Virtual Event | Russia’s War of Aggression: A Conversation with Congresswoman Victoria Spartz

TRANSCRIPT

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• Representative Victoria Spartz, U.S. Representative, Indiana’s 5th District
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A video of the event is available: https://www.hudson.org/events/2090-virtual-event-russia-s-war-of-aggression-a-conversation-with-congresswoman-victoria-spartz32022

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Rebeccah Heinrichs:
Welcome to this event at Hudson Institute. My name is Rebeccah Heinrichs.

I'm a senior fellow here at Hudson, and I have the privilege today of being joined by Congresswoman Victoria Spartz, from Indiana. She is the first Ukrainian American to join us in the U.S. Congress, and she has become a leader on how the United States should be appropriately responding to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

It is a real pleasure to have her here with me this morning. We're going to have a conversation about the status of the war, and how the United States and NATO is responding, and what we can be doing to help the situation.

Congresswoman, I thought what we would start with is, you have family still in Ukraine. To the extent that you're able to, give us a little bit of insight into how they're doing, and just the general sense of what you're hearing from Ukrainians about the war, and what they're saying that they need?

Rep. Victoria Spartz:
Well, thank you for having me. It's a pleasure joining. The situation in Ukraine is difficult. It's a dire situation. It's a very vicious invasion.

It's really not a real war. It's genocide of the Ukrainian people, and I don't use my words lightly, but it is. There are a lot of cities right now under siege. There's no electricity, no water. They're trying to kill any person who tries to escape city. I have some family in the cities have been bombed for three weeks now, nonstop.

I don't even have communications with my grandma, and people that take care of her, so I don't even know how they're doing. No one can get into the cities. I'm sure they're not doing very well, because you can only have so much of supplies.

There is no water, no electricity, and it's winter. It's cold out there. There are a lot of cities like that in Ukraine, probably over a million people right now being encircled, and really, they're trying to kill all these people.

No one is willing to, they're not agreeing to have any humanitarian corridors or safe passages. They're just not agreeing to do it, they're killing people, and they're trying to escape.

It's difficult now. Kyiv is going to be under siege. It's a large city with even more population, and I think it's getting encircled. It's not there yet, but I think it's very difficult.

Maybe, just being Ukrainian born, a lot of people reaching out to me and was saying that it's painful for me to watch these videos and pictures of, I mean, of women and children getting killed, and hearing their stories and really begging for help. So I probably get more of that.

I feel sometimes, "My gosh, I have to go. This is tough for me to watch all of this," not just because I'm Ukrainian born and seeing all the cities, just because, as a human being, the atrocities. I mean, it's terrible.
But I always think, "What, I'm just watching this video. These people are living through that." And they're tough. My mom, she lives here. She talked to her neighbor.

Now, she doesn't have communications, and her former neighbor, and she was talking to her and she said, "You know what? It's okay. Don't cry. We just want to have guns to fight. We're okay, just give us guns to fight." I think that is something, that the will and the strengths of the people, it's inspiring for me.

Rebeccah Heinrichs:

You have said that repeatedly, that the Ukrainian people are not asking for American troops to fight their fight. They're asking for weapons to fight for themselves. A lot has changed even since the last Russian invasion of Ukraine.

There's even, I think, a perceptible more cohesiveness with the Ukrainian people, a stronger Ukrainian identity that's very unique, uniquely Ukrainian. And a lot of the attacks, the targets from the Russians, have been not just military targets, but cultural targets of Ukrainians.

Back to your point about, it's not even just, it's not a normal war. They really are trying to crush what it means to be Ukrainian. Can you give us a little bit more about that? What is the national identity like of Ukrainians?

Because Americans can sometimes be confused about this. They think, "Well, don't Ukrainians see themselves as Russians, or isn't there a large number of Ukrainians who see themselves as Russians?" Can you give us some insight into that?

Rep. Victoria Spartz:

Well, it's interesting, because the city of Chuhuiv, actually, the Prince of Chuhuiv started Moscow as part of Kievan Rus', because at that time, they have got the Mongols and Tatars, they were attacking them from the east. So they constantly would attack, the Kyiv and Chuhuiv of ancient cities.

