Senator Mike Rounds on the Importance of the War in Ukraine

TRANSCRIPT

Discussion

- Senator Mike Rounds, *US Senator, South Dakota*
- Peter Rough, *Senior Fellow and Director, Center on Europe and Eurasia*

Disclaimer: This transcript is based off of a recorded video conference and breaks in the stream may have resulted in mistranscriptions in the text.

A video of the event is available: [https://www.hudson.org/events/senator-mike-rounds-importance-war-ukraine](https://www.hudson.org/events/senator-mike-rounds-importance-war-ukraine)

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Peter Rough:

Hello, and welcome to Hudson Institute's latest program on the war in Ukraine. My name is Peter Rough. I'm a senior fellow at Hudson, and the director of our Center on Europe and Eurasia. Today, we're coming to you from Capitol Hill, the Hart Senate office buildings, the offices of Mike Rounds of South Dakota. Thank you so much, Senator, for graciously opening up your offices for this conversation today.

Senator Mike Rounds:

I appreciate the opportunity to visit about Ukraine and Europe with you.

Peter Rough:

Senator Rounds, many of you know, holds very important committee assignments, and for our purposes today, the most important are the Committee on Armed Services and the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. He was previously governor of South Dakota, and I thought very interestingly, recently, Vanderbilt University and the University of Virginia ranked him as the second most effective lawmaker on national security issues, according to their center on effective lawmaking. We thought, we have to come see you and talk about Ukraine, to hear the secret sauce of what makes an effective lawmaker on national security issues.

Senator Mike Rounds:

Teamwork. I've got a good team.

Peter Rough:

no doubt it helps that you have Ellsworth Air Force Base, just outside of Rapid City, in South Dakota. The B-21, of course, is heading your way, too.

Senator Mike Rounds:

You hit it on the head. The B-21 bomber, as I would say, with all due respect, it is a badass weapon of war and peace. The point there being, we can have peace as long as our adversaries know that we're prepared for war. The B-21 is the most advanced weaponry that we've ever deployed, and it has the ability to reach out and touch people when they're not behaving themselves. This is something that we won't be using lightly, but it will be an everyday flyer. It's one that will be available to reach out a long ways, and they can't see it. The deployment is still classified in terms of when it's going to be available, but the first flight will be this year, and it is on time and on budget, which is something we can't say about most major programs.

Peter Rough:

With that, we're already at the breakdown of deterrence in war in peace, and having a muscular military, to ensure that deterrence holds. I thought very interestingly, seeing you on "Meet the Press" a few months ago, you made the connection between our withdrawal from Afghanistan and the war in Ukraine, and subsequently on top of that, raised the issue, our performance in
Ukraine might determine how Xi Jinping views the South Pacific and Taiwan. Can you talk a little bit about what's at stake here in the war, what really the big strategic questions are that keep us in this conflict, and supporting the Ukrainians?

Senator Mike Rounds:

You have to respect the intellect of Xi Jinping. He is the leader of China, that says by itself that he is not foolish. He's going to be very careful in what he does. He watches world events, they take indications from our behavior. They look to see long-term whether or not we will be a leader in the world in the future. Whether or not we have withdrawn from Afghanistan, was that an indication that we're withdrawing from world affairs? When they saw, really, the debacle that was the withdrawal, and it was one that we can't find a single military officer who gave advice to the President of the United States suggesting that we have a withdrawal in that form. They had recommended withdrawals, but in a very calculated way, without a date certain. The President, on his own and in disregard from the advice of others, said he knew better, that he was the President and he was calling the shots, and he was going to withdraw on a date certain. That allowed our adversaries that were still there to be empowered, and they made life miserable.

They killed American servicemen, they disrespected us, and they are now regrouping once again. The rest of the world saw that. They looked at it and said, "There's decadence in America. They're weak, and they won't carry the strong chin forward." Coming in, you also have Putin, who literally doesn't care except for the power and the advancement of Russia, in terms of an imperial approach to Europe. It appears that he still believes that they're entitled to the land that is Ukraine today. In 2014, when we did nothing as he worked into Crimea, he said, "We just will test this new leader again today." What he found out, though, is that the rest of Europe made it very clear that he was not going to get a free ride in Ukraine. President Zelenskyy has stood the test of time so far. He has been a great leader, and he has helped to bring Europe together.

