



Transcript of the 2022 Holberg Debate: "Will Fear Keep Us Safe?"

The Holberg Debate is an annual event organised by the [Holberg Prize](#). The Prize is awarded annually to scholars who have made outstanding contributions to research in the humanities, social sciences, law or theology. It was established by the Norwegian Parliament in 2003 and is administered by the University of Bergen, on behalf of the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research.

The Holberg Debate is inspired by Ludvig Holberg's Enlightenment ideas and aims to explore pressing issues of our time and to highlight the relevancy of research in the fields covered by the Holberg Prize. The debate seeks to include panellists from both inside and outside academia.

The Holberg Debate on Ukraine, Russia, China and the West took place on 1 December, 2022, at the University Aula in Bergen. The topic for debate was: "What do the current geopolitical crises mean for the power of deterrence and the prospects of a new global security order?"

The event featured the following participants:

- John J. Mearsheimer, R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago.
- Carl Bildt, former Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Sweden. Bildt is Co-Chair of the European Council on Foreign Relations and contributing columnist to The Washington Post. He serves as Senior Advisor to the Wallenberg Foundations in Sweden and is on the Board of Trustees of the RAND Corporation in the US.
- Moderator: Cecilie Hellestveit. Hellestveit is a conflict researcher at the Norwegian Academy of International Law, as well as Special Adviser at the Norwegian National Human Rights Institution.

Welcoming remarks were given by the Chair of the Holberg Prize Board, Professor Kjersti Fløttum, University of Bergen.

[00:09:37] FLØTTUM:

Good afternoon.

It is my profound pleasure to welcome the audience here at the University Aula in Bergen, Norway, as well as viewers around the world, to this year's Holberg Debate. My name is Kjersti Fløttum and I am the Chair of the Holberg Board.

The Holberg Prize is one of the largest international prizes awarded to outstanding scholars in the humanities, social sciences, law and theology. The Prize was established by the Norwegian government in 2003 in homage to the scientist and writer Ludvig Holberg, who lived from 1684 to 1754.

In addition to the academic events that are held each year in celebration the Holberg Prize Laureate, the Holberg Debate is held annually in December in tribute to Ludvig Holberg's Enlightenment ideals. The debate aims to engage prominent academics as well as non-academics in public debate on pressing issues of our time.

This topic of this year's debate is the current global security crises facing us. In particular, we will focus on Ukraine, Russia, China and the West – and what kind of power and deterrence that may prevent future wars or escalation of the existing conflict. We have called the debate “Will Fear Keep Us Safe?”

On the panel, we are delighted to have Professor John Mearsheimer, of the University of Chicago, and former Prime Minister of Sweden, Mr. Carl Bildt.

We are also very pleased to have with us Dr. Cecilie Hellestveit, who will moderate the event. Hellestveit is a conflict researcher at the Norwegian Academy of International Law. She has a PhD in international humanitarian law from the University of Oslo; and she has been associated with a number of research institutes in Norway and abroad.

So, without further ado I hereby give the floor to Cecilie Hellestveit.

Cecilie Hellestveit, the floor is yours.

[00:12:17] HELLESTVEIT:

Thank you so much for that kind introduction, Kjersti. Dear audience, I'm honored and delighted to have the privilege to moderate the Holberg Debate of 2022, organized by the Holberg Prize in the loveliest of cities in Norway, Bergen. But while the city is bright and cheerful, the

subject of tonight's debate is far from it. It is dark and gloomy, because we live in dangerous times.

This year war on land between nations returned to continental Europe. Russia's aggressive military assault on Ukraine is a watershed, a monumental event in the history of modern Europe. And we are still struggling to gauge all the effects that this war of aggression will have for the future of Europe and the world at large. Simultaneously other dark clouds are on the horizon. The rivalry in technological, political, economic and military terms between the giants of the world, the US and China, is gaining traction. But even when war and geopolitical rivalry is upon us and it is very clear to us who is a friend and who is a foe, public debate must take place. And the Holberg Debate this year ventures into this complex and sensitive landscape, asking whether fear will keep us safe and what do the current geopolitical crisis mean for the power of deterrence and the prospects of a new global security order.

As the journalist and grand strategist Walter Lippmann once observed, "where all think alike, no one thinks very much". On behalf of the Holberg Prize I'm therefore delighted to present to the public two distinguished speakers who do not think alike. One is a scholar of politics and one is a craftsman of politics. One is American and one is European. One is a proponent of the school of realism, the other a firm believer in liberal traditions. Our two speakers have expressed views in stark contrast to each other, notably on Russia and her war on Ukraine.

The American guest and realist scholar is John Mearsheimer. Professor John Mearsheimer is the R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor of political science at the University of Chicago. He graduated from West Point in 1970 and served five years in the US air force. Mearsheimer has also been a research fellow at the Brookings Institution and Council of Foreign Relations in New York.

The European politician is Carl Bildt, former prime minister and foreign minister of Sweden. Carl Bildt has also a distinguished international career. Among others, he was the EU's Special Envoy to the former Yugoslavia, High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina and UN Special Envoy to the Balkans. He also was a co-chair of the Dayton Peace Conference. Bildt is currently co-chair of the European Council of Foreign Relations. And we will start the debate by hearing opening remarks from both speakers. And I do want to remind the audience and the viewers that they still have the opportunity to send in questions for

the speakers. And since we are in Europe and this is Carl Bildt's turf, we first give the floor to him. The floor is yours, Carl.

[00:16:09] BILDT:

Thank you for those kind words of introduction, and it's truly a pleasure to be here in Bergen. I've come not too long, professor Mearsheimer had come a long way, but I think we both look forward to this particular debate.

And let's be clear, we have entered more dangerous times. That certainly applies to the global order, or perhaps the lack thereof, but it applies of course in particular to the situation that we are faced with in this part of the world in our Europe. In the American debate the focus has always been or has often been on the risk of an armed confrontation with a rising China, notably over the future status of Taiwan, and that has loomed large, and policies have been oriented and are oriented towards trying to contain that and slow down the rise of Chinese power in different domains. But here in our Europe we are since ten months in the largest military conflict this part of the world has seen since 1945, with no end in sight and with consequences that will last decades. We did, after all, manage to secure some sort of peace during the long decades of the Cold War. In half of Europe, it was the peace of the graveyard. We were in the lucky part. And perhaps the recognition that war in Europe in those days could have taken us all into nuclear Armageddon played an important part in bringing stability to those long dark decades.

But then the Soviet Union and its wider empire, under the weight of its own failure, collapsed more than three decades ago. And the task for particular policy practitioners like myself since then has been to try to build an order that could not only secure peace and security, but hopefully also the element of freedom and prosperity for every part of our continent. And it is these efforts that are now under such a mortal threat from the military aggression initiated by Vladimir Putin ten months ago.

Europe hasn't seen anything since Adolf Hitler in September 1939 launched his all-out attack against Poland. And there are important similarities between the two cases. In both cases it was war started by a personal decision of a dictator that didn't really feel any constraints whatsoever. In both cases it was war started by dictators driven by some sort of vision derived of history of what they wanted to achieve. Hitler wanted to get rid of independent Poland, it was an unnecessary creation

of the Versailles peace treaty. Putin wants to get rid of Ukraine as an independent entity. He describes this as an unnecessary mistake in creation by, of all people, Vladimir Lenin. Hitler of course then continued. When he attacked and occupied Norway it was described as absolutely necessary to safeguard the security interests of his greater Germany.

We know how it all ended. But we don't know how this horrible war will end. It is indeed horrible. We have several hundreds of thousands of soldiers engaged in combat. We have more than a thousand, as a matter of fact 1,300 kilometers of frontline. We have waves after waves of missiles against the civilian infrastructure of the entire Ukrainian nation. We have the greatest number of people displaced or forced to flee of any conflict in any part of the world during the last few decades.

The Ukrainians are determined to fight for their freedom. You can't really blame them. And they are more so determined with every new missile and every new bomb that strikes them. But Vladimir Putin is unlikely to back down from seeking to dismember, control and subdue Ukraine. He has described it several times as a life and death struggle. In all probability it is a life and death struggle, for him. He's likely in my opinion to escalate as long as he can until he runs out of possibilities and until he collapses.

But let's look at the principles if we are to search for new stability. There are two principles that I consider absolutely fundamental for the security of our continent. The first is obviously that aggression should never be tolerated. The Nuremberg and Tokyo trials after the Second World War consider aggression to be the ultimate international crime, every other war crime derives from the crime of aggression. And the second principle that I consider fundamental is that borders should be respected and should never be altered by force. Most of the borders of Europe have been drawn by blood during past centuries. Not all of them are entirely logical. Sometimes the past still creates emotions and tensions, but if you open up the issue of borders, if you allow one country to dismember another country, one big taking over parts of a smaller, you will open up a Pandora's box of true horrors for all of Europe.

