Virtual Event | Freedom Over Tyranny: A Conversation with Senator Joni Ernst

TRANSCRIPT

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• Senator Joni Ernst, U.S. Senator from Iowa
• Bryan Clark, Senior Fellow and Director, Center for Defense Concepts and Technology, Hudson Institute

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A video of the event is available: https://www.hudson.org/events/2092-virtual-event-freedom-over-tyranny-a-conversation-with-senator-joni-ernst32022

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Bryan Clark:
Welcome to the Hudson Institute. I'm Bryan Clark, a senior fellow at the Institute and Director of the Hudson Center for Defense Concepts and Technology. We're honored to have with us today Senator Joni Ernst of Iowa. The two term Senator is the first woman to serve in federal elected office from Iowa and is also the first female combat veteran to be elected to the Senate. She is a member of the Agriculture, and Nutrition, and Forestry Committee, the Environmental Public Works Committee, Small Business and Entrepreneurship Committee. And for the purposes of today's discussion, she's a member of the Arm Services Committee. Thank you very much for being here, Senator. It's great to have you on.

Senator Joni Ernst:
Oh, it's great to be with you, Bryan. Thank you.

Bryan Clark:
Well, we'll get right to it. You got a very busy agenda of meetings and media events and it comes down to this recent CODEL that you took, you recently traveled to Poland and Germany with a Congressional Delegation to visit the troops. See how conditions are there, talk to the folks that are supporting operations in Ukraine. What most impressed you from that visit and how can the U.S. better help the Ukraine and help its people?

Senator Joni Ernst:
Yes. Thank you so much, Bryan. It was a wonderful CODEL, Congress Delegation. We had 10 United States senators, bipartisan. And when we went, we were in Germany and Poland and what impressed me the most was the incredible female leaders that came from Ukraine. They were part of the Ukrainian Civil Society and they demonstrated to us this will to win. The Ukrainian people are just solid. They are steadfast in their commitment to their free and sovereign nation. And that really, it struck a chord with me and how I would feel if my own country was being under attack by invaders. But we took away the fact that Ukraine can win this war. They want weapons and they want those weapons now. So providing lethal aid is key for not only the United States, but also for allies and partners in the region. And as I traveled to Poland, seeing many of the refugees coming out of Ukraine, this really hit me very hard. I spent some time in Ukraine in 1989 on an agricultural exchange. It was still part of the Soviet Union. And as a young female at that time, engaging in agriculture on a collective farm, we would get together. There were other Iowa students. We would get together with the Ukrainian families and the community every evening. And on the first night of that exchange, as we got together in their community center, the first question they asked us as young Iowa students was not about agriculture. The first thing they asked was what is it like to be an American? And what is it like to be free? And those word have stuck with me in the past number of decades, just how incredibly important freedom and liberty is. They recognize it in Ukraine. They don't want to see that go away.
Bryan Clark:

Which that's very interesting that you got to talk to a lot of Ukrainians that are leaving the country because I think now we're estimated to have three million refugees having left Ukraine from the war. How are they handling the refugee onslaught in Poland? How is that going?

Senator Joni Ernst:

Yeah, it is going well. And yes, there are millions that are exiting the country and the Poles actually have done an incredibly good job at assisting in this humanitarian crisis. They have set up refugees centers on the borders, thousands and thousands of Ukrainians are passing through those areas every day. So they do have a number of non-governmental organizations that are assisting with this effort. So they are doing a good job. I would say it's going almost as well as it could be done as far as the refugee centers.

But then as you look at the crisis that's going on within Ukraine that is very tough. There are many more Ukrainians, millions more within the country that have been displaced from their homes. They are trying to get through to the borders or they're staying with family members, friends in Western Ukraine. And it's extreme important that our non-governmental organizations are able to get the humanitarian supplies into the country and through these so-called humanitarian corridors, but oftentimes they are being blocked by the Russians or they're being targeted by the Russians, bombarded. So it's becoming increasingly difficult to get supplies into the country. And that's really what I worry about very much.