We have provided resources, and now Xi Jinping is looking at this, saying, "I'm not so sure that I want really get in and threaten Taiwan the way that Putin threatened Ukraine. I want to watch this, I want to see how this plays out. I want to learn from this." They are watching us, and they are trying to figure out whether or not it's worth it, in terms of material cost, embarrassment, and Chinese blood to actually invade Taiwan, or to go about negotiating, in a diplomatic way, for a reunification sometime in the future. The strong stand that NATO, including the United States and absolutely backed by Congress, that we will support Ukraine, and we will see that Putin is stopped in his tracks, hopefully that sends a message to Xi Jinping, that taking on Taiwan could hold similar types of costs as what this has been to Russia. A long-winded answer.

Peter Rough:

It's an excellent one, because I think precedents and credibility matter. We hosted at Hudson Tsai Ing-wen of Taiwan, when she transited through the U.S., and she very clearly connected, as did the speaker of the Taiwanese parliament, who visited us this week, the battlefield in Ukraine to peace in the South Pacific and the Taiwan Strait. You also mentioned congressional leadership strongly in support of Ukraine, and ensuring that Ukraine has the military kit and the budgetary support to stay in the fight against the Russians. Speaker McCarthy had that now somewhat famous press conference in Jerusalem, where he went after a Russian "Journalist" who asked him about support for Ukraine. He said, "I stand for supporting Ukraine."
We've seen members of the armed services committee, which you sit on, as well as the vast majority of senators, stand by Ukraine. There are some voices in the party, though, who worry that in an era of metastasizing deficits and debts, we can't afford to support Ukraine, and that we shouldn't send money to Ukraine. What do you say to those Republicans, or maybe some voters back home in South Dakota, who worry about the cost of supporting Ukraine?

**Senator Mike Rounds:**

We also recognize the cost of war, and we recognize the cost of maintaining peace. I think the cost of maintaining peace is less than the cost of maintaining or having a war. I think the cost of an all-out war pales in comparison to what we are spending right now in terms of providing military assistance to Ukraine. The cost of a war will pale in comparison with the cost of providing Taiwan with the tools to defend itself as well. Long-term, we don't want a world war, but we have to be in a position to defend and to maintain an international set of rules that have kept peace in this world, for the most part, for literally multiple generations, since World War II, really. While there have been wars, they have not been world wars.

When you talk about the superpowers, the United States, China's getting close, Russia has more nuclear weapons than basically anybody else. When you talk about that, you have to recognize that in this great powers competition, we have to maintain the ability to deter, or to eliminate other people's thought that they might just maybe be able to win a war against us. Overwhelming strength and deterrence keeps us safe. If at any point someone who is imperialistically driven, such as Putin, decides it might be worth it for the long run to test it, has to be proven upfront that they're wrong. You stop them as soon as you can, you display the might in the hopes that if you do have a fight, it's a short and quick battle, and that it is never a fair fight, that our young men and women always have the advantage. That's the reason why we spend the money now. If we can spend the money on technology, and resources, and put ourselves in a position to end a war quickly, then our adversaries may very well think twice about ever starting the war in the first place.

**Peter Rough:**

As a member of the Senate, two of your primary duties in foreign relations are, number one, passing budgets and funding are military, the second is an oversight responsibility that you have. A lot of the oversight talk, at least in the general press and the media, is about oversight of specific monies that's going to Ukraine. I think that's been addressed, and you've addressed it in the media relatively satisfactory.