These are not only principles of international law, but they are primarily, I would argue, principles derived from the very bitter history of Europe. But they're of course also principles that resonate strongly across the world. Faced with the Russian aggression, in two landmark decisions the UN General Assembly with first 141 and then 144 votes in favor endorsed these principles. Only five, I will classify them as outcast nations, voted against. So when we support Ukraine today, it is not only supporting the right of its freedom and independence, but also the support for upholding these principles that are fundamental to the security of all of our European nations. Aggression must never be tolerated, borders must be respected. Hitler, as you might remember, had all sorts of arguments for invading Poland. He considered it much too close in alliance as matter of fact with Britain and France. He didn't like its treatment of the German minorities. He considered the entire Versailles settlement, Polish corridor and all of that, unfair to Germany. And Putin also marshals argument against Ukraine. He doesn't like them, to put it mildly, wanting deep integration with the European Union and indeed NATO. He bitterly regrets and opposes the departure of former president Yanukovich, he certainly doesn't like this talk about Color Revolutions and democracy. He thinks Russia has been mistreated by the Americans.

But nothing of this, be it right or be it wrong, gave neither Hitler nor Putin any sort whatsoever the right to invade Poland or invade Ukraine. And let's be clear, true peace in Europe can't be restored until this aggression has been rolled back and Ukraine has been secured as a democracy freely able to choose its own path for the future. And this can't be achieved until Russia has given up its imperial ambition and focused its energies on building a functioning nation state. As long as it is dragged away by an imperial temptation it will never be able to be developed in harmony, peace and security with the rest of Europe. And with 140 million people, 11 time zones and vast natural resources, it doesn't really need an empire in order to be successful. We want to live in peace with a prosperous and stable Russia.

I do believe that representative rule, constitutional order and rule of law would be hugely beneficial for that country, but ultimately that's up to them to decide. But Putin's aggression means that there's now a fundamental and indeed dangerous uncertainty as to the future of Russia. His war has already failed to reach its objective, but where is Russia some years from now? Will it be in internal chaos and conflict?

Will be it on an even more militaristic regime? Or will there be Alexei Navalny competing in free and fair election? No one, no one, knows.

But one thing we know, this war and its consequences will be with us for a long time. The entire order between rivers Vistula and Volga is in flux. In our immediate part of the world Finland and Sweden will soon enter NATO. Denmark has given up its reservation against security defense dimensions of the European Union. NATO will further enhance its forward presence in the Baltic countries. There are 20,000 more US soldiers on European soil than just a year ago. All countries are increasing their defense expenditure, and NATO and the EU will move closer together. The one a military alliance, the other a security alliance. In my opinion the future security of Europe will be a function of the security of Ukraine. A secure Ukraine will create the conditions for stability and peace in Europe, and also for Russia to be able to develop as a great nation state. A destroyed, a dismembered, a divided and distraught Ukraine will only generate chaos and conflict for years to come.

Today it's a brutal battle on the plains of the East of Europe. People in the hundreds, perhaps thousands, are dying on a weekly or daily basis. Some time in the future the days of diplomacy must certainly come, but we are clearly not there yet. But then those days of diplomacy must be based on the fundamental principles I have mentioned. The peace and stability of Europe must be based on them. And the peace and stability of Europe of course also should be a global concern. Twice in the last century strife and conflict in Europe brought war to all of the globe. And there are, as I'm sure we'll debate, numerous other issues as well. There's more global disorder than order. The rivalry between the US and China must be handled. Responsible competition is the slogan, the catchphrase that is used in Washington today, and I hope the same phrase can be used in Beijing as well. The power balance is indeed shifting, China will be the largest economy in the world with growing naval and now also nuclear capabilities. Both nations are in a desperate race to control the technologies of the future. They know that that is where power ultimately lies. Europe, having to handle the brutal war, sits in between these competing global powers. It does consist of nations that are small and some that don't yet understand that they are small.

And we are, the European Union, we are a civil, a trading, an economic and in increasing respects also a security power. In this way you can say that the European Union is a hybrid power able to handle hybrid threats, but it is certainly not a military power. It can most particularly only handle the nuclear might of Russia through its alliance with the United States. Nuclear deterrence remains an unavoidable, perhaps somewhat unpleasant but unavoidable foundation of our security. And the overall security as we look ahead is indeed both dense and tense. Preventing nuclear proliferation and war, containing the unavoidable disorders of the great Middle East, facilitating all of the consequences of the rapid demographic rise of Africa, handling the security implications of climate change, notably in the Arctic not too far from here, securing a safe entry into the digital age, artificial intelligence and quantum computing. It's a tall order, perhaps taller than any political generation has faced for quite a long time. But for us in this part of the world, here in our Europe, securing the future of Ukraine is the foundation for everything else. Thank you.

[00:32:25] HELLESTVEIT: Thank you so much, Carl, for providing us with a very fruitful basis for discussion. And then professor Mearsheimer, I'm happy to give the floor to you.

[00:32:46] MEARSHEIMER: Thank you very much, Cecilie, it's a great pleasure to be here and I feel honored to be asked to be here this evening. Let me start by saying that I agree completely with both what Cecilie said and what Carl said about the fact that we live in a very dangerous world together. I'd put a finer point on it and say that I think the world is likely to get more dangerous with the passage of time. And number two, I believe that the world that we are moving into is more dangerous than the Cold War was. And of course, the Cold War was dangerous, but there's bigger trouble ahead.

Now the question is why do I say that. I say that because you have to think about what the world looked like when World War II ended and how it's evolved over time, and you have to think about how the structure of the world has changed, because that tells you a great deal about the likelihood of conflict.

When I was born in 1947 it was a bipolar world. There were two great powers in the system: the United States and the Soviet Union. When the Cold War ended in 1989, and certainly when the Soviet Union fell apart

in December of 1991, we moved from a bipolar world to a unipolar world. Then around 2017 the structure of the system began to change and we moved from unipolarity to multipolarity, a world where there are three great powers: the United States, China and Russia. So if you think about it, in my lifetime we went from bipolarity to unipolarity to multipolarity. Now, what this means is that in the multipolar world we're in now we have what I would call two conflict dyads involving great powers. One is the US–China dyad and the other is the US–Russia dyad.

During the unipolar moment you had no great power competition. Most of you young people in the audience were born in the unipolar moment. There was only one great power in the system in the unipolar moment and you cannot have great power competition by definition when you have only one great power. In the bipolar world that I was born into there were two great powers and you had one conflict dyad, the United States and the Soviet Union. So what you see is today you have a major conflict dyad in Asia involving China and the United States, a major conflict dyad involving great powers here in Europe, involving the United States and Russia. That's two conflict dyads vs. one in the Cold War, and none in the unipolar moment. Furthermore, war is more likely, security competition is more likely to turn into war in the US–China competition and in the US–Russia competition than it was during the Cold War.

So, what I'm saying to you is that we have more potential wars between great powers in the multipolar world we now live in, and furthermore, those wars are more likely. Now, why do I say that? I think what I have to do here is explain to you how I think about the security competition between the United States and China in East Asia, is tell you what I think is going on there, and then talk about what's going on here in Europe in terms of the US–Russia competition. And of course, when I talk about the US–China competition what I'm going to do is focus mainly on Taiwan, and when I focus on the US–Russia competition here in Europe, I'll focus mainly on Ukraine. And what I'm going to try and do is convince you that these are really dangerous situations.

Now, with regard to the US–China competition, what's happening here is that China is a peer competitor of the United States. If you would rank order the three great powers in the system now, the United States remains the most powerful state on the planet. China is a close second,

and there is great fear in the United States that they will eventually overtake us. And Russia is a distant Russia, Russia is a weak great power. There are a number of people who argue it shouldn't even be considered a great power, people should argue that we're in a bipolar world today that involves just the US and China. I don't agree with that, I think Russia is a great power, but it's the weakest of the three great powers. China's a potential hegemon, it's a potential hegemon in Asia. China is growing very powerful, and in international politics when you grow very powerful the ideal situation is to dominate your region of the world, it's to be a regional hegemon and to make sure that no other country on the planet, really no other great power on the planet dominates its region of the world the way you dominate yours. And of course, the paradigmatic example of this is the United States of America. We are the only regional hegemon in the world. We dominate the Western Hemisphere. No American goes to bed at night worrying about any other country in the Western Hemisphere attacking us. Why? Because we are Godzilla. In the international system you want to be Godzilla and you want to make sure you're the only Godzilla on the planet. Well, the Chinese have figured this out, the Chinese want to dominate Asia the way the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere. The Chinese know full well what happens to you in international politics when you're weak. They call it the century of national humiliation. It runs from the late 1840s to the late 1940s. They were weak and when they were weak, they were taken advantage of. You can rest assured that they want to make sure that they are by far the most powerful state in Asia, and you can rest assured that they'd like to get the Americans out beyond the first island chain, out beyond the second island chain and far away from China. It's the best way to survive in international politics, to be a regional hegemon, and the Chinese are taking all that economic might they have and they're turning it into military might.