So one of the princes moved the capital to Moscow, and was one of the founders. They even have a monument to him. Now [Putin is] bombing the city of Chuhuiv for three weeks, destroying churches that have centuries, went through all of the wars. Now he's purposely destroying the cultural heritage of Kievan Rus', because in reality, Russia didn't even exist before.

This is a Slav tribe that created Kievan Rus', and actually Kiev was the capital. If we just go back in history, which is a bad idea, to go back and re-divide the borders in Europe, because there is a lot of history. So there is a heritage that he's really trying to destroy.

But unfortunately, I think it's also not the fight, about him in the territory. It's a fight about the ideas and ideals, and he believes that he can suppress, and he did suppress his own people, with a lot of threats and a lot of very harsh things that he's doing.

He put people in jail, innocent. So he did it to Russians, he did it to Belorussians, they try to do it to Ukraine. If you remember, Orange Revolutions, they killed 100 people.
Well, guess what? Millions show up next day? Well, it's very difficult to kill millions people with police force, so now, he summoned an army to kill his people. So the only reason he's killing this people, because they're not willing to submit.

He doesn't need territory. Look at that. He is destroying to the ground, leveling to the ground, the territory. If you want to occupy and take advantage of resources, you wouldn't be leveling to the ground, cities, and killing civilians like that.

How can you even install the government, after you killed so many civilians? I grew up in Chernihiv region, which is very multicultural. Actually, he's killing a lot of people that are Russian-born.

A lot of people in places like Chernihiv are actually Russian-born people. So it's not about Russia and Ukraine. It's about, he wants to kill people that do not submit to him. That is all about it.

And he wants to kill as many as possible, civilians. He's not fighting the army. He wants to kill civilians. He give an order to kill civilians, women and children, shoot them.

I think these atrocities are unbelievable, but people, even if they, before, they didn't have that. The areas I grew up in, never was anti-Russian, and didn't even have problem. Now there's, I mean, after you have your children, grandchildren dying in almost 15,000, even before this started, died, now people are definitely have these patriotic feelings.

I grew up, and it was Soviet Union, but Ukraine being independent for 30 years, a lot of these young boys and girls, they grew up, they really have no connection to Soviet Union. They're like, "What in the hell are you talking about? I don't want a socialist communist, we are done, it's enough. Enough is enough."

They're willing to die for freedoms. And unfortunately, a lot of good people are dying.

**Rebeccah Heinrichs:**

Well, and that's actually something that you have repeatedly said is, actually, growing up, how you grew up and where you grew up is where you actually get some of your political philosophy.

**Rep. Victoria Spartz:**

Yeah, yes.

**Rebeccah Heinrichs:**

And that, and your patriotism as an American, comes out of your experience, which is often the case with many American immigrants who become, American citizens here. And if you want to talk about that too, that would be great, because I know there's Ukrainian populations throughout the Midwest.

I have family, also, in Ohio, who's Ukrainian born. So that political philosophy makes sense, that it comes, you know what oppression is like.

**Rep. Victoria Spartz:**

That's right.
Rebeccah Heinrichs:
So you can talk a little bit about that. Then, also, while you're maybe thinking about that, the other thing I would like to hear from you, is how you think the United States should view the importance of Ukraine, and what the Russians are doing, and how that impacts U.S. national security.

Rep. Victoria Spartz:
Right, and I think, just to follow up, I think I didn't finish on the other questions. Ukrainians are very realistic, and understand that the West is not going to go fight the war for them, but also, there is some commitment that the West does have to Ukraine, and I'll tell you which commitments are.

Ukraine used to be the largest nuclear country, after Russia and the United States. In 1994, the United States, rightly so, pushed Ukraine to give up the nuclear weapons, and in exchange, provided Budapest memorandums that the sovereignty, they will make sure, that they're sure, sovereignty.

I actually remember that, because I still live in that country, and I went to School of Economics in that time. And we even had discussion at that time. "Is it really a guarantee? Did Ukraine really get this properly? And what is really, they got in return?"

And the reality that, "Sure, this is a piece of paper." but it sets a very dangerous precedent, because now we're dealing with countries like Iran, and we're dealing countries with like North Korea.

And if we are going to be a country that wants to get into some agreement, and then agree, and then, don't provide some way what is going to happen in the return, every other country is going to think, "Well, why should I give up my nukes," right?