**Senator Mike Rounds:**

Let me just make it clear. Look, we know that nothing is ever perfect, but we have clear evidence, and we have multiple auditors, inspector generals and so forth there that are following up on the dollars. We believe that the vast majority of what we can see is going to the war effort, just as it was supposed to. I will never say that in any war that there isn't some loss in terms of resources, but the vast majority is being put to the use that was intended. We clearly have the support of the President of Ukraine in making certain that it is done the way that we have laid it out, and he understands that. This is a case of, if they mess this up, this can be the death mill of their country. They're not going to mess it up.

**Peter Rough:**
They're dependent on Western aid to stay in the fight, and it's also logical that this is getting to the front, because they're fighting a much larger adversary. If they were diverting weapons elsewhere, as some conspiracy theorists argue-

**Senator Mike Rounds:**

What would be the benefit of diverting some weapons, getting paid a few bucks for it, and then turning around and losing your country, or losing your life? Look, this is a case of true commitment on their part.

**Peter Rough:**

The oversight question I really wanted to get to is one of defining what the administration's actual strategy is in the war. I've noticed, in the press releases that the State Department sends out announcing certain weapon systems and the drawdowns going to Ukraine, that they add this line, which the president has adopted, that they're prepared to support Ukraine as long as it takes, but they never quite define what "It" really is in that sentence. When you press the administration, when members come before you from the administration, senior officials to your committees, and when you're in conversation with them, what do they say the administration's strategy is for Ukraine? Is it an open-ended, boil the frog type of approach that plays on time? Are they looking to wind down the war after the counter offensive, through a negotiation? How do you read it?

**Senator Mike Rounds:**

We question their support. We question their bureaucracy. We question their timing, in terms of getting things there in a timeframe that is expected of them. We push them hard to make sure that they're delivering in an on-time way. In some cases, they literally have looked at this thinking that they're going to save, such as Abrams tanks. We're going to deliver 31 Abrams tanks, and then they come back and they say, "It might take two years." Our challenge to them then is, "Why is it going to take two years? We know better. What's going on here?" Now, suddenly we've been told, "We've looked at this again, and now we're talking about a much quicker timeframe," which they've shared with us, the timeframe. I'm not sure I can talk about that in this setting or not, but we have a date.

We know when, but it didn't start out that way. It has been pressure from Congress. When we do things internationally, we do our best not to be partisan in nature, but let me just share that I think the fact that Republicans and Democrats alike in Congress have pushed the administration, has made them begin to at least lead, beginning in the back, but pushing towards the front a little bit more all the time. We wish they were leading more to the front right now. We're going to continue to push to the front, and we're going to continue to let them very clearly know that our expectations are that if we've appropriated funds, and we've directed and authorized the use of weapons, we expect them to deliver those weapons in a timely and business-like manner. If not, we want to know why not, and we've been doing that.

A lot of it you have to do behind closed doors, because you don't want to share where they're going, and when they're going to get there, and how they're getting there. That's been one of the challenges we have, is sharing with the American public. These are being delivered. The vast majority of the resources that we have said we were going to deliver, we have delivered.
We’ve got more to deliver, and we’re probably going to have to look at more resources in the future, depending upon how this advancement by Ukraine this spring and summer goes.

**Peter Rough:**

Do you anticipate being able to pass, if this latest tranche of money is spent by the administration, a new package of funding for Ukraine come late summer, or whenever it might be? Are you worried about that vote in the Senate and the House?

**Senator Mike Rounds:**

We will do our due diligence. We’ll make sure that the money is directed, and that there are plans for how they’re going to deploy it. We’ll ask the hard questions, but we won’t delay our decision on making it work. We’re going to push them to make sure that they’ve got the same focus that we have, which is the delivery in a timely fashion, so that it can actually be effective in defeating Putin in Russia, and sending a message that this is going to be an extremely costly endeavor for Russia, and their best hope should be the withdrawal and a peace plan long term. The imperial attempts by Putin can never be rewarded. We have to send that message, and the rest of these folks out there that have imperial designs on other places, including Xi Jinping in China, have got to understand that there will be a cost involved, and they have to measure that cost with the probability of success. The probability of success, in their mind, has got to be extremely low and long-term.