Now, how are the Americans reacting to this? It's very clear, the Americans do not tolerate other regional hegemons in the system, the 20th century shows this very clearly. The United States played a key role in putting imperial Germany, imperial Japan, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union on the scrap heap of history. We had no intention of letting any of those four countries dominate either Europe or Asia. You can rest assured we have no intention of allowing China to dominate Asia. And in fact we're not going to pursue a pure containment strategy, we're going to pursue a rollback strategy as well. We're going to try and weaken China the way we weakened the Soviet Union during the Cold War. We have our gunsights on the Chinese. The Chinese of course fully

understand that and they're going to great lengths to try deal with us, and at the same time, as I said to you, the Chinese have a deep-seated interest in achieving regional hegemony. And the more powerful they grow economically the better off they'll be at developing the military capability to achieve regional hegemony. This is why of course the United States is trying to slow down Chinese economic growth.

So what you have in East Asia is an intense security competition between China and the United States, and the principal focus is on Taiwan, and Taiwan is a really dangerous situation. There is no analogous situation in the Cold War, the 1947 to 1989 Cold War. Berlin was not the equivalent of Taiwan. Why is Taiwan so dangerous? Taiwan is remarkably dangerous, because number one, the Chinese consider it sacred territory and they desperately want it back. Number two, the Americans believe firmly that for a variety of reasons it's important that we not let China take Taiwan, because it has great strategic value for us. So what's happening here is that the United States is now moving closer and closer to Taiwan. The Nancy Pelosi visit's just one indicator of how we're moving closer and closer to Taiwan. And this of course enrages the Chinese, because this is sacred territory, this is nationalism at play. The Americans are preventing us from getting Taiwan back, so you have a lot of attention. And then the third reason is it's easy to imagine a cold war in East Asia turning into a hot war over Taiwan, because it would be a battle over an island in a huge body of water. During the Cold War when Carl and I were young it was hard to imagine starting a war in Central Europe, because you had two massive armies with thousands of nuclear weapons in their inventory. And if those massive armies crashed into each other with all those nuclear weapons we probably would've all gotten incinerated.

So, when we ran war games during the Cold War it was very hard to get a war going in Europe, because everybody understood what the consequences would be. It's much easier to imagine a war breaking out over Taiwan. It's a small island out in the middle of a large body of water. And by the way, the other two points of friction in East Asia are the South China Sea and the East China Sea, and you can imagine a war breaking out over those two bodies of water. So you see, the different scenarios between the Cold War, Central Europe, and the new Cold War in East Asia between China and the United States over Taiwan or the South China Sea or the East China Sea. So there's big trouble coming in East Asia. I'm not arguing here that war is inevitable, but it is going to be very

difficult to avoid that intense security competition turning into a real war.

Okay, let's shift gears and go to Europe and talk about what's going on in Ukraine. And here we're focusing mainly on the US–Russian dyad. It is very important to understand that the Americans drive the train in the West. Putin doesn't want to talk to the Europeans, he wants to talk to the Americans. He knows who the boss is. So when you think about the war in Ukraine it's really the US and the Russians that matter the most, in addition to the Ukrainians of course. Now, the conventional wisdom in the West is that what is happening here is that Putin is an imperialist and he is bent on creating a greater Russia or recreating the Soviet Union, and what he is intent on doing in Ukraine is conquering that country, occupying that country, and integrating it into a greater Russia. And in fact, Ukraine is the first stop on the train line. When he's done with Ukraine he's going to move onto other states, like Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, maybe Poland, who knows, but he is an imperialist at heart. He's an aggressor who's interested in building an empire.

This is the conventional wisdom that you all know well. I would imagine that most of you believe this. My view is this is simply wrong, there's no evidence to support it. I believe that if you're going to make that argument you have to show evidence that Putin said it was desirable to conquer Ukraine and create a greater Russia. You have to show evidence that he thought it was feasible to do that, and you have to show evidence that he said that that's what he was doing. There is no evidence, and I want to underline that word, no, there is no evidence that he thought it was desirable to conquer Ukraine or to create a greater Russia or to conquer any other country. There's no evidence that he thought it was feasible, and there's no evidence that he said that's what he was doing. Furthermore, he does not have the capability to do it. The Russians invaded Ukraine with 190,000 men, there's no way 190,000 men could conquer a piece of real estate with 40+ million people in it with 190,000 men. When the Germans invaded Poland in 1939 they went in with 1.5 million men. You need a huge army to conquer a country like Ukraine, occupy it and incorporate it into your country, and you're not going to do that with 190,000 men.

Furthermore, this man, Vladimir Putin, does not have the Wehrmacht at his fingertips, you've noticed how poorly the Russian army performs. So you have a small army that's not the Wehrmacht, there's no way this

army could conquer all of Ukraine. And if you look at the strategy that's been employed, my argument makes perfect sense. This is not a case of Putin acting like an imperialist. My argument is, as I'm sure many of you know, that if you look carefully at what was going on it's quite clear that the West efforts to turn Ukraine into a Western bulwark on Russia's borders was viewed as an existential threat, the brightest of all red lines as Bill Burns, the US ambassador to Moscow, at the time said, by the higher Russian elite the idea that Ukraine was going to be incorporated into NATO, the idea that Ukraine was going to be incorporated into the EU, the idea that you are going to promote an Orange Revolution and turn Ukraine into a pro-Western liberal democracy, it's unacceptable to the Russians. It was an existential threat. You might not think it was an existential threat, but what you think doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is what the Russians think, and the Russians thought it was an existential threat and they made it unequivocally clear to us that it was an existential threat. And how did we react? We ignored what they said and we continued pushing to bring Ukraine in NATO, pushing to bring Ukraine into the EU, pushing to turn it into a pro-Western liberal democracy. Why did we do that? I'll tell you why we did it, because the Russians were weak. That's what happens when you're weak in international politics.

The Russians protested NATO expansion from the get-go. The first tranche took place in 1999, the second tranche of expansion took place in 2004. The Russians screamed bloody murder both times, we didn't care, we just shoved it down their throat. They were weak, and when they are weak you can do that. 1999, we succeeded. 2004, we succeeded. And then in 2008 we said we're going to bring Georgia and Ukraine into NATO. The Russians made it very clear you're not going to do that, you're not going to do that, we're going to resist. And if we have to, we'll destroy Ukraine. This was clear a long time ago. What did we do? We doubled down, we just kept pushing and pushing and pushing. And what you want to understand is that from the Russians perspective this is an existential threat. They have to win this war, they cannot afford to lose it. If you accept the argument that Putin is an imperialist and he's just bent on conquering some more territory and creating a greater Russia and there's no really underlying security imperative, then you can cut a deal and end this war. But if you think that the Russians view this is an existential threat, you think about this conflict in very different ways because you're dealing with a great power that's armed to the teeth with thousands of nuclear weapons that sees itself facing an existential threat.

Now, that's my view of the Russian perspective on how this has to end, they have to win, they cannot afford to lose. What is American policy and what is Ukrainian policy? American policy is we're going to beat 'em in Ukraine. This is of course Western policy, Norway's deeply involved in this. Our policy, our policy is to defeat the Russians, and also wreck their economy with sanctions, and also promote regime change and then put Putin on trial, and maybe even break apart Russia. This is our goal. We're going for a victory. We think we can win in Ukraine. Putin has to win, we think we can win. And the Ukrainians, that's an open and shut case, of course from their point of view they want to recover all their territory and they want to weaken Russia as much as possible so that Russia can't pay a return visit.

So the Russians are pursuing a clearcut victory, the Ukrainians and the Americans are pursuing a clearcut victory. What does this tell you? This tells you there's no diplomatic solution. There's no diplomatic solution to this one. This is why everybody basically understands that this is going to be a protracted stalemate, or at least they think it's going to be a protracted stalemate. They think it's going to be a protracted stalemate because there's no solution. There's another dimension to this, the most worrisome of all, and that's nuclear escalation. Russia thinks it faces an existential threat and again, what you think doesn't matter, it's what the Russians think, they think they face an existential threat. What happens if NATO succeeds? What happens if we begin to roll the Russian army back in Ukraine and we're moving up to the borders of Russia? When I say we I'm talking about Ukrainian forces backed by NATO power. The Russians are likely to use nuclear weapons to rescue the situation. This is a great power that's facing an existential threat and it's losing. You don't think it's going to think seriously at least about using its nuclear weapons? You can rest assured it is.

