Lessons from the Ukraine Crisis with Rep. Jason Crow

TRANSCRIPT

Discussion

- Representative Jason Crow, U.S. Representative, Colorado’s 6th District
- Kenneth R. Weinstein, Walter P. Stern Distinguished Fellow, Hudson Institute

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Ken Weinstein:

I'm Ken Weinstein, Walter P. Stern Distinguished Fellow here at Hudson Institute and I am delighted to welcome Congressman Jason Crow to speak today. Congressman Crow represents Colorado's sixth congressional district east of Denver, including the city of Aurora. This is his second term in Congress. He was first elected in 2018. Most notably for our purposes, he previously was an Army Ranger who served three tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan as part of the 82nd Airborne and the 75th Ranger Regiment.

He practiced law for a while in Denver before being elected to Congress, and he serves, most notably, both on the House Armed Services Committee and the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. Delighted to welcome you, Congressman Crow. Would love to get your take on the situation in Ukraine, what the United States, what NATO needs to do to avert a deeper crisis. Thank you so much for joining us.

Rep. Jason Crow:

Thank you, Ken. Really a pleasure to be with you again, albeit virtually, and thank you to Hudson Institute for the invitation. Always appreciate the discussions and the forum that you host on these issues. We obviously are in a very dire situation right now with Ukraine. There's no doubt that Vladimir Putin is putting all of the pieces in place for an invasion. I think at this point, a large military invasion is highly likely. I think that this is looking like the type of invasion that we haven't seen, frankly, in Europe since World War II, which gives us some historical significance for it.

[Putin has] somewhere north of 70 percent of the combat power amassed in the north and east and south of Ukraine to conduct a large-style invasion. I think what's notable is not just the battalion tactical groups, the armor columns, the artillery but, obviously, the supplies, the ammunition, the field hospitals, the petrol, the blood supplies, all the other things that are being put in place as kind of the final pieces that would be necessary to conduct innovation. So just establishing some context right here, let's start briefly with what is Vladimir Putin's intent? Why is he doing this?

If you zoom back and you talk to people that have studied this far longer than me, they'll tell you that Vladimir Putin really viewed the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the collapse of the Soviet Union as the greatest tragedy of the 20th century. That was a formative turning point in his life, and much of his career and his ascendancy since then has been geared around trying to reestablish as much of that as possible. He really views Ukraine as the centerpiece of that reestablishment, and it's very critical to his legacy. He's really at that point of kind of trying to finalize his legacy, and Ukraine is an essential component of that.

So in his mind, Ukraine is far more important to him and to Russia than he believes it is to the West and to NATO. That's part of his overall calculus here. The second component is, and this seems to be a miscalculation of Putin's, is he views Ukraine kind of in a pre-2014, post-Cold War framework. He seems to be under the impression that the military component of this invasion, if it occurs, will be swift and that any resistance will be minimal in that there will be some majority support within Ukraine for Russian intervention and reuniting Ukraine with the larger Russia.

I think, as do many people, that he is miscalculating that. The Ukraine of today is substantially different from even the Ukraine of 2014. This is a country that's been moving west now for a decade. This is a country that now enjoys freedoms and is a nascent democracy. This is a country that's been at war with
Russia for over seven years now and has had a steady stream of wounded Ukrainian soldiers coming back to Ukraine from the front. Obviously, their families and other folks, a pretty strong Russian sentiment, I think, is the best way to put it.

So I think we’re seeing a resolve and a potential resistance movement that Putin is not counting on because he is willing to undertake the expense and the casualties of an invasion. But what scares him more is a long-term insurgency and a resistance much like he saw us having to struggle with over the last 20 years in Afghanistan. So where does that all leave us now? Obviously, we continue to the diplomatic engagement piece, which I think we have to do. We have an obligation to do. It certainly buys us some time.

In addition to that, I and others on the Hill have been a large proponent of a vast increase in both the quantity and the type of defensive, lethal and non-lethal, aid provided to Ukraine. So what we have to do is change the cost calculus. We have to make this much more costly to Putin in a very short order. We're within a window now that, frankly, we're limited in what types of munitions and supplies are actually useful and could be fielded in short order. So that window is closing.

And then the third, of course, is the diplomatic or, I'm sorry, the sanctions piece, making sure we pass in Congress a crippling sanctions that Russia has not seen and undermine Putin's base of support with his oligarchs who rely, frankly, on their ability to travel and spend all that money they make off of petrol in Paris and other places around the world. If they're not able to do that anymore, I think that would put substantial pressure on Putin back home. So really looking at how do we change that cost calculus domestically for Putin as well.