Like Ukraine, if they would be nuclear country, they wouldn't have Russia now slaughtering their people. That puts us in a very bad situation, where we can make war, and a nuclear arms race, and it's very dangerous situation to have it. So I think there is some, it's not our guarantees under Article V there.

Rebeccah Heinrichs:
Right.

Rep. Victoria Spartz:
But it's some level of assurance that we do have commitment. You cannot just be a wishy washy wobbly country. And that's what Putin is trying to do.

He's trying to embarrass us. This is a strike of the West, and United States, in particular, as he considered to be leader of the West.

That's just to say, "Oh, look at this, you got embarrassed in Afghanistan? Let's see what the West is going to do? That is a, they team up with China to say, "Listen, you're going to be with us, follow our centuries of democracy," which is a complete joke.

I mean, they say, "We are countries with centuries of democracy." I mean, I don't think, maybe their constituency is drinking Kool-Aid, but I think the rest of the world is not that dumb.
But then, they want to show that, "You are with us, we'll guarantee your peace, but you go with the West, look how West is protecting Ukraine. Look what is West is doing. We're going to slaughter all these people, and they're going to be watching them."

This is a strike in the world order of democracy, and it kind of show, where is the West? What are they helping? Because I was meeting with one of the leaders in Middle East recently, and it was interesting. He said, "Ukraine thought they were in the green, and now, they're in the gray." And I think they are in the gray. I think this is a big discussion for us, going forward, what are our institutions providing, how we can have that stability in peace?

We created the United Nations, we created all these organizations. We have a major war right now in Europe, and none of them are functional, so what is the process for that?

And what kind of things can happen, and need to happen, to make sure that there is a stability and peace, where somebody can’t just sit in the Kremlin, and go and try to slaughter a bunch of people, and can escalate a conflict, and much more significant? So I think West needs get stronger.

There are some things we cannot do. We cannot provide no-fly zone, just because, I mean, we cannot just go, and I mean, we cannot enforce it in a effective way without getting direct conflict with the nuclear power. That is not feasible.

But there are some things that are feasible. We can help Ukrainians to secure their humanitarian corridors. We can have provided proper weapons that have an ability, they have ability to protect their own people.

Rebeccah Heinrichs:

Yeah.

Rep. Victoria Spartz:

And they understand, very realistically, that they will have to do it. They're not going to fall. They're not saying, this is not, the people are going to say, "Oh, well, let's just give this some things, and we're going to run away." These people are fighting with nothing.

But I think it's important for us to do, and have some speed, and scale, because in any conflict you have to have the right strategy. You actually need to have a strategy. Unfortunately, in the West, a lot of these conflicts and problems we get in, we actually don't have a strategy.

You always have to have an exit strategy, too, when you enter into anything, and know where you want into land, and you adjust your tactics. Then you need to have speed, and you need to have scale, to be able to do it at much faster pace.

Otherwise, it can be prolonged. And the longer things prolong, the more dangerous they become.
Rebeccah Heinrichs:
No, several wonderful points, I think you just made. I've focused my work here on issues related specifically to nuclear weapons, and I have been very concerned about the point that you made, about the nonproliferation message that we're sending.

And I actually am concerned, President Biden’s emphasis, that the United States is not going to get in a direct confrontation with Russia, because it would necessarily turn into World War III. I think that is kind of, that's a straw man that he's created, because it is a nuclear power. But we do want to avoid direct military confrontation.

However, that should not self deter us from doing so much more, at completely reasonable levels of escalation. You and I have talked about some of these things, providing weapons at scale, and the right speed, in making sure that the Zelensky government is getting the right kinds of weapons.

So let's talk about that. Oh, and the other thing, that the humanitarian corridor ... Hudson has done, I think, great work.

My colleagues, Bill Schneider, Doug Feith and Brian Clark have put together some ideas about how we can do the very thing you said, that it's not a no-fly zone at all. But it does enable the Ukrainian government to make sure that the humanitarian corridor is actually safe.

But NATO allies can contribute outside the borders of Ukraine, to be able to do that. That's something, I think, that is a completely reasonable NATO mission, to make sure that we can do that.