I like to tell the story about 1945, Japan, 1945. The Americans had defeated Japan by August 1945. Japan was defeated, we just couldn't get the Japanese to throw up their hands and surrender, and we thought that we were going to have to invade the Japanese home islands and we knew how many casualties there had been at Okinawa and at Iwo Jima, and we did not want to invade the Japanese home islands. We were desperate to avoid invading the Japanese home islands, and you know what we did. We dropped two nuclear weapons on Japan. And you know what? You could do that because the Japanese didn't have nuclear weapons of their own and they were not going to retaliate. Well, I have news for you, the Ukrainians don't have nuclear

weapons of their own, and if the Russians use nuclear weapons in Ukraine, Ukraine can't retaliate and we're not going to initiate a general thermonuclear war by using nuclear weapons to defend Ukraine.

So, you can see the potential for nuclear escalation here is real, and given the consequences, the potential of escalation does not have to be very high to scare the living bejesus out of you. So, you want to understand there's a perverse paradox here, which is the more successful we are in waging the war against Ukraine, the more likely it is that they'll turn to nuclear weapons. That's not to say they axiomatically will, it's just to say it becomes a real possibility. So, the story I've told you here, in conclusion, is that during the Cold War we had one conflict dyad, during the unipolar moment we had none, during the multipolar world we now live in there are two potential great power conflicts on the table, and both of them, as I tried to describe, are very dangerous. So, all of you should be very fearful about the world that you live in and even more fearful about the world that we're moving into.

[00:56:53] HELLESTVEIT:

Please. Now, thank you very much to both of you for very disturbing, I must say, presentations. Now, the subject of today's debate is how the geopolitical crises influence the power of deterrence and prospects for a new global security order. But let us start in Europe and then we will zoom out afterwards. And before we venture into this uncertainty of the future and even of the present, let us go to one issue where I know that your analysis and your statements, which you have repeated here, is seen as very provocative in Europe, namely the why of the Russian invasion and the Russian aggressive stance towards Ukraine. And I would invite Carl to have some initial reactions to what John has said.

[00:57:49] BILDT:

And I can do that, but let me start by saying that at least there is one issue where we do agree: We live in a more dangerous time. Power relations are shifting, different competing interests are there, it is less predictable, it is more dangerous. On that we do agree. And there was an element of agreement also on the China analysis. We could go into that further, but on obviously the Ukraine–Russia we do disagree.

[00:58:20] MEARSHEIMER:

Yeah.

[00:58:21] BILD:

To me it's abundantly clear if we read what Mr. Putin said, he was very explicit in his speeches that setting up Ukraine was not only a mistake, it was worse than a mistake, it was unacceptable, it's old Russian land, should never have been allowed by Lenin to set up this Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. And then he said it didn't make much of a difference he said because Stalin ruled it with an iron hand anyhow, but Stalin did a mistake of not taking away the formal structures of Ukraine. And the second mistake was allowing it independence. This is, as he said repeatedly, ancient Russian land. There's no question, he wants to get rid of Ukraine. I don't think he wants to create the Soviet Union, his ideal is sort of Ivan the Terrible, it is Peter the Great, it is Katherine II, that's his Russia, and he wants to recreate that. It's not only Ukraine, it is undoubtedly Belarus as well.

So his intention is abundantly clear in the speeches that he gave immediately before and immediately after the invasion. Then John said that he didn't have the resources to do it. That's fairly obvious by now, agreed, but we should be aware of the fact that when he attacked on February 24th he attacked with 90 percent of the combat potential of Russian army, 90 percent. And he attacked from the north in order to get Kiev, biggest city, from the West to get Kharkiv, second biggest city, from the south to get Odesa, the third biggest city. He attacked with missiles every single major center across the territory of Ukraine. It was not some sort of Sunday expedition by some Russians forces who would get lost in the woods. It was an all-out invasion. It's failed due to the fact that the Russian army was less competent than he thought, and as a matter of fact substantially less competent than most of us thought, because even the Western intelligence agencies who said he's likely to invade thought that he was going to finish the job in a week. He believed that as well. We know a fair amount of his political preparations, he believed he could do it in one or two weeks. The Ukrainians proved otherwise.

But then on the background, John, I can understand that, nothing wrong with Chicago but that's where you're coming from, so your perspective tends to be the Americans all over the place and Europeans and others not really to that extent. It wasn't really, and I've written a book about it, I was there, it wasn't really the Americans pushing. We Europeans went to Washington to say you have to care about Europe as well, not only be obsessed by China. If there were anyone pushing, Poles pushed in order to become members of NATO, the Ukrainians were knocking on our door all the time, we want a closer relationship with European Union, we want to be part of the West. It wasn't the West going

East, it was the East wanted to go West in order to get more of the security and the prosperity that they rightly or wrongly associate with the European Union and indeed NATO. And the Americans were fairly reluctant in the beginning. If you take the entire crisis that led up to the first invasion, first the Crimea one and then the Novorossiya ones in 2014, the Americans were fairly absent from the scene, they were fairly absent from the scene because they were engaged in other things. It was the Ukrainians pushing, and rightly so in my opinion. Then finally (just) [0:49:56] the Russians consider it an existential threat, Ukraine. Why on earth would they consider it an existential threat? I mean that's pure fantasyland. I wouldn't deny that there are Mr. Patrushev and others, but we should take them out of that. If they consider their neighbors to be existential threats, there are going to be the one invasion after the other. There's no way that Ukraine is going to invade Russia. No one has ever thought in those particular terms. You said that Americans live peacefully, Canadians are not going to invade, the Mexicans are not going to invade, you live in peace, there's no reason whatsoever why Russia and Ukraine should not be able to live in peace if just Russia gives up its imperial ambition.

[01:03:02] HELLESTVEIT: What is your answer to this, John, how would you respond? Where are the smaller European states that sought protection from NATO and the EU once they had the opportunity when Russia was weak in the early 2000s, late 1990s, where are they in your analysis? Wasn't this also-

[01:03:23] MEARSHEIMER: I'll answer your question but I also want to deal with some of the points that Carl made. There's no question that states in Eastern Europe that were outside NATO wanted in. I don't blame Ukraine for wanting in. My point is we don't have to accept them, there's no rule that says just because somebody wants to be in NATO that we have an open-door policy and we take them in.

[01:03:51] BILDT: And you didn't with Ukraine.

[01:03:53] MEARSHEIMER: I actually don't believe that at all. We have actually doubled down.

[01:04:00] BILDT: They are not members of Ukraine [sic] and no one has..

[01:04:04] MEARSHEIMER: You have to let me answer the question.

[01:04:05] BILDT: Yes, sorry, sorry. Sorry.

[01:04:09] MEARSHEIMER: You raised a lot of excellent points and I want to deal with them. I think that if it's clear that the Russians view Ukraine in NATO as an existential threat you should not admit Ukraine to NATO or push to admit Ukraine to NATO, because the end result is what you have today. We in effect pursued a policy that is leading to the destruction of Ukraine. If we had not attempted to make Ukraine a Western bulwark on Russia's border with NATO expansion, EU expansions and the Color Revolution, but especially NATO expansion, there'd be in all likelihood no war in Ukraine today, Crimea would still be part of Ukraine, and certainly those four oblasts that the Russians annexed would be part of Ukraine.

But I just want to go back to couple points that Carl raised. First of all, I'd gone over in great detail every one of Putin's speeches, press conferences and his writings, and your argument that he was bent on incorporating Ukraine into Russia is usually said to be outlined in a famous article that he wrote on July 12th 2021. You can easily find this article on the internet. And he did say many of the things that Carl said about how it was regrettable how Lenin set up the Soviet Union and so forth and so on. He does not say in that paper that he is interested in conquering Ukraine, that it's desirable to conquer Ukraine or that's what he intends to do. In fact if you go look at the article, and this article that almost everybody points to, you should go read it, he says that he recognizes Ukrainian nationalism, he says that he recognizes Ukrainian independence and he says that the future of Ukraine is up to the Ukrainian people. That's what he says in the article that everybody points to as the key piece of evidence that he was out to conquer Ukraine. As I said to you before, I can find no evidence that he thought he could conquer Ukraine.