**Peter Rough:**

Especially given that Putin has inverted the nuclear logic, and used offensive threats of nuclear use to try to push the United States from delivering certain weapons to the Ukrainians. If that precedent is set, third countries might decide for themselves, “The Americans can be pushed off of weapons deliveries. Ukraine gave up its nuclear weapons famously at Budapest, in the mid 1990s, so we too need nuclear weapons.” That, of course, is a superpower responsibility, to keep the non-proliferation regime intact. I think that's an astute point, and I hope one all of our listeners will pick up as well.

**Senator Mike Rounds:**

In order to do that, and here's the caveat, that costs us more money, because we are in the middle of upgrading our nuclear command and control, and upgrading our nuclear weapons capabilities. We want to do that in such a fashion that there is no question as to our competency, or our capability, or our ability to really extend power if ever necessary, in order to stop the aggression in the first place. President Ronald Reagan suggested Star Wars. He suggested the ability to stop our adversaries from doing us harm. That has to be a part of what we look at in the future as well, so that not only would they suffer devastating losses should they ever decide to attack us, but they have to understand that there's a high probability that we may very well be able to defend against some of those attacks and stop them in the first place, meaning they would be suffering catastrophic losses, and we may very well still survive.

I think that's an important message that Ronald Reagan had, and sometimes we forget it, and sometimes that's controversial today. I don't think that should be controversial. I think that should be part of our obligation, the defense of our homeland and our allies.
Peter Rough:

And our allies, which is an important way of keeping proliferation, I think, at bay. Since you sit on the Senate Select Committee on intelligence, I hope you don't punt altogether on this question, but I'll try it anyways. What do you anticipate in this upcoming counter offensive? What are your hopes? How do you think it will shape American attitudes, and the course of the war going forward?

Senator Mike Rounds:

I just hope that Ukraine has the resources, and the planning, and the desire to move Russia out of Ukraine. That they do it in such a fashion that they don't provoke by aggressively going into Russia, but rather, they get right up to and they run the Russians out of Ukraine, and out of that part of Ukraine which is referred to as Crimea. That's my hope. I don't know that they can get that all done this year, but I think they can inflict enough cost on the Russian army that perhaps cooler minds that I believe do exist in Russia take a hard look at whether or not Mr. Putin is doing the right thing, and whether or not he needs to either be stopped, or perhaps a change in leadership occurs in Russia.

Peter Rough:

To engender a true spirit of compromise in Moscow, so to speak, to put it delicately. I don't think we could end on a better note, because that's a rousing call for support of Ukraine, and for the counter offensive, which we all at Hudson Institute hope for, and certainly support. We're grateful to your leadership on Capitol Hill. You've been a stalwart supporter of Ukraine, and of the American interest in this war, which really is, I think, what's at stake. I know your time is valuable.

Senator Mike Rounds:

Let me share this with you. I had the privilege and the opportunity to serve as governor in South Dakota for eight years. I went to 31 funerals for young men that had died in the service of our country. I won't forget them. The message, if I could share, is the more we do to prepare right now, and the more aggressively we create the systems that protect us and our country, the better chance we have of not having other young men and women have to sacrifice their lives. Whatever it takes, we're going to make damn sure that if they ever do enter into a conflict, it is not a fair fight, and that we have overwhelming capabilities, and they've got a huge opportunity to come back and to live out the rest of their lives after offering time in our armed services. That's my goal, overwhelming capabilities to protect young men and women who offer to serve.

Peter Rough:

I think that's also an important distinction between America's wars in the past and the war in Ukraine. There aren't American boots on the ground-

Senator Mike Rounds:

Correct.
Peter Rough:
Shedding blood, and we'd like to keep it that way.

Senator Mike Rounds:
Absolutely.

Peter Rough:
Thank you very much, Senator Rounds. Thank you all for joining us today. I know the senator has a busy schedule, so I'll let you go. Please join us for future programming on the war in Ukraine, and all of Hudson's offerings, at hudson.org.