Bryan Clark:

It seems like that problem is just going to get worse as Russia continues to slowly gain more control over the country and move its military operations increasingly to the western part of Ukraine, which up to now has been something of a sanctuary. Should the U.S. and NATO be doing more to directly intervene in the conflict in an attempt to protect these humanitarian corridors, both to get relief in and evacuee out? There's been talk about a no fly zone, which I think you and I from our military experience would say, that's probably not the most effective way to do it, but do we need to do something like combat air patrols to keep these corridors protected from missile attack mostly, but also from air attack?

Senator Joni Ernst:

Well certainly there is a lot that we can do as the United States, but working in conjunction with our partners and allies. And we have taken a very hard stance that U.S. troops, NATO troops will not directly engage with the Russians. And we feel that that is very important in order to prevent this war from spreading outside the geographical boundaries of Ukraine. We do not want the Russians to hit any of our NATO allies or partners. So it's important that we maintain that stand off distance. However, Bryan, there are things that we can do as the United States, whether it's through the State Department and enabling the sale of military equipment through our DOD providing different types of lethal aid through our NGOs, making sure that humanitarian supplies are going in. But when it comes to that airspace, the Ukrainians have asked for additional planes, MIG 29 fighters from the Poles, they've asked for surface to air missiles, they've asked for additional stingers.

So I believe that whatever that means is we should provide to the Ukrainians. And again, we need to do it now, not two weeks in the future, but we need to do it now. We need to provide them whatever
means they can to protect their own airspace and be able to push back on the ground as well. I'm afraid that what this administration is doing is providing just enough to maintain a status quo where we're losing ground and not doing enough to enable the fight, to move forward and push the Russians out of Ukraine. They want to win. We should give them everything we can in order to enable that win.

**Bryan Clark:**

Yeah, that's an interesting development recently where it just seems like Ukrainians are actually making gains against Russian troops that have adopted fairly static lines. And now there's some breakthroughs happening with Ukrainian troops actually making it behind Russian lines, which sort of suggests that as you said, maybe we should be providing them more capabilities so that this is not just a standoff where we reach a negotiated settlement, but instead try to drive the Russians back and make them seek some kind of off ramp. So the kinds of systems I've heard S-300s that are air defense systems available in Eastern Bloc or Eastern European countries. And some more stinger missiles could make a big difference.

To kind of pivot to strategy that the good administrations coming up with national defense and national security strategies right now and one of the big concerns there is how do you deter countries like Russia? What lessons do you think we're learning in how to deter great powers or major powers from this experience with Russia? And maybe what should the administration look at in these strategies to kind of ramp up its ability to deter beyond just what they did with sanctions, which didn't obviously do the job in terms of stopping Russia aggression?

**Senator Joni Ernst:**

Well, right. And we can backtrack and see where the U.S. and NATO failed to deter Russia from going into Ukraine. And what I have witnessed, and I've said this many times over, but it really has been more of a doctrine of appeasement with the administration starting from day one, with all of our adversaries, just appease, appease, appease, and hope for the best. That's not a doctrine we should follow or adhere to. So what Russia saw there was a weak moment in time where they could take on these actions and invade Ukraine with very little pushback coming from not just the United States, but from our NATO allies as well. President Biden also lifted the sanctions on Nord Stream 2, which many of us felt should not have been lifted. Again, we're funding then this war machine that President Putin is using to invade Ukraine.

So I can go on many, many different avenues of where we've actually enabled near peer adversaries through various types of policy in this administration, but it's failing. And we know that. And so what we need to do is make sure that authoritarianism is not prevailing. So we see the example of Ukraine fighting for freedom and we see Iran, we see President Xi in China, the Taliban, North Korea, they are all watching how the United States and NATO is handling Putin and Russia. So what we hope is that we have a more alert DOD and Department of State, and that they are paying attention to our posture, whether it's in the Indo-Pacific, that we are engaging in more diplomatic discussions across the board, the whole of government approach that we should be utilizing.

So going back to deterrence, we have to deter, we have to show, and I'm a huge fan of course, of peace through strength. So we do have to be much stronger as the United States. We do have to look at our posture in Europe. We have to look at our posture in the Indo-Pacific and we need to make sure that
we're funding appropriately, resourcing with the men and women in uniform, and making sure as well that we continue to keep dialogue open and flowing through our State Department. We've got some great partners out there that should be pulled along with us. So again, we just need to double down on our efforts to maintain those friendships and strengthen our posture all around the globe.

