What’s Next for Ukraine? A Conversation with Former President of Estonia Toomas Ilves

TRANSCRIPT

Discussion

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Ken Weinstein:

Approximately 130,000 Russian troops appear poised to invade Ukraine flanked by maneuvers on sea and in the air, NATO member states are divided as to how to respond to this threat. To analyze Vladimir Putin’s intentions and whether the West still has the will and the capacity to deter Russia. We have the honor of welcoming Former Estonian President Toomas Ilves, the noted geostrategic analyst, here to Hudson Institute for a conversation about policy options on the Eve of what may well be a Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Toomas Ilves, of course, needs no introduction. He is a forthright and transformative leader who served as Estonia's fourth president from 2006 to 2016. He was especially critical to Estonia’s transformation into a global, digital, and cyber powerhouse—a remarkable feat for a country of 1.325 million people, a slightly smaller population than our state of Maine, and his expertise at the intersection of technology, policy, and geo-strategy, which I would argue is arguably unique among world leaders, were critical to his efforts at turning Estonia into a model for e-governance, but also more importantly, allowed Ilves to play a critical role on efforts at global internet governance and the like.

Raised in exile from Estonia, primarily in the United States, educated at Columbia University and the University of Pennsylvania, Ilves, of course, is a hero of the movement to free captive nation Estonia, working as a journalist first and then as head of the Estonia service of Radio Free Europe from 1988 to 1993. From 1993 to 1996, he served as Estonia ambassador to the United States. A Social Democrat, he served twice as Estonian Foreign Minister from 1996 to 1998 and 1999 to 2002, and was also a member of the European Parliament. I am delighted to you to Hudson Institute. Look forward to your remarks, Mr. President.

Toomas Ilves:

Well, thank you very, Ken. Well, last time I spoke to the Hudson Institute, it was, I guess 2016, but then I was there in person.

Ken Weinstein:

Exactly.

Toomas Ilves:

I'll just go through what I see from here. As you mentioned, there are 130,000 troops, roughly equally important, massive of amounts of material from all over Russia and they are on almost all sides of Ukraine. So on the north, you have troops massed and tanks and all kinds of other things, both in Russia and to Russia’s west on the border of Belarus and Ukraine. You have the eastern part of Ukraine controlled by Russia in these satrapies of the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic, which basically, they’re occupied by the Russian army, but this was a result of the invasion of 2014. In the south, you have Crimea, which has been occupied again since 2014. On top of that, you have a large number of assault landing ships. The big fear is that they will be used to attack Odessa, which is one of Ukraine's most important culturally and population wise important cities, main port other than Crimea. And then even on the west, Transnistria, which is part of the divided Moldova, where Russian troops never left after the collapse of the Soviet Union.
Now, this really comes down to these ultimatum or ultimatums, which were given by Russia right before Christmas, in which they demanded all kinds of things that really, I think, sent everyone into a shock. Started with Lavrov saying that Eastern Europe, after the collapse of communism, was quote, "left without masters," and this is one reason they're doing this. That's indicative of an attitude that has been running through all of their statements, which basically comes down to a restoration of spheres of influence. Their initial demand, which I guess we've heard a lot about and a lot of discussion in the U.S. and elsewhere, that NATO can't take in Ukraine, but there's no traps of Ukraine coming into NATO for years and years.

But on the other hand, the North Atlantic Treaty, which is the basis for the existence of NATO, would have to be revised to meet these Russian demands, even if we thought about meeting them. And the Russians full well know that this would never happen since it would change and the treaty requires ratification by all 30 members and that ain't going to happen. On top of that, they demand that NATO returned to the situation in May, 1997, which was before the enlargement of NATO. So there wouldn't be any NATO presence in any of the countries that have come into NATO in the past 25 years. And then on top of that, again, today, Lavrov repeated his threat that we do not receive a constructive answer from the West on our security demands. Moscow will tell appropriate measures. It's quite heated. And given everything since we know that the West, NATO will not go and meet these demands. There's no way, they've been told, but the Russians are demanding written answers, but the Russians are full well these can't be met.