What else? So we are now sending, the United States is sending more weapons into Ukraine. Is it enough? Is your sense that it is happening at the right speed? Or do you think that the administration is still a little bit too slow at getting Ukraine, everything they need to put up a fight?

Rep. Victoria Spartz:
Well, they definitely were playing a catchup and dragging their feet, for sure, and that is not very good. And they also do a lot of talk. You don't need to say what you will not do with it. You just actually don't know what things can happen.

Don't just make this categoric things that you will not do, what you need to do. You say, "If this happen, I'll do this, and then do it."

That's more meaningful in any deterrence and foreign policy, whether how you deal with sanctions, whether, how you deal in the defensive and military strategy, right? Just say what you're going to do, if this happened, and just do it.

A lot of time we just talk about it, before it's done, and then some is not done, and then politicizing. And this is actually very unhealthy.

If you go to poke a bear, you better make a strike, okay? You just don't do too much talk, because that's create a lot of danger, and you put a lot of people in danger. You escalated, actually, the situation, before it even needed to be escalated.
But you need to make some points, you need to make some deterrence points. You know, "If you go too far in some of things, this is just not acceptable. We are not going to accept some of the crazy things that you were thinking about it," and set that red line, and follow that red line.

But also, with helping with the defenses there, like they say they did with this MiGs. They politicized this issue, was no reason.

**Rebeccah Heinrichs:**
Yeah.

**Rep. Victoria Spartz:**

Also, why do you even need to? Putin is not Tweeting what his next step is to be, or put it on national media. I mean, why would you need to go and do that, before you even done it?

If you want to share it, you've done something. If you believe it's necessary, which, most of the time, probably, it's not.

But even if you want to do it, well, don't say it. And then you kind of backtrack, and wobbly, and you might not even do it.

Then you decide, are you trying to get his approval for that, or what? It's like a joke. I've never seen such military strategies done on national TV. I mean, it's strange to me, it's almost like this talking point signing, just a picture ops.

I mean, this is real war. This is not a picture op theater, and it's not a political ... I mean, they, they trade in this like it's some political theater, which, we have full of Congress, but it's a serious situation.

**Rebeccah Heinrichs:**

It does seem that a lot of the messaging coming out of the White House is geared towards an American domestic audience, which obviously can have a negative impact on the actual war that's going on in Ukraine. And I agree, it does seem that, again, back to this point, that if the administration is so afraid of a direct military confrontation, that they're trying to communicate to the American people, essentially that they're not going to go to war over Ukraine with Russia.

That's the narrative that they want, so that's how they're communicating publicly. But then the impact is saying things like, "They're not going to be providing certain kinds of ISR to the Ukrainians."

For a while there, they were not providing real time targeting to the Ukrainians, because they were afraid. And they would say this, that they're not willing to do it because of the concern that the Russians might call the United States a co-belligerent in this.

Or they didn't want to send the Polish MIGS, which, I thought, that's a decision that the United States can make privately, but it was, I thought, a mistake to that to send the MIGS would be escalatory and high risk.
If you say that, and then you tell the Poles, but to go ahead and do it, you've essentially made it just impossible for Poland to do that without US backing. Because the Russians can now say, "Well, even the Americans said it was high risk and escalatory."

Rep. Victoria Spartz:
Right.

Rebeccah Heinrichs:
So it is an interesting point, it does seem like we could have less public declarations of what the United States is unwilling to do, and then more of these conversations happening privately. And then, just doing it, so that we have maximum options, and to cause the Russians to think, "Maybe I shouldn't attack so close to the Polish border, near NATO missions, because might elicit a response, even if it isn't directly inside Poland's territory."

Rep. Victoria Spartz:
I think that's a really great point. So President Zelensky addressed the Congress. I'd like to know how you thought he did, and how he's doing.

Then, if this last batch of weapons, you think, is still good. And if there are things that you are seeing from the Biden administration, working with Congress, that are at least encouraging to you?

Well, even just follow up on this MiG situation, it's kind of interesting. Because I read some, what Russian Minister of Defense said, and actually, they said, that if we let MiGs fly into Ukraine from NATO air fields, that's escalatory.

They never even mentioned just given it to Ukraine, that somehow it's escalation. So it was interesting. They even issued a statement on that issue.