Then, of course, there are a variety of other things I think we should be signaling, and that is our willingness and our resolve to assist with cyber operations, defensive cyber support, tactical intelligence support for the Ukrainians and also a resistance movement. I think we should be very clear that we're willing to help support a longer term Ukrainian resistance movement and that this is not going to be a quick and easy victory for Vladimir Putin. So I'll stop it there and would love to obviously engage in a conversation and take questions.

Ken Weinstein:

Wonderful. Thank you very much, Congressman. That was very clear and insightful. You headed a bipartisan congressional delegation to Ukraine back in December before the situation looked as grave as it does now. How do you assess? You talked about the transformation of Ukraine as a nation since 2014. How do you assess the will of the unity of the Ukrainian people on the eve of a potential attack? How much are they looking to us? How independent are they? How do they view the West as well?

Rep. Jason Crow:

Yeah. So my impressions are not just this visit, but other engagements I’ve had with Ukraine. They are moving west as a culture, as a society. It's definitely a much stronger westward movement than there is any eastern movement. You can see that. You can feel that. You can see the economy growing. You can see that desire to move into Western Europe to engage more strongly with the United States. The will is there. I certainly saw a tremendous will to fight, people very open about saying that if they were invaded, they were going to grab their guns and go to the weapons caches, and they would fight for
their country because the sense of Ukrainian sovereignty and their identity as a separate country has just grown so significantly over the last decade.

Again, part of this is the fact that they have been at war. When we talk about a Russian invasion, we have to be really clear that Russia has already invaded. They obviously took Crimea. They're in Donbas, and that has already occurred. This is, obviously, a much different type of invasion, substantial additional invasion. But the will is there. What they lack is the tools. What we know is the modernization of the Ukraine military has happened very rapidly over the last couple of years. They are modernizing, but they're still not a NATO type of force, their technology, the capability they have, the ability to conduct combined arms operations.

As we talk about it, that's still a nascent capability. So putting that all together and increasing their lethality is something that certainly they've made great strides in, but they have a long ways to go yet. So the tools are essential. That's where our ability to provide some real force multipliers in the form of intelligence, cyber defense, and lethal defensive munitions to increase that cost are really important. We're certainly not going to change the infrastructure of the Ukrainian military in the next couple of weeks or months, but we can do things that would make a big difference on the battlefield. But we're almost out of time now.

Ken Weinstein:

Let me ask you first about the Ukrainian reserve army that, as you mentioned, people who go grab their guns and go to the battlefield. How trained are they? I mean the will is there, as you said. But are they battle-ready in the way that the Russian Special Forces and others who are likely to be the initial fighting force, the landing team, as it were? What's your sense there?

Rep. Jason Crow:

Yeah. Well, they're not Spetsnaz brigades. I can tell you that. But they don't have to be. They don't have to be. I'm somebody that spent formative years of my 20s fighting insurgencies. You don't need to be a trained special operations force. So they have a couple of advantages. Number one, if you're fighting on your home territory in your backyard, that's an advantage. Number two, there are hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian veterans, people that have fought this war over the last seven-plus years in Donbas and Crimea and other places that are trained and have combat experience that are now civilians.

They're either in the reserve forces. They're in the territorial defense forces that they're building up because there's kind of multiple layers of a resistance. So one is the actual reserves. The second are these territorial defense forces, which is a mixture of veterans who are no longer in reserve status, but whom are trained and have combat experience. And then you just have your normal run-of-the-mill Ukrainian, your accountants, your doctors, your nurses, your fill-in-the-blank who are willing to fight. Certainly, we need to be able to train those folks or help with training and advising and assisting, which I'm encouraging us to continue to do.

Of course, there's a broad range here, and everybody can kind of bring something different to the battlefield when you're talking about a resistance force, so to speak.
Ken Weinstein:

In terms of what else we can do in terms of equipment, you talked about defensive equipment, both lethal and nonlethal, as the clock begins to tick. Also, if Russia goes in, what happens then? Is there going to be a massive uptick of the kind of equipment that goes into Ukraine? What’s your sense of what actually happens if the fighting goes on for some time?

Rep. Jason Crow:

Well, I mean any of these things, Ken, as you know, it depends. It depends on the nature of a Russian offensive, how fast it happens. I mean there’s different courses of action here. If Putin decides on a full offensive blitz into Kyiv, it's possible that the capital could fall within a matter of days. There could be a missile bombardment followed by long-range bomber bombardment on major Kyiv facilities and then an invasion basically from the north. They put substantial combat power in Belarus, very large amount of combat power, obviously, that is just likely to be the force that would take Kyiv, given its proximity to Kyiv.