So basically, where the conclusion is that they're spoiling for a fight, and this is what has everyone worried. So on the one hand, they're surrounding Ukraine. Ukraine is basically hostage to this. And on the ground in Ukraine, well, the situation is very difficult to predict and a number of scenarios are possible. But the consensus is that on the one hand, the Ukrainians would lose if there were a war because of the massive, well, technological advantage of the Russians. Ukraine has an army of 145,000, so more or less about as many as Russian troops are gathered, at least this moment. But they also have 300,000 to 400,000 veterans with combat experience who have been, for the past eight years, been fighting the Russians at the border of the so-called Donbas. They have combat experience. They would offer significant resistance, even if outgun by Russian forces with far superior Air Force and Navy.

On top of that, which I think makes the situation even more complex, is that the last eight years has seen a complete change in Ukraine, which was a laggard country with high corruption and low trust in the government. But the crucible of war, as we have seen over the years in many places, has really created a new Ukrainian identity that really, where the population believes in their country and do not want to... As they keep saying, "we will not give up our freedom." And so you can see as there are massive outpourings of people, even 60 year old grandmothers, who joined the equivalent of a national guard running around in combat gear, all practicing to defend their country. And so the opposition is going to be much larger than simple troop numbers show.

On the Russian side, it's not clear how effective they will be because while they have some 30-40,000 basic special operations forces, so the equivalent of Green Berets and Navy Seals that are there, but they also have this mercenary group, the Wagner military company, which has been known for all kinds of horrendous atrocities in Syria, also in Ukraine, in the Central African Republic, if you follow the news. And then the rest will be made up of conscripts who are badly trained and have low morale. This might be the one Achilles heel for Russia is that the Russian public may not care much about the Spetsnaz, or
the special forces. But when you have conscripts coming home dead, they've seen that last on a big
scale during Afghanistan. So this is a big risk.

Now, there are a couple of things which we need to pay attention to. First of all, and what has caused
the immense glee in Moscow, is that NATO is not unified, mainly because of one country. And here, it's
basically Germany has been recalcitrant. The new government has said repeatedly it will not cancel Nord
Stream 2, which is the gas pipeline from Russia to Germany, which, in the United States, has also caused
quite a bit of controversy, especially with the Germans lobbying very heavily there to not impose
sanctions with the Republicans in the Senate for sanctions and the Democrats actually having been for
sanctions, but, being heavily lobbied by the administration, finally are defeated an idea to impose
sanctions if Nord Stream 2 goes online. And that's advocated by the Chancellor or Prime Minister, Olaf
Scholz.

The other issue, in terms of sanctions, is cutting off Swift, which allows dollar transfers. And here, the
problem is the Conservative Party, CDU and CSU, or CDU and CSU, their new chairman just said, "No, no,
we don't support cutting off Swift." Those are the two primary things that Germany could do. On top of
that, the Germans have not been willing to send any kind of weapons to Ukraine, whereas everyone else
is. And so that has caused some consternation. And then in my own little country, we're doing three
different things. One of them is we're sending 300 javelins, anti-missile rockets, the best, top of the line,
state of the art, to Ukraine, which we initially bought from the United States. And then following
international procedure, you have to ask the producer of the weapon that you buy for permission, which
was immediately given by the United States. So we're shipping these missiles off, as are other countries
that have bought javelins.

But then we have, in our country, basically 40-year-old howitzers, which were initially from the DDR, the
former East Germany, which then became property of the reunited Germany, which then they gave or
sold to the Fins, who in turn, then gave it to us. Now, every step of the way, you have to ask the
permission of the German government. So we wanted to give Ukraine these howitzers and the German
government refused, which, again, has caused lots of waves across NATO. Then why would you do that?
And then the third thing we actually did was we built, since we're a highly digital country, a fully digital,
state of the art military hospital. And now that, we could give. And in fact, Germany co-financed that.

But there have been other issues. Again, the UK was sending their equivalent of javelins to Ukraine, but
because Germany wouldn't clear transport over their territory, or it would take them two weeks to do it,
the Brits simply flew around Germany. Now, if you look at the map, it looks pretty funny because they
cross over and then they head North and then they go through Denmark and then they fly down
through Poland to avoid German airspace, again, all of which is creating a good deal of doubt in the
minds of other allies about the trustworthiness of Germany within NATO. And as I said, this is causing
huge glee, well, in the Kremlin. Now, in addition to this situation on the ground, we have one more big
international body there, which is the European Union, which has failed to really do anything with
security, on the security dimension, for as long as it's been around, but especially in the last 10, 12 years,
in which there was actually sort of a call to develop EU security.