Just a word or two about capabilities, he had 190,000 troops, it was almost all of his army as Carl pointed out. You're not going to conquer a piece of real estate as large as Ukraine with an army that small. And he might've dropped bombs on western Ukraine but you can't conquer and occupy a country with bombs, you need ground forces to do that. He didn't have the ground forces, he never even attempted to conquer one half of the country. At most he attempted to conquer one third of the

country. He just didn't have the capability. This was not the Wehrmacht. Even with regard to Kiev, he could not have conquered Kiev with the forces that he had, it was just too small an army. He wanted to threaten Kiev but he couldn't conquer it. Now just one final point and then I'll turn it back to you Cecilie, Carl said that if you look at what happened over the past few decades it's a case of the East moving West and not the West moving East. I don't know how you could make that argument with NATO expansion. Of course it's the West moving East. NATO expansion, EU expansion, the Color Revolutions, where were the Russians moving westward? The Russians weren't capable of launching a military offensive in the 1990s, they were so weak, and then Putin comes to power in 2000 and over time and he resurrects the Russians, he brings them back from the dead, but they don't have the military capability to go on the offensive. As you know, in the August 2008 military campaign in Georgia the Russian army performed terribly. They just don't have the military capability, there's no evidence that the East is moving West, it's the West that's moving East. And this is what presents an existential threat to the Russians.

[01:08:46] HELLESTVEIT: But what about if you go back to 2007, that is when Putin in his speech in Munich announced that in his view the multipolar world was already arriving. Now in your presentation you said 2017, that is ten years later, so isn't it a possibility that Putin from that moment on has that in mind as he goes forward from 2008 and then interprets things..

[01:09:15] MEARSHEIMER: No, the famous Munich-

[01:09:16] HELLESTVEIT: ..differently?

[01:09:17] MEARSHEIMER: The famous Munich speech in 2007 that Cecilie is referencing is where Putin first makes it manifestly clear that he is angry at the West for their policies, which he thinks do not take into account Russian interest. But he does not indicate that he's going to rectify this problem by going on the offensive and attacking any country in the world. What sets off the real trouble is the April 2008 decision at Bucharest, this is the NATO summit at Bucharest, April 2008, where NATO says at the end of that summit that Georgia and Ukraine will become part of NATO. It's no accident, ladies and gentlemen, that in August 2008 you had a war in Georgia and then starting on February 22nd 2014 conflict broke out in Ukraine. That's what was driving the train here. And by the way, just one

final point before I turn it to Carl, Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy were adamantly opposed to bringing Ukraine into NATO at the April 2008 Bucharest summit, and Angela Merkel has recently said that the reason she opposed bringing Ukraine into NATO is that she understood, listen to these words, she understood that Putin would interpret it as a declaration of war against Russia. That's in April 2008, but what did the Americans do? The Americans steamrolled her and they steamrolled Sarkozy and they kept pushing and pushing and pushing, and it all blew up in their face on February 24th of this year.

[01:10:16] HELLESTVEIT: Your reaction to this?

[01:10:19] BILDT: Pure fantasy. I can agree with you John that the Bucharest meeting was fairly muddled. There were the then president of Ukraine, the then president of Georgia wanted in, and most people said no. And then as a compromise they had that particular language. But they refused them even a membership action plan, and you need unanimity in NATO. And since then there's not been a single NATO meeting where there's been a serious discussion about membership.

And even I would say, even a half-dead second secretary of Russian embassy in any NATO country would be able to report back that that was off the table for the foreseeable future, off the table for the foreseeable future. What caused the big problem in 2013 and 2014, and I was there, was the fact that Ukraine wanted to have a free trade agreement with the European Union, and it was the Ukrainians who wanted it, they were knocking on the EU door time after time after time. Not everyone in the EU was enthusiastic, but evidently that was given, and then Putin said this is utterly unacceptable, forced President Yanukovich with a bunch of brutal means to go back on that. That caused the people of Ukraine to go the square in Maidan, waving, they didn't wave American flags, sorry to say, they waved the EU flags on the Maidan and say we want to be part of this. And why? Not because they were anti-Russian, that was not an issue at the moment, they saw the success of Poland for example having done the democratic reforms and having done the economic reforms and having a substantially better economic and social and political development than Ukraine had. No question, they wanted to go the same way.

And Ukraine happens and that's fairly important to understand, Ukraine is a democracy, they have elections, they express their will to go in this particular case West. On going West and East, it's not moving geography, I agree with that. Geography doesn't move, but in political terms they wanted to go West. Poland wanted to go West into NATO, Ukraine wanted to go West into the EU as the Baltic states did. They wanted to go away from the East, which they associated with authoritarian and failed and repressive regimes in Russia. And that I think, and there I can agree with you.. I think Putin does see that as an existential threat. I think he does see a successful democratic big Ukraine as an existential threat, not to Russia, but to the sort of Russian regime that he represents. And he's been abundantly clear in saying that what is called Color Revolutions, people waving European flags, people waving flags of others, people wanting democracy, people wanting to be able to elect their governments, he's been abundantly clear that he sees that's an existential threat to his Russian regime. In that particular sense he's right.

[01:14:32] MEARSHEIMER:

Let me make two sets of responses to what Carl said. He makes the argument which many people make that there was really no chance that Ukraine would become part of NATO and that we have sort of given up on that. I believe that's simply not true. And in June of 2021 NATO's conference was held at Brussels, and in an official statement released by NATO they said that they were reinvigorating their commitment to bring Ukraine into NATO. On November 10th 2021 the United States and Ukraine issued a white paper laying out the strategic relationship between the United States and Ukraine where we made it unequivocally clear we were committed to bringing Ukraine into NATO. Furthermore, we were arming and training the Ukrainians so that they were effectively becoming a de facto member of NATO. Many people wonder why the Ukrainians have done so well against the Russians on the battlefield, and they say it's because the Russians are incompetent, period, end of story. That's half of the story, the other half is that the Ukrainians were a formidable fighting force and they were a formidable fighting force because we were training 10,000 Ukrainian troops per year from 2014 to 2024. And we were arming the Ukrainians. President Zelenskyy and his defense minister today refer to Ukraine as a de facto member of NATO. It was becoming a de facto member of NATO in fact, and then in principle we remain committed to bringing it into the alliance. Now, just-, okay, go ahead.

[01:16:45] HELLESTVEIT:

[laughs]

[01:16:46] MEARSHEIMER: No, I just, let me make one quick point, just on another issue that Carl raised. Carl raised the point that the Russians viewed Ukraine becoming a liberal democracy as a serious threat and you said you agreed with me on that. The point I want to make is that NATO, mainly the United States, was pursuing a three-pronged strategy, I tried to make that clear in my formal presentation, NATO expansion, EU expansion and turning Ukraine into a liberal democracy. So it's important to understand that that third strand that Carl was talking about where he and I agree, that third strand is inextricably linked to the second strand and the first strand in the minds of the Russians. So when he --. Go ahead.

[01:17:42] BILDT: In the mind of Putin. Don't say that Putin and the Russians are necessarily the same things. I've been involved with Russia intensely since the early '90s, I made a lot of friends, I worked very closely together with two Russian foreign ministers I still consider my friends and one of them I'm still in contact with, and in the Balkans we worked constructively with them.

I have to say that all of my friends from those years are either dead, killed, murdered, imprisoned or outside of Russia, but those were Russians that wanted the same thing as the Ukrainians, they wanted a constitutional government in their country, they wanted decent living standards, they wanted free speech, they wanted some sort of democracy, might not have been Swedish standards. But Putin has a security regime that is different and he has faced demonstrations in Russia that he fights with violence after he returned to power, and he's seen Color Revolutions as a threat against his regime. That's why I'm saying in that particular respect he's right. He considers the Color Revolutions, democracy in other parts of the former Soviet Union as a threat to his regime. But that to be precise is not something invented by me or by American politicians, that is demands coming from the people in these countries themselves, democracy it's called.

[01:19:17] HELLESTVEIT: Can I --.

[01:19:17] MEARSHEIMER: But Carl, let me, I just --.

[01:19:19] BILDT: Yeah, yeah.

[01:19:19] MEARSHEIMER: Can I just quick go back, I just wanted, I hope you don't mind us going back forth but-

[01:20:21] HELLESTVEIT: That's good, okay.

[01:19:25] MEARSHEIMER: I mean this..

[01:19:25] HELLESTVEIT: Go ahead, go ahead.

[01:19:25] MEARSHEIMER: ..fits together neatly. I think that if we talk about Russian elites, regarding the issue that we're talking about tonight, the question is how do the Russian elites think about bringing Ukraine into NATO. And you might think from listening to Carl talk that there's disagreement among the Russian elites. I do not believe that's the case. And Bill Burns who is now the head of the CIA, he's now the head of the CIA, and he was the US ambassador to Moscow at the time of the Bucharest NATO summit in April 2008, wrote a famous memo to Condoleezza Rice where he said for the entire Russian elite, not just Putin, Ukraine in NATO is the brightest of red lines. He said I've talked to all of the knuckle-draggers in the depths of the Kremlin, and he said I've talked to Putin's most ardent liberal critics and they all agree to a person that Ukraine in NATO is unacceptable. So on that particular issue, which is the issue on the table this evening, there is unanimity. This is why Carl I would say that if Putin is overthrown you're not going to get somebody in there who is interested in cutting a deal and living with Ukraine in NATO, you'll get somebody who's probably more hawkish than Ukraine or at least as hawkish.

