in the world. I talked about the sanctions piece of this, but if you really looked at how Xi Jinping intends to advance, the reason that Vladimir Putin wanted the red winter wheat from Ukraine, these are economic objectives as much as they are objectives of military conquest. NATO needs to evolve into a broader understanding. And the NATO nations a broader understanding of the economic relationships that create risk of conflict.

And I say that in the context of an administration that constantly says, we're afraid we're going to provoke Vladimir Putin. I would pause it to you that he's done been provoked to use kind of a Kansas articulation, but Xi Jinping has done been provoked too. And maybe we didn't provoke him, but he feels provoked. And that's all that matters is that perception that there's a space to move. And so I'm very hopeful that NATO will begin to confront this as well. Chinese cyber doesn't stay in Asia. Chinese cyber attacks on NATO are real threats as well. China considers itself a near-Arctic nation. Pull a globe out, check the math. You decide. These are the kinds of things that NATO can have an enormous impact in creating a platform for peace that I think it's at risk of missing as we get to the eighth and ninth decades of NATO's existence. So be really good at the core mission and continue to demand that nations do the right things with their own security budgets where even smaller country.

... do the right things with their own security budgets, where even smaller countries can fill real niches. I saw this. There were a handful of small European countries, I saw it as the CIA director, that had really capable intelligence services across a place where it's like, "Goodness
gracious, that is enormously additive to what we are doing.” They were never going to be at scale, right? Too small to be at scale. But you could say, “Nope, that's your task.” Some information things. These are the kind of things that NATO could begin to think about in a way that it doesn't think about enough and that could really be additive as we move into this next set of conflicts, this next set of global risk that emanates from Beijing.

**Peter Rough:**

Well, especially given the amount of money that NATO is now putting on the table. A 2% floor will be announced at Vilnius. Again, that's still aspirational, but let's presume that this money actually gets obligated and spent as the US buffs up its deterrence posture in Indo-Pacific. We need to, I think, work with our NATO allies and what it is that they can spend on to fill the gap and which niches might work for them. I see the legendary John Gizzi is in the back. Will give him a chance to ask a question.

**Mike Pompeo:**

That is a perfect descriptor. Hi, John.

**John Gizzi:**

Hello, Mr. Secretary, and thank you. Thanks for the warm words. Sudan has recently emerged as a crisis related to Russia. It's interesting to note that the warlord Hemeti, who is fighting to take over, has close ties to Russia, was with Vladimir Putin the day before the Ukraine invasion was launched and was a player in Russia getting its port near Sudan. If he emerges triumphant, would it help Putin's cause in Ukraine?

**Mike Pompeo:**

Oh, I absolutely think so. It's probably not a primary importance, John. It's interesting. My perspective on Sudan is they're partners in the Abraham Accords. So I met all these generals. I met Burhan. I know these ghastly characters are-

**John Gizzi:**

And Hemeti.

**Mike Pompeo:**

And Hemeti. I know these guys. It's interesting. The whole time we were working on that project, the Russian propaganda inside of the country was staggeringly effective at influencing how the population thought about what it was we were trying to do. So I think this is now four years ago when we were doing this, something like that. So it's interesting. Look, I don't think this is a proxy for Ukraine. I don't think the timing of this... But we should also keep in mind that there are other places that this conflict is taking place and the absent of American leadership has an impact.

And Sudan's a good example. You talked about Russian influence there. Don't forget Gulf Arab state influence in those African countries as well. The kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Emirates,
even some of our other friends have lots of influence in these places. So these are certainly things that America must follow, attempt to influence. And we should never forget how much capacity we have to actually shape those, not only through our own resources and the assistance that we provide in those places, but through others who have actual forces on the ground there that are friends of ours that would want to work against increased Russian influence in that place. I'll leave it at that. I want to make sure I stay on the unclassified part of this, but the predicate of your question is correct.

Peter Rough:

And the Wagner rights, I suppose, connect the two feeders in a way as well given their activities in Central African Republic and Libya and all through that.

Mike Pompeo:

It's funny. One last thought on deterrence. That reminds me. I'll bet not 1% of the American population would recall that we killed 300 of the sumbitches.

Peter Rough:

In Syria.

Mike Pompeo:

In Syria. We're coming across the Euphrates and we had a president who said, "I know how to stop this." And we did. And it never left. I could read this in classified and unclassified spaces. They never forgot that they actually killed Russians. It's like, don't forget Vladimir Putin remembered that too. You ask why didn't he like... Well, he's actually already done this. I know there's folks who'd say that was all crazy and gosh darn it. But we had Americans at risk. We had Americans on the ground on the other side of the river, so there was a real time necessity. And second, we had the capability to do it. And third, we were confident, and I was in the middle of this, we were confident that we had communicated adequately with the Russians that said, "Go back. Don't do it. Going to end badly." I'm summarizing. I used all my best military adjectives when I spoke to them.