So it depends on the timing here, and that dictates whether there's time to disperse the weapons caches, constitute the reserve forces, the territorial defense forces, and also how many of the regular Ukrainian forces actually survive that initial assault and can reconstitute west of the Dnieper River in stronger Ukrainian territory in the far west than currently exists in the east. So those are all kind of the variables that we have to look at.

But certainly, our ability to assist a resistance, a long-term Ukrainian resistance, is going to depend on those factors, who we're dealing with, how many of those forces survive the conventional assault, how much of the weapons are able to survive, and then where we train forces and how we help facilitate movement of additional equipment in the months and years to come.

Ken Weinstein:

In terms of the resistance which you've spoken of a few times and you've talked about publicly as well, you've talked about the need for increased democracy promotion, but also the need to really aid the forces in the case, depending on what happens in case of an invasion. If we are aiding the Ukrainian resistance, do you see Russia trying to take advantage of us geostrategically elsewhere? Do you think they're going to be so occupied they won't be able to? What do you make of that kind of a situation?

I mean it would be a different kind of resistance, obviously, than you faced in Afghanistan and in Iraq, but I'm just wondering what your sense is of how things might play out.

Rep. Jason Crow:

Yeah. That's a good question. I mean I think our ability to aid in a longer-term resistance movement, first of all, I just want to make the case for that because some people might say, "Why should we do this? Why is this in their interest?" I get this back home, too, is sometimes some people will ask me, "Why is this important?" My response is several fold. Number one, this is just an outright attempt by an autocrat to take by force a free and democratic sovereign nation. We should not allow as a precedent for that to happen, let alone one who is a partner of ours, number one.
Number two, stability matters for the global economy for Europe, our trading partners and others. Having that stability, I think, is also important. And number three, as you mentioned, there is this issue of others looking at what we do here, too. China is looking at how we respond and whether or not they could try to attack Taiwan in the next couple of years and do so with limited long-term consequences. That's why I think the long-term consequence piece is really important here.

There should be short-term consequences, but I think it’s critical [to understand] that this is not fast and easy. Because if you're China and others trying to do this assessment, you're thinking to yourself, "We're playing the long game here. We can take short-term pain for that long-term gain. We'll just ride it out." But if they understand that the free world will not allow that to happen and that we have a long-term commitment to other free and democratic nations that continue to fight and resist, that does substantially change their calculus in terms of the long-term cost benefit analysis here.

So I don't know. Obviously, nobody knows what's in Vladimir Putin's mind, except for Vladimir Putin. He keeps his cards pretty close to the vest. But I will say that I do think that if Russia does a full large-scale invasion, I think that will substantially tie them up. This goes to my earlier point that I think he's miscalculating the costs both near-term and long-term militarily and economically and in terms of his own political capital back home. Because let's also be clear that if a large-scale invasion happens, there's going to be tens of thousands of Ukrainians filming it live and posting YouTube videos of this happening.

That's different from what we dealt with in Afghanistan and Iraq even, in many instances. So he's going to have to deal with those images back home, too. So I think this will tie him up in a way that maybe he's not expecting in his ability to then conduct other operations. [His attempts at] destabilizing could be very limited around the world, which might be part of his miscalculation here.

**Ken Weinstein:**

That was a very rich answer. One thing of particular interest is you used the term, the free world, which is a term that gives chills up and down my spine because it's a term ... I'm a little older than you. It's a term we used in the 1970s, '80s, and '90s. But it's a term that has become increasingly unpopular on both the left and the right. There's been a big chorus of people on both sides of the aisle who are skeptical about defending Ukrainian sovereignty as a focus of American foreign policy.

I'm just wondering how we've gotten to this point. You've indicated why you think these policies are wrong, but how have we gotten to this point that such a major incursion in the heart of Europe, what could be, as you said, the largest invasion since the end of World War II? So many people in the United States are throwing their hands up and saying, "Not our business."

**Rep. Jason Crow:**

Yeah. Boy, where to even start on that one? We haven't gotten there overnight. That's for sure. It is interesting. It is kind of astonishing to me sometimes. You indicated this, Ken, that sometimes we have to make the case for democracy, why it's even important anymore. I think it's a moment of humility, actually. It's humbling to understand that you can never stop making that case of why freedom and democracy and sovereignty matter. Because the moment you stop making the case, somebody else will continue to make the opposite case. They're not going to stop. So why should we? So certainly leaning into that.
I remember I was really surprised in my first term in Congress. The first time I'd been to the Munich Security Conference, this was 2019 before the pandemic, you might remember this. Literally, the title of the 2019 Munich Security Conference was "Westlessness," this idea that there was malaise, that the West has kind of lost its way. We have to remake the case for why NATO matters and democracy matters. There was just a lack of vision and clarity on that point. I think for us, right now, therein lies the great opportunity.