Rebeccah Heinrichs:
Wow.

Rep. Victoria Spartz:
Because I can read Russian, I know both Russian and Ukrainian, so I periodically go see what they write. But it was interesting for me to say they never even considered it to be escalation. So we made it into escalation.

Rebeccah Heinrichs:
Then they adopted that language.

Rep. Victoria Spartz:
Yeah, yeah. Well, and it's almost like why we wouldn't do that. That is very strange to me.
We cannot be just afraid. You need to have some strength, and you need to have some courage, if you want to, dealing with someone that's aggressive like that, then you need to be strong.

But I think President Zelensky, he really stepped up to the plate, and I think his courage, and what he is doing, united the west more than anything else. I think it's an inspiration to a lot of people.

I even was recently meeting with Taiwan representative, and she said, "We are nervous what's happening, but it's really strengthening, and inspired people in our country. We feel like we can be strong, we will be strong."

I think the actions of Ukrainian people are inspiration to a lot of people. I was always saying, this reminds me of the founding of our country, and unfortunately it takes a lot of blood to gain freedom, so it's better not to give it up.

I always tell my children, "You'll have a lot of fights to fight, but remember, don't give up your freedom, because there are a lot of people that died for them, and for you, and just keep them. Because otherwise our children and grandchildren will have to die, then, to keep it. And we don't want to go there."

But it's a very vivid example, what, how hard it is, that freedoms are, and how hard to get them. So I think President Zelensky is good that he's getting, not just talking to all presidents and everyone, but he actually gets to the people.

He talks to Congress, we're the people's house. We are influenced with people, we're have influenced by constituents, so just having direct messages to Congress, it's very important. And I think Congress, it's been united, in a lot of ways, is not a lot of other issues.

We do need some unity, actually, because we have a lot of problems that we need to deal with. And we need to have some common sense, and not drama BS that we do, and talking about nothing in this committee.

Because there are some serious issues, internal, that we have in the country. I think that is very positive for us, at least, to see some of that.

Rebecca Heinrichs:
Yeah.

Rep. Victoria Spartz:
And put pressure on administration, because we are a coequal branch. We actually are first among equals.

We have a power of purse and a power of war. This is a pretty significant powers were given us by Founding Fathers, and we have been reluctant to exercise our powers effectively.

And I'm not saying, because I have a Democrat president. I had a Republican governor when I was State Senate, and we were not on the same page a lot of times.
So I challenge anyone, because my job is to represent the people, and be check and balance to executive branch, and have accountability, because their executives are supposed to execute what we ask them to do. And they're accountable to us, on the execution.

They shouldn't be legislating and creating policy, making decisions. We are actually given the power and authority to do that, and they execute what we want to do. But unfortunately, we did not set up proper mechanism.

Oh, you write it in a lot of ways, where we do have that oversight function, and they have to care what you do, not just send some stupid responses, so now, letters about nothing, and [inaudible 00:24:21] it, and this and this, you send all this letter.

I'm like, "I'm done with all of this letters. This is like a bureaucracy pages, that they just send you junk responses. They don't care what you send to them."

They should care, because if they don't do it? Well, you know what, we can deny them funding. If we will be using that, that is the biggest strength we have, that are given to us. And we have not been exercising it.

**Rebeccah Heinrichs:**

I am curious, too, when you mentioned constituents, and really members of Congress are responding to what their constituents want. There's been a lot of Americans inspired by President Zelensky.

When you go back home to Indiana, and you talk to your constituents, what are they saying about this war? And do they agree with you? Did they recognize that Russia is a threat, and that the United States is not being directly involved in combat, but that we should be helping the Ukrainians fight?

And we have to be sending a message that the Russia can't simply just maraud across Eastern Central Europe, and that he must be stopped. Do they get that? And is that important to them?

**Rep. Victoria Spartz:**

Well, I think people are very disturbed. I have so many people in my district, very disturbed what's happening. And I think Americans are very good hearted, strong and generous people. Seeing this atrocity, on God loving people, people are really shocked.

We actually have a lot of churches in my districts that had a lot of direct relationship with Ukrainian churches, so they get a lot of people from Ukraine writing them, too, directly. And people are very, very concerned.