Bryan Clark:

I mean, I think you bring up a great point that success of the Ukrainians against this Russian aggression enabled by Western assistance could be a really useful tool in deterring other major or other aggressors, not just major powers. Because they'll see, well maybe it's not such a cake walk going up against a neighbor that maybe I perceive as being weak, but suddenly can have a lot of very helpful friends come into play very quickly once that aggression starts.

Senator Joni Ernst:

Right.

Bryan Clark:

So with regard to Taiwan, as we look to maybe have a more robust posture and think about deterring China, China's aggression more effectively, do we need to think about maybe doing more directly on Taiwan, have more military operations or exercises directly with the Taiwanese as opposed to sort of treating them at some remove to better deter?

Senator Joni Ernst:

Yes, I do believe so. Again, I believe in peace through strength and in order to make our adversaries sit up and pay attention, you have to be able to exhibit that strength. And one way that the United States has done this around the globe and most certainly in the Indo-Pacific area is by engaging in various types of demonstrations or military exercises. And we do that, not just the United States, but we engage our partners and allies in those exercises. So not only can we exhibit our strength, we can flex our muscles, be able to show that in this case, the Chinese, the ability, not only for the United States to advance our technologies, our fleets, but engage others, working in collaboration so that they know that if Taiwan is a target for them, that we will not back down. And that we have others that are willing to engage with us in keeping a free and democratic society than in Taiwan.

So again, working with our allies and partners and doing those types of demonstrations and exercises is very important. But unfortunately, what we have seen with this administration is really a budget decrease for our military and defensive postures around the globe, whether it's exercises and a decrease in budgetary or the appropriations going towards those exercises. And certainly in programs like IMET where we are engaging in international military education and training with our partners, we've seen decreases there. And state partnership programs are always invaluable to forwarding the deterrence as well. So all of those areas are extremely important. We really need the administration to step up and recognize how invaluable they are for keeping peace.
Bryan Clark:

I'm very glad you brought that up because one of the things we've noticed is, as you said, a reduction in the funding for experimentation, especially as well as exercises, which allow us to demonstrate our capability and work together with allies to be more interoperable, but also to just develop new concepts and show new looks to an adversary that might surprise them. And get new technologies filled and practice using those, which is all important to keep your adversary kind of off balance. And that needs to be, it seems like that would need to be improved or increased substantially to better deter a country like China.

Senator Joni Ernst:

Oh, absolutely. I think that that is so important. And when it comes to research, technology, and moving our military forward, we really do have to engage in that area and we do well, but when it comes to the fielding of those initiatives, of course, we want to be much better, do it much faster, of course, get out there on the cutting edge. And then of course, just hinting a little bit to our adversaries that we have these capabilities. You may not know what else we have undercover, but we have these capabilities. So it's a little bit of show them enough of what you've got and leave them guessing as to the rest of what you have. So we need to do a lot more of that again, with using our partners and allies.

Bryan Clark:

Absolutely. And which kind of gets to one other area I wanted to address before we kind of close out with a discussion of the defense budget. The invasion of Russia into Ukraine came after more than a decade of gray zone or hybrid operations they'd been taking on in the Donbas or the Eastern Ukrainian region. And we've seen with China the same thing against Taiwan, and against Japan, and against the Philippines, this kind of gray zone aggression, this incremental approach to sort of gaining territorial space and also gaining influence at the expense of their neighbors. We've sort of let that go in a lot of ways, the west, NATO, the U.S., U.S. allies, and not really pushed back very hard against those gray zone actions. Should we be maybe more willing to confront that kind of gray zone aggression day to day as a way to maybe dissuade an opponent from taking it up a notch like Russia did against Ukraine?