My good friend Mr. Lavrov and my counterparts at CIA at the time, Mr. Naryshkin and Bortnikov. Like, "Don't do this." And we said we were going to do it. We told them, "If you do this, here's how we will respond." When they did it... It's mechanical, right? It seems very simple, but I promise you if a current senior leader from this administration had that same conversation, the Russians would go, "Doubt it." And they might still stop their action. I suppose it might still work, but the turns model that we had developed was real. And you could tell when you had the conversations. There were many times we could just use diplomatic tools to achieve the ends because we had demonstrated that we were prepared to execute against the things we promised we would do. I can't reiterate enough how important it is. Even in the tactical, even in places that seem far off like the southeast part of the Euphrates River, these things matter. Leaders remember.

Peter Rough:
And for all of the Game of Thrones ongoing on the Russian side now between Prigozhin and Gerasimov and Shoigu and Surovikin and all the rest, I wonder if Wagner wasn't a way for the Russians to test American red lines while having some plausible deniability, at least. Because had there been 300 regular Russian troops, it would've been an international crisis.

Mike Pompeo:

No, I think that's right. I think that's right.

Peter Rough:

Our colleague Can Kasapoglu.

Can Kasapoğlu:

Excuse me. If you're going to make me a legend, it's Kasapoglu.

Peter Rough:

Oh, sorry. Apologies. I have a last name that's regularly butchered. So we're kindred spirits in that.

Mike Pompeo:

Nobody ever gets mine wrong.

Peter Rough:

Yeah, exactly.

Mike Pompeo:

Everybody knows Ellen from Grey's Anatomy, so they get my name right.

Peter Rough:

But Can Kasapoglu, a Turkish military analyst with Hudson has described them as kind of morphing into a modern day Hezbollah of sorts, which is sort of interesting. And on the point of Sudan, we have our colleagues Zineb Riboua from the Center from Middle East Peace and Security as a peace and foreign policy on this, I would recommend to everyone. And Josh Meservey, one of our Africanists, is also publishing a big policy memo on this. So there's some intellectual food for you all. If you're interested it that, you can pull it up at the Hudson website. We have time for one last question. I'm going to go to Mike Watson here from Hudson.

Mike Watson:

Thank you for your time here today. Your remarks have been really interesting. I'm curious, one thing we sometimes hear here, both from people in DC and from people from other countries, is that our response to the war in Ukraine has basically been counterproductive in that it's driven
Russia and China together. Now, I happen to notice that no limits partnership that they announced happened before the war started. And Xi and Putin, I think the last time they got together, Xi said something along the lines of, "There are great changes going on and every time we get together, we make it happen." And Putin was like, "Yeah, thumbs up. I agree." I'm curious though what your take is on that belief basically that if we don't give the Russians lifelines to Europe or here or whatnot, that we're driving them into China's pocket.

Mike Pompeo:

Well, I mean, I've heard this argument before too. Putin invaded. You can't go, "Oh my goodness. If we help Ukraine defend itself, the Chinese and the Russians will become closer together. Let it go." Right? The same could be said for Lithuania or Estonia or Finland or Sweden, right? "Oh boy. It'll drive them closer together." So that argument, to your point, really about the timing of their increased closeness is absolutely true. I do think Putin's failure, that is the absence of success in Ukraine, has driven him to become even more reliant and dependent on Xi Jinping. I think that's true. He has now largely handed over large swaths of his economy to the Chinese Communist Party. The Russian people will regret that over the coming decades. I think that's almost certainly true. So I'm not denying that it has benefited, tightened the relationship. But to say that America's response has driven that gets cause and effect exactly backwards, I think.

Lastly, we should be concerned. We don't need the Russian nuclear war heads tied to the Chinese nuclear program. We don't need them connected. That increases strategic risk to the United States of America for sure. We should work to disconnect those and do the things that we can to drive them apart. But don't forget about basic laws of entropy. I took enough freshman year physics. These are two countries that have a long experience with each other and their peoples have long experiences with each other. There are smarter people who will write about this in ways that are more depth than I can. But don't forget, Xi Jinping has been eyeing Eastern Russia for a long time. So did Mao. There's a-

Peter Rough:

Near Arctic power might become an Arctic power.

Mike Pompeo:

No, this is exactly right. So we should never resign ourselves to the fact that this is going to become that someday we'll be going, "No, we think we should defend Russian independence from China." Right? But the Russian should worry that they're the next Taiwan. Make no mistake about it. They should be concerned that Xi has deep intentions for the resources that sit on Russian soil. And maybe I'll stop there.

Peter Rough:

Well, that's a wonderful place to end because I think, at least I believe, one thing that really is a sort of calling card of Hudson is that we try to zoom out from the tactical up to the strategic level and make connections in the world. On that note, in about 10 minutes, we're going to have an event with Senator Cruz here on the Russian Iranian connection as it relates to the war in Ukraine. I'd ask you all either to stay for that or to leave, but we'll need to flip the room quickly so please don't mull about. But before we do that, Mr. Secretary, it's been a real pleasure.
Thanks so much for doing this. Thanks to your service and for your leadership on Ukraine. We look forward to seeing you all at hudson.org again for future events with the Secretary and on all of our programming related to the war in Ukraine. Thanks so much.