People also understand that they're fighting the fight for all of us, and really, what the freedoms are, they're a bastion of this East-West philosophy. And if they don't win, there is no chance for people in China or Belarus to win, or people like in Cuba.

If they are not winning this battle, there is no chance for the rest of the world to become free. Because this is a big message, what can, good win against evil. So I think a lot of people are very concerned.

A lot of people feel that we need to do a better job in the government, and administration need to do things much faster. You always have a diversity of opinion, and that's okay, we even have it in Congress.
It's okay, we're very diverse country. But this is, by far, the most United issues that I've seen, even in my district.

**Rebeccah Heinrichs:**
Yeah.

**Rep. Victoria Spartz:**
This is the people, that probably some of these people never even heard about, what's the difference between Russia and Ukraine? Now they're very stressed out, so I think people are very concerned about that.

I mean, we've done some things, but we are very slow in responses. To your question earlier, you mentioned, is it enough, not enough? I think, the faster we act, the more we put pressure on Russia to get to the negotiation table, the more likely things can happen, because the longer the conquest prolongs, the more bad things can happen.

It can escalate, the dangers posing, being on the board of NATO, and get in, drag us into that indirect contact, it's becoming higher.

I mean, more people are going to die, and, for Ukrainians, well, already a lot of them, I mean, it's a disaster. But the more people die, the much harder is going to be for Ukrainians, even, to be able to agree to anything with them. And it really brings in, too, more escalation, more different type of weapons.

I think we need to strike very seriously, from a sanction front, help Ukrainians to defend, beef up our Eastern flank, and then drag Russians to the table, and say, "Enough is enough. Let's work with Ukraine and find some, an agreement to resolve this situation, because it's not going to be for good for you, the worst for you. And it's not good for anyone." And this is conflict, it's very serious.

So I think right now, I don't think they have an honest desire to do that. They send in some former Minister of Culture to negotiate the agreement, I mean, it's a joke. But I think, the more pressure they feel, the more likely they're going to be at the table.

**Rebeccah Heinrichs:**
People will, I've noticed people in the media saying that the U.S.-NATO side, Ukrainian side, needs to be looking for an off-ramp for Russia, but Russia doesn't want an off-ramp yet. There's been no indication that the Russians are in any way earnest about their desire for any kind of political settlement at this point.

**Rep. Victoria Spartz:**
Not yet.
Rebeccah Heinrichs:

And two points, one, I thought you raised a great point about beefing up, really, what I see as effectively the front of NATO right now, which is Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, and that whole area. There's even more US troops that are being shifted from the West over there, which, I think President Biden was wise to make that decision, and other kinds of military deployments.

Do you see what's happening now? As you said, we should have done a lot of this earlier, because perhaps we could have caused Putin to decide, "This isn't going to be worth it." Because he didn't do it last year, he didn't do it two years ago. He did it now, thinking that maybe this was the opportunity to do it.

Do you think there's a lesson there, that we need to be doing much more? And not just for a year, but in a permanent status, we need to have a stronger NATO in the front of NATO, meaning those, and that needs to stay there.

They need to step up. I mean, the Poles have been great at contributing to a collective defense, Romanians, but there needs to be more war. You see the Germans now are contributing more to defense.

Do you see all of that as, are you encouraged that might be a more permanent situation for Europe? But that Europe might actually end up safer, once we hopefully, Lord willing, get to the end of this horrible war, sooner rather than later?

Rep. Victoria Spartz:

Yeah, I think Europe is learning lesson.

Rebeccah Heinrichs:

Oh yeah.

Rep. Victoria Spartz:

I think they understand the serious of situation, and I think they will definitely reassess what they do, and what they were doing. They were mistaken.

Now they're going to be understand, and do a better job, but we also need to think about it, how we can help more agility to responses to crisis, because we don't need to keep all of these troops everywhere and have all of this. It's actually very exhausting for everyone, and for families and everything.

But we need to have an agility to understand, if crisis happens, and that's happened in March, we should have started doing some things to show that we mean business. We should have sent these people to their front lines there.

We should send move people from Germany, what we have, send these weapons, and it's like, "Hey, we mean business," because, Putin, he's not dumb, okay? He understand that West has been dealing with a lot of drama, it weakened, in a lot of ways, doing a lot of stupid stuff about nothing.
He's an opportunist. He understood, there is an opportunity for him, where it's politically driven, where there are a lot of decisions done based on politics, where people are exhausted in America with endless war, which, we did.