Now, when the Russians presented their ultimata, they presented them to NATO, and they presented
them to the United States, and there was no mention of the Europeans, upon which they went fairly
ballistic and were bleeding and rending shirts and say, "Why they don't talk to us? They're not talking to
us." But on the other hand, from a Russian perspective, they say like, "Why would we talk to the EU when they really are not part of anything that has anything to do with security?"

There is, however, something that the Europeans can do, and which is so far has been almost completely neglected on the part of countries in Europe, be the EU or not, but Ukraine borders four countries in the European Union: Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania. On top of that, Ukrainian citizens, of which there are 44 million, have visa-free travel to the European Union. So if you actually end up with a war, and especially with massive civilian casualties and bombing and so forth, you can imagine there will be several million people who will then flee. And where they will flee is Europe where they can just come across the border with their Ukrainian passports.

This would be, I predict, a much larger refugee flow than the two million we saw in 2015 where the people who basically came from Syria across the sea and, on arrival, had to claim asylum because they were not entering using regular means and legal means. But these people, which could be what? Out of a population of 44 million, that could be four million. It could be seven million, 10 million, who knows, civilians fleeing with their Ukrainian passports, coming up to the EU border and saying, "Hi, we're here," and basically they get across the border with no problem because they have visa-free travel. I mean, it's exactly the same as an American flying to Paris or London. You go through passport control, and then it's like, "Okay, you're in," and you do what you want.

So this is something where the EU, in turn, could actually ... or should be doing a lot. And we have not seen much going on. But this is an additional security problem that Europe has failed to think about, because that's something that would ... I mean, it's not just a war that is being threatened, but this is like a major disaster that could befall Europe whenever the shooting starts. So that's kind of a tour de force or roundup of what the situation is. It's fluid, obviously. The Russians continue to be very belligerent and threatening.

The only last thing I might mention is why are they doing this. Well, it seems that Vladimir Putin has, for quite a while, wanted to restore the former Soviet Union to make it sort of Russia coterminous with the Soviet Union. And he has been wildly anti-Ukrainian for a long time. I mean, he told President Bush already in 2008 that Ukraine's not a country. He penned a long ethnographic linguistic essay this past summer arguing that Ukrainians, they're just speaking in a dialect of Russian, which is not true. And basically saying, "All this talk about Ukraine being a separate country is nonsense." And of course, I mean, Ukrainian is actually, you could argue, is closer to Polish than it is to Russian, but in any case, this is a serious ... I mean, that's the ideological dimension of all of this.

And finally, I say one of the things that you will see crop up in the U.S. media and some other places, which is, "Well, you know they have this large Russian minority," and as if that's a reason to declare war. The problem with that is that the last eight years of war have really been the crucible that's created a nation known as Ukrainians. And whether their mother tongue is Russian or if it's Ukrainian, it doesn't really make much of a difference, because they are Ukrainians. Whether you speak Ukrainian or Russian, I mean, people slip back and forth, and the Russian claim that, "Oh, we have to defend our Russians in Ukraine," is equivalent basically to, say, the United Kingdom saying, "We have to defend English speakers in Ireland." Right? I mean, would anyone really believe that the English speakers, or most of the people in Ireland, actually, would then say, "Oh, no, we really want to be with England"? No. That's not ... We know, if you know anything about Ireland, that's not going to work.
And so, the idea of being whether you speak Russian or Ukrainian, which are closely related, as I mentioned, really plays no role at this point, though it is true that the Kremlin is trying to play this card that doesn't work. So with that, I figured I'd sort of end my quick synopsis of where we are and open up to your questions.

Ken Weinstein:

Great. Thank you very much for that fascinating and rich overview. There is so much to look at there. Let me start off by asking a little about the role of history, because you made just a very interesting comment right now about the last eight years or so being the crucible that has kind of turned Ukraine into a nation. And quite fascinating. I know your understanding of Vladimir Putin, which you've talked about before as someone who is a kind of counter-enlightenment figure, who values himself as someone who understands nationalism. Someone who prides himself, obviously, on being some kind of a geostrategist.