I think this is another thing that Vladimir Putin and autocrats around the world are miscalculating. We're starting to see this happen right now. This is actually an opportunity for us to show that our alliances matter. Our partnerships matter. NATO matters. The U.S. engaging in the world matters, and standing up and fighting for other democracies and for freedom is a big deal because [we are] 70 years post-World War II. That's not to say there wasn't instability and wars and conflicts and mistakes made and issues.

But it is just the fact, if you look back in history, that that was 70 years of fairly unprecedented peace and prosperity. I'm talking relatively here. That's not to say that there wasn't a lot of problems. Relatively speaking, looking back over comparative 70-year periods back in time, it did matter that we built this alliance structure, that we fought for freedom, that we stood up for it, and people made sacrifice for it. Much of the advancements and the kind of the society we live in today and the things we take for granted today were developed in that 70-year period.

So I guess this is a long way of saying we're at a crossroads right now of deciding whether or not we're going to reinvigorate that or not or just allow it to go to the wayside and allow others, China and Russia and others, to make the order for the next 70 years. The answer for me is no. We shouldn't allow that. I think it would be a very bad situation when you lose the rules of the road, when you go from a system designed on transparency and openness and democracy and rule of law and order to one where it's basically the strongest country makes the rules. That's not where we want to go.

Ken Weinstein:

Absolutely. Let me ask you a question. You talked about the theme of “Westlessness” at the 2019 Munich Security Conference. There are many observers, not just here in Washington, but in the Baltic nations, certainly in Ukraine, Poland, who feel that Germany is the “Westless” nation in some ways, that Germany's decision to go ahead with the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, that its reticence to provide lethal equipment to the Ukrainian request so far, that Germany has really been a disappointment.

Germany, of course, is the country that arguably benefited the most from 70 years of our engagement in Europe through its peaceful reunification, first its defense and then its peaceful reunification with the East. What do you make of German policy these days and where it's headed?

Rep. Jason Crow:

Well, I think that's actually TBD now. We have a new chancellor. I think that chancellor is being very cautious with his language and trying to establish his own policies. He's still, I think, feeling out his own coalition. You see the language he's using on Nord Stream 2, which obviously is very careful language, and he's not taking positions, which I think tells me he's formulating his position. He's trying to figure out where his own politics are right now. So I think there's opportunity there.
But I don't know. I'm reminded of a plaque that was on Barack Obama's desk during his presidency. It says, "Hard things are hard." This is hard stuff. This is global security and peace and conflict and war. As our NATO ambassador recently said, "It's hard enough to get a couple of dozen people to agree on what they have for dinner." It's tough. It's never easy to get 30 different members on the same page. But that's the exercise we're going through. I think we stopped using that muscle for so long.

We're now doing it again for the first time in several years, coming together, meeting, collaborating, conducting an assessment of our security posture, which is long overdue, looking at how we can better engage with the Baltic states, how we can maybe forward pre-position some forces, up our rotational forces in Romania and Poland and other places. These are discussions that should have been had with much more urgency years ago. They weren't. But we are having them now. These things historically are never easy. We're going through them, and I think that's okay.

**Ken Weinstein:**

Let me ask you. Well, we've had challenges. Hard things are hard, as you said, with regard to some of our NATO allies. There was, obviously, a very striking image the last week before the opening of the Beijing Olympics where Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin stood together united to call for a global redistribution of power opposing NATO expansion. How do you understand the PRC/Russia alliance, if it is that, and where do you see it going?

**Rep. Jason Crow:**

Well, I mean it's an alliance, as I see it, that's based on what they're against, not what they're for. I mean it's an anti-U.S., anti-Western, anti-NATO. I don't want to use the word, alliance, because it's not really formal like that, but certainly a relationship of some sort, a collaboration that is continued. I'm worried about it, and everybody else is worried about it. It could cause a lot of trouble for us certainly and for our partners and for our alliances if we ignore it and allow it to go on uncontested.

So we certainly have to pay attention to it. But I also believe that there are limits to alliances that are not based on what you're for and what you believe in, but rather what you're against. There are just limits to that in terms of what people are willing to do for one another. I think that makes us stronger and puts us in a better position. Listen, Russia and China, those are two near-peer adversaries. It's very concerning to see them get close together. But you still look at the alliance system of the United States, and there's nothing not even close to it, not even close. Russia and China know that.