I mean, we exhausted ourselves nation building, which, we should never even have gone in Afghanistan. It was just completely dumb to do that, for us.

You need to have a strategy to decide what to do, and pulled out. So you need to be much more agile and responsive and know what to do, not drag yourself into things that it's unfeasible, even impossible, pretty much, to accomplish.

I think he understood all of these things. He understood that a reaction is going to be not as strong.

I think he underestimated to meet the Ukrainian people, I think president Biden underestimated the Ukrainian people, and people around him. But I think we could have done much more to send a clear message, that we mean business.

With all of the things that people don't like about President Trump, one thing that he was very good at, foreign policy, and he actually had a very success with Abraham protocols, and how he deal with North Korea, and other things, including Russia. When they were trying to do something in Syria, he sent a clear message that his Tomahawks are going to be flying on a base with Russians out there.

He was unpredictable. He had a backbone, and you never knew what he was going to do or Tweet tomorrow. This is very good deterrence, to any aggressor in any foreign policy, because they understand that, who knows? You might actually do something.

And then, do you want to screw around with that? Oh, probably not. And I think, in a lot of ways, you need to have that agility of strength, and peace through strength.

It's the most effective way to keep peace, and we need to show that. And I think what we've done with Afghanistan, it made a lot of our NATO allies doubt, and they were like, "Okay, the United States is really the leader of the free world. Are we willing to put our money where our mouth is?"

I think we know everyone was doubting. He was trying to take advantage of this situation and not doing any action, just doing a lot of talk. He was like, "Well, they're going to be doing a lot of talk."

I think West got more united, I think west is learning a lesson. Unfortunately, it will be a high cost for Ukraine to do that. But I think we have to reassess the situation, and have that ability to deal with this crises in more effective way, and in more proactive, not reactive way.

We need to know the strategy. We need to know what needs to happen, to deter things like that. What we've done, everything we've done, was just really awkward and counterproductive.

Rebeccah Heinrichs:

I think your point about Afghanistan is so important for people to understand better, as well, because a lot of national security scholars would like to say that there's no connection between Afghanistan, and what's going on in Europe. [crosstalk 00:34:13] Then there'll be no connection to anything that happens in the Indo-Pacific, or anything else.
But it's impossible not to connect them, because, I mean, when I have meetings with allies, that's what they want to talk about, U.S. commitments. But I want to dig down a little bit and try to understand it better, because you said, the Afghanistan war was popular at the time.

But then you made the interesting point. The thing that was fatiguing to Americans, though, was how protracted it was, and the nation building, rather than just killing terrorists, and going out and leaving, just killing terrorists, and keeping the mission very, very narrow and specific, so we had a clear military end state that we could, we could look to. Then it was that withdrawal, and the way that our country withdrew from Afghanistan.

And it kind of gets back to this theme we had mentioned before about, the lack of this administration's willingness to adapt to changing circumstances. It's really inflexible. It makes a decision that we're not going to go to war in Ukraine, so it's very inflexible in it is willing to do, to adapt to certain circumstances. And we kind of, we saw that characteristic play out in the Afghanistan withdrawal.

When the Afghanistan withdrawal was happening, was that your sense, it was the way it was happening, and the lack of coordination with NATO, I mean, did that give you a sense of foreboding, that more bad things are going to happen? Is that the sense you got, and your constituents?

**Rep. Victoria Spartz:**

For sure, right? Because it shows our weaknesses. It shows that we are not, and our allies, we know, are doubting us. We are not standing with our allies. I mean, we abandoned our native allies there, that were backing us.

We cannot withdraw that quickly, and I think it's interesting, because I think it's purely because people who are running the country, that they're just really been in politics all their lives. So they're all afraid to say that, "Well, I was wrong, and I need to adjust the strategy."

They always say, a successful manager, if 50% is right on your first time, when you make a decision, you adjust your strategy. You have a strategy, you adjust your action.

Things always go wrong. It's being able to figure out when things go wrong, how to adjust, to still achieve what you want to achieve. This is how life is. This is a common sense in business, in anything, that's how you deal with.