Unlike us in Washington, you have actually sat down with Vladimir Putin. You obviously know the Russian leadership to a significant degree, both personally and from close observation. What motivates Putin? How could he have such a blind spot with regard to Ukraine? I want to say this. Then I want to turn to the West and ask about our blind spots next.

Toomas Ilves:

Well, there are two ways to look at it. One is that he's trying to instrumentalize some kind of Russian nationalism that I don't think really, at this point, is possible to instrumentalize. I mean, clearly in 2014, he used the invasion and occupation of Crimea to stir up a lot of jingoist, pro-Putin sentiment among Russians.

In the meantime, the Russian economy has stagnated, and the kind of boost that he got eight years ago, it's unlikely he'll get it now. And if you read even the polls that are, oh, basically ... I mean, how much you can believe Russian opinion polls because they're conducted basically under the auspices of the Russian government. But even there, there is not much support for any kind of war with Ukraine. So that side is not working too well, and it's unlikely that this will cause a huge sort of rebound of support.

The other thing is this is kind of classical, which, if you look at sort of Imperial Germany in 1913-14 or Japan in the lead up to Pearl Harbor, there is a sense, it seems, that if they don't do it now, they will fall too far behind. I mean, this is our last chance to make a real grab. Right now we see that the U.S. is divided, and therefore, let's use this opportunity because the window of opportunity is closing. Just as the Imperial Germany in 1913-14 said, "Well, if we look at the projections that the Brits will be far ahead of us, so we better do this now." And the same thing with Japanese thinking was, "Well, if we don't really stop the U.S. by bombing Pearl Harbor now, the way the U.S. is developing, that it will never be able to do it."

And so at least a number of analysts have argued that this is that kind of moment for Russia, which is that, "Okay, this is a time when the U.S. appears temporarily weak and divided. We are probably at the peak of our abilities. And we have this whole natural gas thing over Europe, I mean, over their heads, sort of the Sword of Damocles, that this is the time for us to make our move, because in the future, we may not be able to do it." And certainly, the rapid development of Ukraine since 2014 plays into this.
The nation has been forged through the war over the last eight years, which I repeat, has been a continuous war with 14,000 dead.

It's kind of like, let's put it in the perspective of the Vietnam War. I mean, they have basically one-fifth of the population of the United States during the Vietnam War, and they have basically one-fifth of the casualties. So it's basically the psychological effect of the war is fairly similar, but the difference being that they're the ones being attacked, right? And Ukraine has made huge advances in sort of becoming a more market economy, reigning in the oligarchs, cleaning up on corruption, all of the things that debilitated it for many, many years until basically 2014.

The last thing I mention is that right now, their big push on Ukraine is that, "No, they can never join NATO." Well, in fact, there wasn't even a desire for them, among Ukrainians, to join NATO when the Russians invaded eight years ago. And where they invaded to intercede was to block Ukraine from getting something as minor as "association agreement with the European Union." And just so that's clear, that's just a free trade agreement. It's not EU member ... It's so far away from EU membership that it could possibly be. It's basically a free trade agreement plus student teacher exchange programs. I mean, it's really kind of a very minor thing.

We had an association agreement. It took us 10 years to get from our association agreement to joining the EU, and we worked hard as hell for those 10 years, and we don't see any real efforts on the part of the Ukrainians to do that, unfortunately. Even having something as minor as an association agreement with the European Union was, in the eyes of Vladimir Putin, eight years ago, a casus belli. I mean, that I'm going to go invade them because they want to have a free trade agreement with the EU. I mean, that shows this kind of mentality that unfortunately reigns in the Kremlin.

Ken Weinstein:

No, very interesting. So yeah, it was quite striking. I remember being in Ukraine in 2014 and seeing just an unbelievable number of EU flags. I've never seen as many EU flags anywhere flying [crosstalk 00:29:13]

Toomas Ilves:

Not in the EU certainly.

Ken Weinstein:

Yeah, definitely not in the EU—not at that point when there was ... Brexit was looming, and there was great frustration over the Euro and the tensions over the north and south and the like. Let me ask you about—So it's interesting this. Certainly, Putin is who he is. The Ukrainians have certain strength in their resolve. But the resolve of the West, although it seems to be strengthening in the last few days, is certainly weak. In your presentation, you've seemed to be skeptical that Putin will be able to back down in the face of all this. Am I right? And do you see any circumstances that he might be able to claim some sort of Pyrrhic victory and walk off? You mentioned the challenges he faces at home as well.