They want an alliance structure. You see China trying to create one, but having a hell of a time doing it. Because as it turns out, people don't really like their approach. They don't like their value proposition. We have a better value proposition than they do. They're having a really hard time creating an alliance structure. But we have AUKUS now. We have the Quad. We have NATO, and we have others. We're looking at how do we build out more in INDOPACOM, too. There's not going to be a INDOPACOM version of NATO because the challenges are different. The history and everything is different.

But we can build something out. I know the administration is working really hard. I think we're going to see some big leaps forward vis-a-vis Japan, the Philippines, and other countries that we have really engaged with robustly in the last year that, I think, are wanting to come our way.
Ken Weinstein:

Yeah. The promotion of the free and open Indo-Pacific is critical, the first island chain. Let me change gears to another sort of periphery security issue. That's Arctic security, which you have followed closely. You've been an important voice on the challenge of growing Russian militarization in the Arctic, the threat to ship lanes posed by Russia's growing presence. China also has its own sort of growing presence in the Arctic as well.

Let me ask you, what else should we be doing in the Arctic, which is the problem's not going to fade away, whatever happens in Ukraine?

Rep. Jason Crow:

Well, we do have to solve the issue of what our Navy's going to look like and what our shipbuilding plan is and how many ships we're going to have and what type of ships they're going to be. The combination of autonomous versus manned is a debate that's still going on. It seems like we've been having this debate. Well, it doesn't seem like, we have been having this debate the entire time I've been in Congress. Well, it's time to stop debating and just get it done and start building the ships that we need because Russia has dozens of ice breakers, many of them nuclear-powered. We don't.

Last time I checked, I think we were at two operable. One of those is marginally operable. So I think we have to really look at what type of maritime capability we have up there. We have a very strong and strengthening alliance with Norway and Sweden and others in the Arctic. I have actually spent a fair amount of time going up to Barentsburg and the Svalbard peninsula in that area. Certainly, seeing some of the Russian build-out up there is concerning and Putin reconstituting beneath the Arctic Rim facilities that went dormant right after the Cold War that are now being manned again.

So a freedom of navigation is going to be really important. Our ability to project a power up there, our need for icebreakers as part of the inventory is going to be extremely important. But I think NATO's going to play a big role in that one as well. There's no doubt about it.

Ken Weinstein:

Very good. Let me ask you. Let me wrap up and ask you about hypersonics. We obviously see both Russia and China moving forward and both of which pose a security threat, a threat as my Hudson colleague, William Schneider, argues in the Financial Times, a threat to our early-warning systems of potential nuclear attack and a broader threat moreover. What's your take on hypersonic, what we need to be doing?

Rep. Jason Crow:

Yeah. Yeah. Well, we are behind, there's no doubt about that, in both our own hypersonic R&D, so making investments in that to expedite our own systems is going to be important, but also defense. Our defensive systems are designed around an attack from the north coming over from Russia, our radars and others, and also designed around a traditional ICBM capability. So hypersonics base, because of not just their speed but their maneuverability and the fact that they have unpredictable flight patterns, make them close to impossible right now, given our technology, to defend against it.
So looking at airborne defense and directed energy weapons and also a layered defense, because unlike some of the defense of the past, we're going to have to address these weapons at every layer. Pre-deployment, what cyber options do we have to interrupt the deployment? During deployment or during launch, during flight, and then close to impact, so kind of the four-layered defense system, and there are different technologies that you have to address at each layer of that defense.

So we are doing some work along those lines. I think we have to continue to expedite that. This actually underscores the costs of Afghanistan. When we actually look at all of the costs of Afghanistan, it's not just the trillions of dollars that we spent, and it's not just the lives lost and those wounded and also some of our credibility. But we have spent 20 years largely focused on an unconventional threat in CENTCOM. In that 20-year period, our adversaries have been preparing for the next war with new technologies and new systems, fielding generation five and six stuff. So that's been a cost.

The bottom line is that Afghanistan is over. I think we can shift our view, which we're doing, and looking at the next battle and the next fight. But we're behind in a couple of places. I think we have to be really honest about that and make sure that we're refocusing as we need to.

Ken Weinstein:

Well, thank you very much, Congressman Crow. You are an important voice on national security questions in Congress and beyond, and we’re very grateful to you for making the time to be with us at Hudson Institute. This was an absolutely fascinating and enlightening discussion. Thank you.

Rep. Jason Crow:

Yeah. Good to be with you. Thank you, Ken.