[01:21:09] HELLESTVEIT: But where is the Ukrainian people in your analysis? Because the Ukrainian population in 2014 was divided on the issue, but as a result of what has happened in Ukraine over the past eight years, more and more Ukrainians, also Russian-speaking Ukrainians, are kind of rallying around Kiev. And from February of this year when the invasion took place, a number of powerful Ukrainians who have been more likely to support Moscow rallied around the flag. How do you explain that?

[01:21:50] MEARSHEIMER: Well, anytime a foreign country invades your country you're going to have a rally around the flag effect. Nationalism is going to kick in big

time. I think there's no question that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has fueled Ukrainian nationalism and it has brought the Ukrainian people together. I wouldn't deny that for one second.

[01:22:13] HELLESTVEIT: But didn't Putin take that into account?

[01:21:14] MEARSHEIMER: Yes, I'm sure he did.

[01:21:15] HELLESTVEIT: How?

[01:21:18] MEARSHEIMER: Look, Putin felt for certain that he was in a desperate situation. Invading Ukraine is a matter of huge consequence, you just don't do that lightly. You have to feel that there is a serious security threat, because you might not know to what extent the United States and its European allies are going to come into the fight, but you know the United States is likely to come into the fight. You know how powerful the United States is. Putin was fully aware, you can document this, that the Ukrainians were being armed and trained by the West and were reasonably formidable, so for him to do that he had to be desperate. This is my point about using nuclear weapons, you do not want to underestimate the risk that great powers are willing to take when they are desperate. And I believe that his attack against Ukraine on February 24th was an act of desperation. It was not an attempt to create a Russian empire.

[01:23:22] HELLESTVEIT: Because, in an interview in The New Yorker in February, you said that in your view Putin was not going to try to build a greater Russia, he was not interested in conquering and integrating Ukraine into Russia, you suggested that we invented the story that Putin is aggressive and responsible for the situation. Now then in November you said Putin's goals have escalated since the war started on February 24th and he's now interested in conquering territory by annexing four oblasts in the east. Now, most analysts believe the opposite is the case, that Putin's goals were much more ambitious at the outset of the war but he failed time and time again, the Ukrainian pushback took the Russians by surprise, the closing of ranks in Europe and NATO has been unprecedented since 2001, and how do you explain that a war has gone so badly for Russia has led Putin to escalate his goals?

[01:24:18] MEARSHEIMER: Look, there's no question that when a war breaks out, and I could walk you through some of the big wars of history, that you get escalation in terms of goals and you get escalation in terms of the means or the strategies or the weaponry that's used. You could get nuclear escalation, you get an escalation now where the Russians are attacking the electrical grid in Ukraine, so there has been significant escalation in terms of means and there has been significant escalation in terms of Russian goals. The question on the table that we have been debating up to now is what were Russian goals before the war, and as I'm arguing throughout the evening, there is no evidence that the Russians were bent on conquering territory. The Russians went to great lengths to make the Minsk II framework work, because the Russians did not want the Donbas, they want a Minsk II solution. It's when the Minsk II solution clearly had failed by February of this year that he invaded.

[01:25:36] HELLESTVEIT: Do you have any comments to that? Or--.

[01:25:36] BILDT: No, go back slightly in history, because it's not entirely uninteresting, the history, we do agree with that. When the entire crisis started in (the most) [1:13:32] acute phase, 2013, 2014, Ukraine had neutrality in its constitution, because they recognized in 2008 that NATO was not going to happen. Neutrality was part of their constitution. When Putin invaded and took first Crimea and then to take all of the southeast, Novorossiya as he called it, and eventually was forced to send in the Russian (regular) army in order to secure parts of Donbas, neutrality was in the constitution of Ukraine.

[01:26:23] MEARSHEIMER: We should've recognized it.

[01:25:24] BILDT: But why should we recognize it? It was in their constitution. And I remember, I saw Zelenskyy for the first time before he was elected president, in the beginning of his presidential campaign, asked him about NATO and he said it's not an issue, I'm not going to mention it, it's not an issue. It wasn't part of his platform even. And immediately after becoming president he reached out to Russia. He's a Russian speaker, he's a Jew who Putin has now described as neo-Nazi and drug addict, so the history is sort of, and you said we armed them, we didn't arm them. We did training, correct, we did, even Sweden did training. We trained the army in medical things, primarily for different peacekeeping operations, they were part of UN peacekeeping operations and we

helped them for training with that. We did not provide them with any arms. Obama refused that consistently, Merkel refused it consistently. Trump eventually did give them some anti-tank Javelin missiles, anti-tank missiles, and to be precise he stored them in the west of the country, they were not even allowed to give them to the soldiers, they were stored in the west of the country, not even given to the soldiers, anti-tank missiles. How on earth could it be an existential threat to the second biggest army in the world that the Russians had.

So if we go to this, there's nothing in this particular story. And the entire NATO expansion, just to go into the military aspect of it, if we deal with the NATO thing, up to 2004 was the expansion, Poland and those countries, long time ago by now, but there was no NATO infrastructure, there was no troops whatsoever moving East. Nothing, nothing, nothing, with the exception of two fighter aircraft at the Baltic states doing air policing as a reaction to 9/11. It was only, and as a matter of fact, 2000, and all of the countries were taking down their defense expenditure in the West. 2013 the Americans took away their last, their very last battle tank from Europe. We were all going down, we were doing nothing whatsoever. Then came Crimea. Then came his pressure on Ukraine. Then came Novorossiia. Then came the invasions of 2014. Then NATO started to give forces to the countries in the East, because they said we are afraid, we don't know what the man is up to. But prior to that neutrality was in the constitution of Ukraine and there were no NATO forces whatsoever in the new member states since 2004. So where is the existential threat? There was no one there who was going to invade and take down the Kremlin.

[01:29:21] MEARSHEIMER: Well, it doesn't have to be an existential threat today. Bringing Ukraine into NATO could be a steppingstone to bringing NATO forces--.

[01:29:30] BILDT: Yeah, but you said that Putin was desperate when launched the invasion, desperate about what? It was not, I mean, diplomatic reporting in newspapers, there were no one talking about anything whatsoever, except the fact that the Donbas issue was unresolved. 14,000 people died, we should not forget that, in the fighting in Donbas. But it was no threat to Russia in February of this year, none whatsoever. There's no justification whatsoever for the invasion.

[01:30:02] MEARSHEIMER: Look, you're talking about bringing a military alliance that was military foe, it was foe of the Soviet Union, and you're taking that military alliance and bringing it up to Russia's doorstep.

[01:30:20] BILDT: I'm sorry John, but I think you and Putin are the only ones in the world who believe that NATO was going to allow Ukraine in February of this year. There's no one else.

[01:30:33] MEARSHEIMER: That it was going to allow --.

[01:30:34] HELLESTVEIT: But how can you argue --.

[01:30:35] BILDT: Allow Ukraine to be a member or NATO, it was not on the table.

[01:30:30] MEARSHEIMER: It was on the table, it was becoming a de facto member of NATO and we had redoubled our commitment to bringing it into NATO.

[01:30:48] BILDT: We had no forces there, they were not --.

[01:30:50] MEARSHEIMER: You don't need forces there, we --.

[01:30:51] HELLESTVEIT: But John --.

[01:30:51] MEARSHEIMER: -- didn't have forces in Poland and we brought Poland into NATO.

[01:30:55] HELLESTVEIT: John --.

[01:30:55] BILDT: And now Finland is going into NATO, Estonia has been a member, Norway is a member of NATO.

[01:31:00] MEARSHEIMER: I don't dispute that --

[01:31:01] HELLESTVEIT: The situation has changed.

[01:31:01] MEARSHEIMER: -- but what is that going to do to the Russians, that's just going to scare the Russians even more.

[01:31:04] BILDT: No but it is --.

[01:31:06] HELLESTVEIT: One final question, okay?

[01:31:07] BILDT: It is not a threat to Russia, and Nor-

[01:31:08] HELLESTVEIT: Carl and John.

[01:31:10] BILDT: Sorry, yeah.

[01:31:12] HELLESTVEIT: Now I cut. Now one final question, because in 2008 when Putin went to the Bucharest meeting and said this is a red line, the situation was far away from the Cold War, at the time Russian ships were participating in a NATO operation in the Mediterranean, there was no threat comparable to that during the Cold War.