Toomas Ilves:
Well, okay. There are certain opportunities domestically, because as with our enemy is East Asia, no, our enemy is Oceanian. He could flip that on a dime. So, suddenly it’d be... He would have to claim some kind of victory, but he's gotten one, which I think he may in fact use as a way to get out of the corner that he's painted himself into. Which is that he quietly, without any opposition, any objection, moved massive amounts of the Russian army, with tanks and material and everything else and air force, into Belarus. And Belarus, in a sense, has just become not the [inaudible 00:31:06] but de facto part of Russia.

And so, one way out, I can... Well, okay. We decided to let the Ukrainians do their funny little thing there. But in the process, we just increased Russia to include Belarus. And with an acquiescent and pliable dictator, Lukashenko, there wouldn't be any objection. And there wouldn't be much popular... while the Belarusian population definitely does not want to be part of Russia, given the effectiveness and the brutality of the Belarusian security forces, you won't get demonstrations either. So that could be one way out.

But at this point, other than that, what are you going to say? Because the West is not going to give in. It's not going to do that. Maybe you can claim, okay, we divided the West because Germany is now viewed with suspicion. But I think the initial idea was to really push the U.S. out of Europe, and that's backfired. If anything, the sentiment regarding NATO and regarding the U.S. presence in Europe has become far stronger.

Ken Weinstein:

Let's look at the German question in particular, the German problem, we can call it once again. It's quite a challenge. We in Washington, I think a number of us have been frustrated. There has been all this talk about Angela Merkel as the leader of the free world. And my own sense, and I know you were certainly a very vocal critic of President Trump, but my sense is I think a lot of Americans instinctively agree with President Trump's gut instinct on Germany, which was Germany is a country that benefits immensely from the American security umbrella, while at the same time, enjoying close relations with Russia. Obviously, in the past, engaging with Iran when the Iran deal was in effect, and obviously having its auto industry very dependent on China.

And there was great hope, I think, among people in Washington, that a new government, particularly one with a strong Green Party presence in Berlin might somehow change Germany's policies, but that has not been the case. And as we look at Western options, we're truly tied by... Nord Stream 2, by both first and foremost, by Angela Merkel's decision way back when to shut off her nuclear reactors after Fukushima, and then move really to dependence on Russian natural gas. And her refusal, as well, to build a natural gas terminal that President Trump had asked her to put in place when Trump left office.

And we had a real opportunity, I think, in the Biden administration early on, when the Germans wanted sanctions off Nord Stream 2, to make serious demands on the Germans with regard to Ukraine, with regard to security assistance, development assistance, all sorts of thing. No requests were made, in the hope that somehow opening the door to Germany would lead to a much closer Trans-Atlantic partnership. At the end of the day, it's not what we see.
What do you make of what's going on in Germany? And also, in terms of Germany's strange understanding of history, that it won't allow weapons to be used against Russia, but God forbid, what about the security of Baltic nations, Poland, and all those other countries that were [crosstalk 00:35:03].

Toomas Ilves:
Invaded by the Germans.

Ken Weinstein:
Exactly. From the Ribbentrop-Molotov agreement, what's your sense?

Toomas Ilves:
Well, I'd say that the free rider part of that is something that not only annoys... The Germans are struggling to reach devoting 1.5% of GDP to defense, and they're against even raising that. And yeah, we've been doing over 2% since we joined, basically. And so has... other countries, they may be a little slower, but Europe has, in the past 10 years, moved up a fair bit in terms of paying attention to doing their share in NATO.

So yeah, the thing about the U.S., U.S. sends 4.5%, but also is that the U.S. is also in Asia and in the Middle East. But for Europe, the idea is that everyone should do 2%. And people are... Eastern Europe does, France does. Okay. They're not in the EU anymore, but the UK does. So this idea of, "well, we don't want to spend money," is not that popular, not only in the United States, but also in the alliance. So that's one part of it.