In politics, we have a bunch of people that spend all their life in politics, so they don't ever make decisions. They don't have a toughness to make decisions, and they don't even understand and say, "Hey, you know what? We have to adjust this decision, we have to come to the result."

And they're afraid to say, "Well, we're going to adjust the strategy," because circumstance changes, because they're just political people. That is very dangerous for the country, when we have a pure political, politicians who spend their lives politicking, worrying about the polls, running the country. And we need to think twice before we elect people like that.

Because this is executive position. In the legislative branch, you can complain all the time, and blame other sides nonstop, okay? That's what we do most of the time. But when you're an executive, when life and death situations happen under your watch, you have to be able to make these decisions.
You have to be able to make tough decisions, and adjust, and have an ability to really adjust your strategy, and come to the good results. But I think Afghanistan, it was, in a lot of ways, it's also a good lesson for us to say, "You cannot build a nation for someone else."

You can help good people, if people want to build a nation, if people are willing to fight for freedoms themselves, to help them, to build their nations in direct way. But only people of that country can build their country.

You cannot change mentality, you cannot change the people, and it's a stupid idea to even to do that, to drag yourself, and think that you can actually do that.

It's good for us to promote this democracy, because it's good and safe for us. The more democratic countries we have around the world in our lives, it's good for us and peace, that we don't have to send our children to die.

Because, unfortunately, if the wars escalate further and further, any war, we get then dragged in into that. So it's good for us to promote that, but we cannot be fighting for these people. If people of Ukraine are willing to die and willing to fight for their own freedoms, there is a hope for these people.

But if people of Afghanistan are not willing to do it, you cannot force them to do it. You shouldn't be, and you shouldn't make decisions for them like that, because it's just, it's very draining for us.

But it's also not necessary. Our children shouldn't be dying for countries that don't want that, or don't have even basis for that.

So I think it was a major mistake to go where we went, but hopefully, we'll learn from some of these mistakes. And it was major mistakes how we mishandled Ukraine in a lot of ways, too, because we could have done much more to deter it, from where it ended up being.

**Rebeccah Heinrichs:**

And you made a nice point, too. The last administration's approach, there's this idea, and I think that maybe some in this administration, have this idea that strength itself is provocative, and that strength, military strength, economic strength, actually prevents us from being able to have diplomatic openings.

But the last administration, actually, they kept Nord Stream 2 forbidden, and sanctions on Nord Stream 2, sanctions against the Russians, for the things that they did in the U.S. election ... I mean, supported the three C's initiative, American energy independence, nuclear modernization, which the Russians opposed, pulled out of arms control treaties that the Russians were cheating on.

They did all of these things that were actually good for the US, tough on Russia, and at the same time, desired diplomatic opportunities. Really, I think you nicely laid out that these things can go hand in hand.

You can have tough strength, with an open hand of diplomacy. And that oftentimes, if you're not tough, you actually just end up getting your lunch eaten from you, from the person who's tougher than you are.
Rep. Victoria Spartz:

That's right, that's right. There is not going to be happening any diplomacy if you don't back it up with, some strength, militarily, just so you mean business.

I think that comes hands in hands. Otherwise, aggressors don't want to negotiate with you, because they feel they can take advantage of you. And I think that's extremely important.

Rebeccah Heinrichs:

Yes. That's so well said, well, I could talk with you for another hour, but I know that you've got some legislative business to get to.

Congresswoman, we are all better for having you in Congress, especially now at this time, and learning from you. We thank you so much for the work that you're doing. Thank you.

Rep. Victoria Spartz:

Well, thank you so much. And I appreciate that we have so many freedom loving people in our country, that very inspired what's happening. And I just hope that this is a great lesson for us, especially for young people, to really learn what it takes to keep freedoms, how much, how many people are dying, and have died before?

And I think I hope that will maybe make a lot of our young people more mature and grow up, and start thinking about things that are important. And also, maybe our Congress grow up a little bit, too. We can use a little bit more common sense and maturity too, so thank you for having me.

Rebeccah Heinrichs:

Well, thank you for your leadership.

Rep. Victoria Spartz:

Thank you.

Rebeccah Heinrichs:

Thank you for joining us here at Hudson Institute.