Now, I want to bring us up to now and I want both of you to answer to this but I want to start with you Carl, because for Europe February of this year was a watershed in terms of how related to Ukraine and to Russia. Up until that point dialogue had kind of been the name of the game to bring the troubles in Ukraine to a halt and even after 2014 Germany and France participated in the Minsk Agreement to bring the conflict to a halt through diplomatic negotiations, but now we are in a very different situation in Europe. Many European countries, including Norway and Sweden, are outright declining the prospects of negotiating with Russia, particularly after the annexation of the four oblasts the new European mantra seems to be the battlefield must first exhaust its potential.

Now what does this say about the prospects for getting this war to some type of halt? And you said so in your intervention that there are two principles for European security today: First, aggression will never be tolerated, second, borders must be respected, they cannot be altered by force. Now you are saying that we will not negotiate, nobody will negotiate in Europe or allow negotiations before Ukrainian territory has

been reconquered. Is this what you are saying or what other type of precedent can Europe accept, because this will set a precedent for security in Europe for decades to come?

[01:31:21] BILDT:

It certainly will, and it's of course not for Norway or Sweden to negotiate with Russia. Any sort of peace, if that was to come, will have to be between Ukraine and Russia, so it's up to the Ukrainians to define. Borders can be changed, I said borders can't be changed by force. They can be changed with agreement, but Ukrainians are very determined to keep their territory. That's not entirely unique if we go in European history. There are very few nations that are prepared to give away their territory to someone else who is invading them. They fight for their freedom, and I think the Ukrainians will fight for their freedom. And we will support them and why do we support them? Well, we support them because, first, Russia is an aggressor and secondly because of these principles are at stake. If we allow Russia to change borders by force and by aggression against Ukraine, we don't know what's going to be continuation. I don't think necessarily they're going to invade Sweden tomorrow, but the fact that the Finns the day after more or less, the day after February 24th every single Finn thought about one thing, 1939, when Stalin attacked, and they said we can no longer be safe without going into NATO. So, I agree with you and I think we agree on that, prospects for peace are at the moment fairly bleak, it will be decided on the battlefield, at some point in time diplomacy will come. But I will certainly give my support to Ukraine fighting for its freedom and independence.

[01:35:09] HELLESTVEIT:

Does this look different in the countries that are closer to the Russian border --

[01:35:14] BILDT:

It does.

[01:35:14] HELLESTVEIT:

-- than for the countries that are further away from the Russian border?

[01:35:18] BILDT:

It does, obviously. Obviously. Go to Tallinn, go to Riga, go to Warsaw, go to Vilnius, rightly or wrongly, go to Chisinau, which has now lost all of its electricity because of Russian bombing. Rightly or wrongly they believe they are next. That might be wrong, but they believe they are next.

[01:35:41] MEARSHEIMER: I think you have to be careful though, 'cause of the case of Hungary. If you would look at Hungary and Poland they have fundamentally different views of how to deal with Russia.

[01:35:49] BILDT: They do.

[01:35:49] MEARSHEIMER: And Hungary shares a border with Ukraine, as does Poland.

[01:35:53] BILDT: Yeah, but not with Russia.

[01:35:54] HELLESTVEIT: And how do you explain that difference?

[01:35:56] BILDT: That's an historical --.

[01:36:00] MEARSHEIMER: Yeah, I think that the Poles have a hatred of the Russians that almost knows no bounds and sees the Russians, Poles tend to see the Russians as the font of all evil. I think the Hungarians have a more circumspect view of the Russian threat.

[01:36:21] HELLESTVEIT: So you look then at historical animosity as coming into the equation?

[01:36:26] MEARSHEIMER: Yeah, I think we would agree that the Baltic states and Poland, given the history --.

[01:36:31] HELLESTVEIT: But isn't this the problem of Europe, because what Putin did in February of this year was basically to say that the institutions that the Europeans have built since the Second World War and particularly after 2000 or 1990 and that you have been contributing to vastly was the objective of having institutions in Europe that would prevent war between nations in Europe from ever returning again, and at the same time have economic cooperation, for instance buying every possible drop of gas from Russia that was possible, so that Russia would not even think about importing the use of military invasion as a way of pressuring the situation in Europe. Now, these means did not work to prevent Putin from invading Ukraine. What now for Europe?

[01:37:31] BILDT:

True, we built the Helsinki principles, the Paris charter to go back, Helsinki principles, OSCE, we have ongoing as we speak in Lodz in Poland a ministerial meeting of the OSCE, (Lavrov) [1:25:30] of Russians are no longer there because they have violated every single part of what is agreed in the OSCE, so they are no longer allowed into that. That's a massive failure. Highly regrettable. I spent a lot of my time as foreign minister and prior to that, even as prime minister, trying to engage Russia in cooperation, and we did fairly well for a while. We did fairly well for a while. But things went wrong at some point in time and I date it from the return of, it was problematic before, I mean there has always been problems, it happens, but I date it really from the return of Putin on his third term. We see a distinct shift of policy when he tried to build up something that was entirely new and when he tried to squeeze Ukraine into something, and then he's went from one disaster to the other. And I think quite certain that Putin will go down in Russian history as a disaster who has created immense damage to Russia itself by misreading, misunderstanding and mishandling the most important neighbor that Russia could've had, that is Ukraine.

[01:39:01] HELLESTVEIT:

How do you react to this?

[01:39:02] MEARSHEIMER:

I want to pick up on the question that you asked Carl and your story of what NATO and the West was up to. My argument, which is consistent with what Cecilie said, is that up until the crisis in Ukraine broke out in 2014, NATO expansion and EU expansion and the Color Revolutions, three-pronged strategy, was not designed to contain Russia. Russia was not seen as a threat. It was designed to turn Eastern Europe into a giant zone of peace. It was designed to take those institutions that had done so much to create peace in the West of Europe and move them eastward. The idea of bringing Ukraine into NATO in 2008 was not designed to poke the Russians in the eye or to contain the Russians. You might not believe this but Vladimir Putin was invited to the April 2008 Bucharest conference. He was not seen as an imperialist up until February 22nd 2014, and that's why I said once the crisis broke out we had to invent a story that he was an imperialist. He took power in 2000, Putin, from 2000 to 2014, according to my higher math that's 14 years, over those 14 years nobody was arguing he was an imperialist. He all of a sudden overnight became an imperialist after February 22nd because we had to blame him for the crisis, we couldn't admit that we caused it. But you see, we caused it, it's the hell of good intentions. I believe that you and your friends had good intentions, you thought that by spreading these institutions eastward you would create a giant zone of

peace in Europe, but it backfired, and it backfired over Ukraine because as Bill Burns said Ukraine was the brightest of bright red lines.

[01:41:23] HELLESTVEIT:

We are not going to get into the bottom of the “why”. The question now is what will happen to Europe going forward, because the type of deterrent that we thought was going to prevent the return of war, institutional building and economic cooperation, did not prevent Russia from going to war. In fact, when we have constructed the institutions in Europe after the Second World War we have constructed institutions precisely for the objective of preventing states from invading neighboring states with the argument that there is minority across the border that we need to protect, which is exactly what Germany did in 1939 and what by the way is exactly the argument that Putin also used in February of this year. After that Russia has withdrawn or been excluded from a number of the organizations that we have in Europe to prevent further conflict. We are looking for a decoupling in part economically speaking between Russia and Belarus on the one side and the EU and Western Europe on the other. What are going to be the deterrent mechanisms preventing further conflict going forward in Europe?

[01:42:46] BILDT:

That we don't know, but you are correct, they are de facto no longer part of the OSCE, they have de facto left, they have left the Council of Europe, which of course has to do primarily with human rights and democracy, which they are not very much in favor of. They have left a lot of economic cooperation. They cut the gas supply. Mind you, it's not that EU has any sanctions on gas from Russia, as of yet, it is Russia that has cut in order to influence the politics of the European countries. Where do we go in the future? We don't know, but as I said I don't know where Russia's going to be in couple years from now. I don't think Mr. Putin is going to be there. I'm fairly certain he's not going to be there. It could be chaos and conflict in the country. You can see the so-called power vertical that he's been running the country on, I think that will disappear. I think you would have different interests in Russia fighting it out, I think it will be very chaotic. The time of troubles, to take a phrase out of Russian history, will come back. Will there be an even more militaristic regime for a while? Could be, but I don't think it's going to survive very long. Will there be more normal forces asserting themselves, as I said even Alexei Navalny being able to stand in a free and fair elections? I don't think that's the most likely scenario, but I wouldn't exclude that either. Russia is going to face a very, very difficult future, Ukraine even more. But we will help Ukraine to rebuild, hopefully to stabilize its democracy,

hopefully to secure Ukraine, because if we don't secure Ukraine we won't get a secure Europe. And then we can't really influence what's going to happen in Russia very much.

[01:44:30] HELLESTVEIT: How does the US scholar look at this?