Now, the history part is, I find, and I have actually commented quite critically on this, there's this idea that Germany owes Russia because of World War II, but that would be... I understand, but on the other hand, if you actually look at who were the countries that suffered the most deaths, both in terms of percentage, which was much higher, and in terms of even absolute numbers, they were first and foremost Poland, which they both occupied and killed people. The Germans came in from one side, the Russians from the other. The Soviet Union was, for two years, Germany's ally. And they did not suffer as many casualties as the Poles, the Belarusians, and the Ukrainians.

And then, you get statements, as we heard from the German president, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, which applied to things that really shouldn't at all, which we owe Russia the Nord Stream 2 pipeline because of what we did in World War II. And you're going, "What? What are you..." And the whole point of Nord Stream 2 is to kill the gas deliveries via Ukraine, a country that suffered more than Russia. And so this, we have a special obligation to Russia, has been a dominant theme for years.

Add to that the success admittedly in the 1970s of [foreign language 00:38:07] which is to get just things calmed down. We can all agree, or most of us can agree, that while it was successful given that the tensions of the Cold War period. But this is a legacy policy. It's not working right now. And so this mantra in German, which is "wandel durch handel" or "change through trade"... it rhymes in German. But change through trade has not been working. And when you look at trade, Poland and the Czech Republic and Slovakia import or buy more things from Germany than Russia does. They're all... they're not big countries. Okay. Poland has 40 million, but eight million Czechs, six million Slovaks, they're buying more German stuff.
And then, there’s this overall thing about... While claiming morality. This was about a month ago, the chairman of the VW, Volkswagen, they have a big plant, car plant in Xinjiang which is where the Uyghurs are. And he was really hit hard, saying, "Well, you have slave labor in Xinjiang. And his answer was, "Well, if we don't have that cheap labor, we won't be able to meet our green targets." And people say, "What?" In other words, we fight climate change by using slave labor is not a really a... First of all, it couldn't be taken seriously anyway, but this idea of... it’s very mercantile. What matters is what we can sell abroad. And if it comes to ethics, morality, we’re willing to just play those down or chuck them out the window for selling stuff abroad. Which, we've seen it with other countries in the past, but they usually don't try to play the morality card at the same time. You can't do both, frankly.

Ken Weinstein:

Sure. And there's also the reverse of the "wandel durch handel," which is the impact on German elites in particular, but also other Western European elites of... And it’s not just a former Chancellor Schroeder's, with his lead role in Gazprom, how it has really de-fanged so many in Germany, Hungary, elsewhere. And I suppose real challenges to Western unity.

Let me ask about, let me let shift gears and ask about the President Biden, whom you've obviously known over the years. How would you grade his handling of the situation? There's been a lot of speculation that it was the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan that really sent the signal that was a green light that Putin took. As you mentioned earlier, this was a moment to act, an optimal moment. Your thoughts?

Toomas Ilves:

In Foreign Policy, there was a survey, and I was one of the three people asked on Europe, and I gave him a B minus. Starting from, first of all, the huge hopes, because to be honest, people were afraid that in Europe, that President Trump would pull out of NATO. And then instead, you get this Europe is back, Europe is back. Oh, great. Well, now let’s see what happens. And then it didn’t happen.

I think that the Afghanistan withdrawal debacle, which was quite shocking at the time, I think did more just regarding the competence of the United States. Because otherwise, this vision of the U.S. is if it's military, the most competent country in the world is the United States, and no one comes close. And then it's like, wow, that didn't really work, did it? Too well.

Yes, that played a role. Although not as much as you see the opposition in the United States saying, "Oh, that destroyed everything." Well, it didn't in Europe, but it just made people think about, "Well, not that great." But the failure to follow up on the U.S. is back, it just didn't really materialize. And certainly, certain moves such as first taking Angela Merkel at her word that, well, we'll let you do NS, Nord Stream 2, but if the Russians do something, then we won't do it. Then the Russians started doing stuff, and Germany didn't do anything.

And then on top of that, so the German administration joint efforts to prevent a veto, rather prevent the sanctions that were proposed by the Republicans in the Senate that did also have broad support on the Democratic side of the aisle, which then through efficient lobbying on the part of the administration and the Germans, they managed to kill those sanctions.
So, you look at that and okay, maybe Germany was happy, but the rest of us looked at and said, "Eh, that wasn't that great." So that's why I gave a B minus because expectations were huge. The rhetoric was... At the Munich Security Conference, Europe is back. And it wasn't. I mean, U.S. is back. Sorry. U.S. is back, but it wasn't.