Senator Joni Ernst:

Yeah. Bryan, I do agree. And I do think that we have to be aggressive in this area. And I'm very honored to be the ranking member on our emerging threats and capabilities subcommittee for the armed services committee here in the Senate. And we do work a lot in the gray zone area in that subcommittee. And what we can do is look at the dime model, again, that whole of government approach. It doesn't always have to be the military that's engaging in gray zone operations, and we can use other mechanisms, economic, it can be in the information space and certainly diplomatically. We have to do that. And we need to do that in order to counter some of those near peer adversaries. And I'll use an example. We've got the Belt and Road Initiative by China and when we talk about that, I think a lot of people think, oh, well, that's just Asia.

No, the Belt and Road Initiative is global. And what we have heard, we just heard from General Laura Richardson, who is our South Commander. And she was telling us about the Chinese engagement in South America. Twenty one of the 31 countries in that region are partners in the Belt and Road Initiative
with China, 21. This is our own neighborhood. So economically we should be engaging as well, encouraging investment in those countries, whether it's from United States investors or corporations, or even from partners. If we don't have the ability to engage in those areas, maybe Canada will engage in those areas, or there's another country that might have an expertise that we could pull upon. So there's a lot that we can do in that gray zone space. And we need to be much more aggressive in that area. We can't take for granted some of these areas, even if we think all is well and quiet, like here in the Western hemisphere, we need to pay attention because they are in the gray zone space. We need to engage as well.

Bryan Clark:

Yeah, exactly. And it's Africa and Europe, as well as European countries, particularly in the Balkans that are taking Chinese money and Serbia and in Hungary et cetera, to build infrastructure that could've been funded by the European Union or by the west somehow. That would've been maybe a better deal for them as well as being an opportunity to push back on Chinese influence.

Senator Joni Ernst:

Agreed. Absolutely.

Bryan Clark:

So one last question. So the defense budget is getting ready to come out next week. It looks like at least the reporting has been that it's going to be about a 4% to 5% increase over what the administration asked for, or would've asked for if just on a straight line trajectory from last year, which won't quite make it able to overcome inflation. So it's going to be essentially a flat budget, if not a little bit of a decrease relative to where we were last year. Last year, and the appropriations of the Senate and the House both gave the Defense Department a big plus up of another several percent of additional funding to help make up for the fact that the department had significant budget shortfalls. What do you think of the defense budget coming in at about a flat budget? And then do you envision Congress taking once again matters into their own hands to give the defense department additional funding?

Senator Joni Ernst:

Bryan, I do think that in this case we will see Congress taking matters into its own hands. And a flat budget is not okay. It is not okay for the Department of Defense. And this is where I have many interests and one obviously is making sure that our national security is strong and that we're enabling our forces to push back on any outside adversaries. Certainly that's important. That's what we're charged with doing as a federal government, is protecting our people. So a flat budget is not okay. I also am very concerned about dollars and how they're spent. So through that crux where they can come together, making sure that if we are going to fund DOD appropriately, and I hope we do as Congress, that it's not a flat budget. And we allow for not only inflation, but the fact that we do need to build up our military in certain ways and modernize, but we also want to make sure then that the taxpayer dollars are being spent wisely.

And so, but we can do that. It's not one or the other, we can do both. And so I do want to see Congress act, push back against the administration. And especially as we've seen demonstrated now with the war
in Ukraine, we have to make sure that not only we remain strong, but that we’re enabling partners. It is incredibly important that we are supporting democracy around the globe. Ukraine is a good partner. They are a first world nation and the fall of Ukraine has created, or not that they have fallen, but if it should fall, it would be incredible instability, not just in Europe, but all around the globe. So we need to make sure that again, they can win this fight. They have the will to win. They can do it. But this is why we need to be strong as well and have the appropriate leadership that is willing not to abide by a doctrine of appeasement, but come from a power or a position of power and strength. We can do this as the United States. It's what we are charged with doing.

Bryan Clark:
Absolutely. Great words. And that's exactly, I think the position we need to take going forward. Thank you very much Senator Joni Ernst for being with us today and taking time out of your busy schedule as you come back from this visit to the Eastern European front, if you will, and giving us an update from there. Thank you for the work that you're doing on the Hill in terms of mounting a strong defense and improving the ability of the United States to protect itself and its partners and allies. So thank you very much.

Senator Joni Ernst:
Thank you, Bryan.