Ken Weinstein:

Is your sense, is it a lack of strategic vision? Is it naivete in trusting the Russians... in trusting the Germans? Was it a focus on Asia? Do you have a sense that President Biden has a strategic vision deep down?

Toomas Ilves:

I think it's the last one. I think it was, the hope was to really fixate on China and get that in order and put all of the U.S.'s sort of security resources to dealing with the China challenge and you could see like the kind of things that were written by people considered close to the administration. Well, we shouldn't really deal with Ukraine or we should get the Russians what the ... And you read that and you realize this is, again, someone close to the administration, what is this going on? It was viewed as various trial balloons to see how the public would react to caving into the Russian's on Ukraine. I think that's now gone because that met with considerable opposition on the hill and by both sides of the aisle.

But I think that was primarily it is the idea that we're going to now focus on the problem of China. Again, this goes back to sort of Putin, very effectively sort of saying, "Oh, this is my chance to really ... the us is not going to get involved and I'll use this opportunity." Well, the U.S. was forced to get involved in a big way. And I think that's how we got to where we are. I would say that it's not as easy as you think to say, okay, well now we'll just focus on Asia and forget Europe. Europe also has to realize that this is inevitable because already during the Obama administration, we had the so-called pivot Asia, which kind of led to not so great results with lack of attention to the 2014 invasion.

It didn't really get the full thrust of U.S. attention and sanctions were not that strong and there was little efforts on the part of ... The U.S. efforts to corral the cats in Europe didn't really bring too big results. Then you had the Trump administration, which was already going like: we don't want deal with these Europeans who are not paying their share, even though they had been doing much more. So it's actually a longer tuition that goes back what is it? It's 14 years since the Obama—15 years since the Obama administration came in. I think Europeans need to understand that the challenges faced by the United States are not, first and foremost, in Europe, the way they were during the cold war. And that Europe does need now to carry a lot more water than it has.

That awareness is not seeped in everywhere, right? If you had 400,000 U.S. troops with boots on the ground in Germany alone, that's the main place, but you had 400,000 protecting Germany. There are two things that come out of that. One is that maybe you should spend more money on defense now that you don't have all of those Americans here. And secondly, it also then it colors the rest of everyone's attitude in Europe, which is like, come on guys, you had 400,000 American troops, and now you're saying, well, we're for peace. We don't really believe in arming the country. I'm like, "Yeah, you didn't have to because you were guarded by another country, we're not."
Ken Weinstein:

When president Trump made the decision to pull troops out of Germany and send them further east, which I would argue, in some ways definitely made a lot of strategic sense in terms of where the actual threats were to NATO. The Germans went crazy and absolutely demanded from the Biden administration that these troops be sent back. So for their own security, they want us. But their concern has been disappointing, I'd argue from the new government in Germany, and from the last one. Let me ask you—Let's wrap up with two last questions. One is about the Brits and it's been a surprising thing. There's obviously huge chaos in the Boris Johnson’s government with party-gate and the like, but it's been quite striking both how they have taken, in a sense, the international lead I'd argue among the Western allies and how Keir Starmer and the labor party has stood shoulder to shoulder with Boris Johnson. And get your thoughts on Britain, it's from the EU, how it understands it's strategy worldwide it's so different from Germany?

Toomas Ilves:

Well, clearly the UK re-emphasizes and brings back into focus the fact that—which has been claimed by Brexit all the time—is that, well, we're not in the European union, but we have not left Europe. And that European security is something that's very important to us. That's the case. The efforts that we're have been made by the UK in this regard are huge and has won kudos from everybody around, I mean everybody says, "Wow. Look at the Brits. They really..." It's not just rhetoric when they say that we left the EU, but not Europe and Europe is of primary concern to us. And then they do what they do. I would recommend a piece written last week by Ben Wallace, the defense minister, I think it was in the guardian, but it was one of the British papers, a fantastic essay, the kind of essay that you don't find written by defense ministers almost anywhere.

This was clearly his own thinking. And as I found out from various sources that in fact he had written it and then published it on why we need to defend Ukraine. You read it, and you go, "Wow, this is the kind of moral clarity and good writing that..." It's not the boiler plate that you always got to get from secretaries and ministers in whatever country. This is great. So you read that, that's like it was a real eyepoener for me and certainly in such stark contrast to what's happening domestically in the UK, which I'm not going to comment, but it really looked like a total mess to me.

Ken Weinstein:

The Wallace piece, which I also read is, is an absolute extraordinary piece just, and well worth the read. Let's wind up by asking you about Baltic security. It's obvious, all of a sudden the Baltic nations kind of find themselves again sort of a vice around it, obviously by Russia, now Belarus with its growing alliance and partnership, and beyond that, as you mentioned earlier, and lastly, the question of Kaliningrad and the like... Your security is now at risk in some ways, much more so than it was and it could be depending on what happens in Ukraine. What do the Baltic leaders do? How do you-

Toomas Ilves:

The Baltic States have been fairly outspoken if you noticed. The thing to understand ... the difference between Ukraine and the three Baltic countries is that we are in NATO and they, in Ukraine, are not. That comes down to article five. That's the whole point of deterrence. You could say, "okay, look at the
three little countries in there they could be invaded in 48 hours." The problem that when people who
talk about that, ignore the fact that if you invade, say, little Estonia as we're called, tiny Estonia is
invaded, but the country that invaded ... If Russia invades, they've just made [foreign language 00:53:49]
to use a Baltic expression. You make [foreign language 00:53:54] all targets. That's the whole idea of
collective security, collective defense.

We're not that way. Actually, to me, the most interesting thing is that the threats that Russia made on
the 26th of December, it's my birthday, that's why I remember the day, against Finland and Sweden
have actually nudged the discussion there quite heavily to the point where the Finnish president on new
year's day gave a speech, quoting Henry Kissinger, among other people, saying that we reserve the right
to make our own decisions on our security. And in the case of Sweden, because there had been threats
made to Gotland, the island considered the aircraft carrier in the Baltic, which they had basically
abandoned, pulled all their troops out of there. There was nothing there. It's kind of a nice tourist
destination, medieval city and all that ... town, it's not even a city. Well, they pulled out of Mali, where
they had special forces and they brought the special forces to Gotland.

They brought in all of armor all because the Russians were talking about, we'll just take Gotland.
Actually, Gotland is so strategic because with the SS 300 and 400 missiles, if you take that over and you
use the existing Russian missiles from Gotland, you can hit every capital in Northern Europe, if you just
do it Stockholm, obviously, but Oslo, Copenhagen, Berlin, Warsaw, Vilnius, Riga, Tallinn, and Helsinki. So
you've got everybody in Northern Europe is all within range. And so there's even been talk on talks on
Russian TV: We'll just go take Gotland. Well, this has nudged these two countries that have been neutral
for decades. Well, in the case of Sweden, 200 years, but neutrality, somehow, it doesn't seem like that
good an option when you have Russia threatening you.

There were all kinds of funny things with all kinds of assault landing ships floating around Gotland, mock
bombing raids on Stockholm over the years. And now with the rhetoric increasing on ... Very strange
flights also, you can look it up, sort of basically reconnaissance flight passing over air command in
Finland and other things. This kind of braggadocio on the part of the Russian political leadership and the
kind of military actions are not things that really endear them to countries.

The latest thing, this is why I don't understand why they're doing it with neutral countries, is that they
now announced yesterday, they're doing live fire or exercises in the exclusive economic zone of Ireland.

And I was going, "What are they doing there?" Until this morning. There was a map of the trans-Atlantic
cables and there's like this choke point where they all come together between the east coast of the U.S.
and Europe in the UK. It's one place where all of these cables are in one place. And that's exactly where
they're doing the live fire exercises. So even the Irish are going, "What is this?"

**Ken Weinstein:**

Well on that note, look, it's been absolutely fascinating. We could have gone on for hours. Didn't didn't
delve into ... there are a number of issues on the cyber side and other things, but we're out of time. I
just want to really thank you President Ilves, it's always an honor to be with you and you're incredibly
insightful remarks are very helpful to those of us in the United States, trying to figure out next steps. So I
want to thank you for your time for your insights and look forward to welcoming you back in person to
Hudson Institute when travel picks up again. But thank you so very much.
Toomas Ilves:

Give my regards to my various friends at Hudson who I also haven't seen in a long, long time, unfortunately.

Ken Weinstein:

With great pleasure. Thank you so much.