[01:44:34] MEARSHEIMER: I would actually like to use my time to ask Carl a question. One thing that strikes me just listening to you talk, and I think it's true of a lot of people who I interact with, is I place a great emphasis on the nuclear threat, I live in fear that this is going to turn into a nuclear war. And my argument is that, as I said in my formal presentation, that the more successful we are, we meaning the West and the Ukrainians, the more likely it is that the Russians will use nuclear weapons. I'm surprised that you don't see that threat, that you don't worry about that. You talk about supporting the Ukrainians and whipping the Russians, and in all conventional world you can think in those terms, but why aren't you scared like I am that this could spin out of control and we could all get vaporized?

[01:45:31] BILDT: No, no, I would be scared of that, I belong to those that gives a somewhat higher percentage of possibility of him in a desperate situation actually using a nuclear device. I don't really doubt it, because I think the man in a certain situation could be extremely desperate. I think that would be the end of the entire thing, I think it would collapse internally Russia if he does that, but that's a separate issue. But I will not give into nuclear blackmail, because if we are to do that and say he's threatening with nuclear weapons, as he does, so we cave in, we give up, then be damn certain he will learn that particular lesson and he will threaten one (or the) [1:33:54] others with nuclear weapons and we will give in. So giving into nuclear blackmail is highly dangerous and we must not do that. We are now trying to, American and European diplomacy is doing that, building as much as a firewall against them using nuclear weapons as we can, engaging the Chinese has been doing in the last few weeks and the Chinese have been fairly good at saying that we shouldn't threaten nuclear weapons in the way that Putin is doing, engaging the Indians and others. Will that help? I don't know. But giving into nuclear blackmail, I wouldn't do that.

[01:46:50] MEARSHEIMER: But the thing is Carl, when you're dealing with a rival great power that has thousands of nuclear weapons, there are limits to how far you can push against that great power. You can't threaten its survival in any way.

[01:47:07] BILDT: No, no.

[01:47:09] MEARSHEIMER: Wouldn't you agree with that?

[01:47:09] BILDT: I do agree with that, but asking --.

[01:47:11] MEARSHEIMER: But you're talking about --.

[01:47:13] BILDT: No, no, but asking Putin to go back and respect the borders of Ukraine is hardly to threaten their survival. It's not that we are threatening to invade Moscow, that's not going to happen, but asking him to go back to February 24th is hardly to threaten the survival of Russia. And if he wants to threaten nuclear weapons, by trying to use nuclear weapons to defend the parts of Ukraine that he has already tried to take over, I wouldn't give into nuclear blackmail because I think that would be extremely dangerous. He would then use nuclear blackmail on the one issue after the other.

[01:47:52] MEARSHEIMER: Okay. So, I don't want to put words in your mouth but basically what you're saying is that you understand that there's a serious risk of nuclear war if we succeed in Ukraine, but you're willing to live with that risk?

[01:47:07] BILDT: No, no, I wouldn't use the word nuclear war, but a nuclear war involves both using nuclear weapons. I think even if Washington hasn't been explicit, but Washington has been very clear that if he sets off a nuke the Americans will not set off a nuke, so we will not get a nuclear war. The response will be there but will not be nuclear. And there are other ways that --.

[01:48:34] MEARSHEIMER: What will the response be? Because many people believe that what will happen is if the Russians use nukes, nuclear weapons, in Ukraine, that as Carl says almost everybody agrees we will not retaliate with nuclear weapons, okay.

[01:48:51] BILDT: Yeah, it's not a nuclear war.

[01:48:52] MEARSHEIMER: But many people believe that we will we do is retaliate with conventional weapons against Russian forces. Then you have a great power war, United States vs. Russia, and Avril Haines who is the director of national intelligence in the United States, she told the Senate Armed Services Committee in the spring of this year that that's the most likely scenario for Putin to use nuclear weapons, because if the Russians can't beat the Ukrainians on the battlefield you can imagine what will happen when they're up against Godzilla, also known as the United States and its allies. So she was hypothesizing, I think quite correctly, that that's the scenario where --.

[01:49:38] BILDT: And that's signaling is what's called deterrence, that the Americans are making clear, rightly so, that if he goes nuclear, things will happen. If the Americans were saying instead that if he uses nuclear weapons we don't really care and we're going to back off, then it would be the end of this particular conflict, then Putin will win and he will continue. So don't give into nuclear blackmail. I think if he uses nuclear weapons the world will turn against him even more decisively. I'm not quite certain that it would be very acceptable in Moscow either, I have to say, I think it might implode the political regime if he does.

[01:50:21] MEARSHEIMER: Yeah, but that's after he's used them.

[01:50:23] HELLESTVEIT: Now I need --.

[01:50:24] BILDT: One.

[01:50:24] HELLESTVEIT: Now if we in one moment expand the perspective beyond Europe and NATO and Russia and China and look at the rest of the world, one of the ways of showing for Russia that Russia is a global power is permanent seat at the UN Security Council, which Russia is using in order to prove that Russia is a global power, and now if Russia were to use nuclear weapons, what will happen to the legitimacy of the Russian set if Russia were to do that? Because the UN Security Council has had one major task over the past 30 years and it is to prevent nuclear proliferation. This is what gathers all the permanent members, the one issue where they can agree. Now if Russia were to use it, it would itself exclude Russia from that club. Wouldn't you say that that would be a major consequence for Russia?

[01:51:28] MEARSHEIMER: It doesn't matter.

[01:51:28] HELLESTVEIT: It doesn't matter?

[01:51:31] MEARSHEIMER: Look, states use nuclear weapons, pursue extreme strategies that involve using nuclear weapons, when they're desperate, when they think they face an existential threat and they're losing. This was my point to Carl, that Carl's advocating a policy that puts the Russians in a position where they're losing and that's a situation where they're likely to use nuclear weapons. It's like the Japanese attacking at Pearl Harbor. If you've never studied this case you should go read about it. The Japanese understood full well that attacking the United States of America in December 1949 [sic] was not a good idea in the sense that the United States had ten times the gross national product of Japan and the United States was capable of building much more formidable military forces and ultimately crushing Japan. Nevertheless the Japanese attacked at Pearl Harbor because we were strangling the Japanese. We had cut off scrap iron in 1940, we had cut off oil in 1941, they were highly dependent on imports of scrap iron and oil from the United States. Their economy was in desperate straits and we just kept squeezing and squeezing. They thought their survival as a great power was at stake, and therefore they were willing to pursue a risky strategy, a highly risky strategy. And the kinds of considerations that you're talking about go out the window in situations like that. It's not that you're wrong that that would happen to the Russians, that they would suffer in terms of how other states perceive them, it would have negative consequences for proliferation, I don't dispute that, my point is that is of minor consideration in a world where you think you're going off the cliff.

[01:53:21] HELLESTVEIT: What do you think, Carl?

[01:53:25] BILDT: Just go back to the beginning of the war and you say Russia perceiving an existential threat and so, I think you saw it as well, probably several times you've seen this sort of meeting of the national security council on February 21st when Putin calls in all of the members of the national security council and asks them what to do, and it was obvious that it wasn't pre-planned that much. And he asked them one after another, he wanted one particular answer, we should grab Donbas, that's the answer he wanted. Most of them tried to avoid giving that answer, he

had to publicly humiliate his head of external intelligence. The man who was responsible for Donbas said explicitly at that particular meeting that he thought the policy was wrong. There was virtually, the prime minister looked like he had wanted to disappear from the meeting all together. It was only couple of them that demonstrated even the vaguest enthusiasm for what they suspected or suddenly saw that Putin was intending to do. This was a decision for war driven by President Putin himself, it wasn't really supported very much by the Russians security elite. I agree with you, there's certainly no enthusiasm in Moscow for NATO expansion into Ukraine, but there was hardly anyone in Moscow who saw that possibility either, but there was even less enthusiasm, even in the ruling circles in Moscow I would argue, for going to war with Ukraine. They were forced into it by Putin, and you can see it's so vividly clear in that particular meeting that we have the transcript of and that we can see on the video. It was a Putin decision driven by, I mean if you read all of his speeches and his historical vision and how he says it was a mistake to set up Ukraine and --

[01:55:29] Audience member: [Interrupts the discussion.]

[01:55:34] BILDT: Är det amerikansk propaganda? Okej. Sorry, it was – a Norwegian. No, it was evident that, sorry, I got lost by a particular intervention by this --.

[01:55:47] MEARSHEIMER: [laughs] He's a planted agent by me.

[01:55:51] BILDT: No, he's a Norwegian agent.

[01:55:52] MEARSHEIMER: [laughs]

[01:55:54] HELLESTVEIT: But the question, we come back to the question of deterrence, what kind of deterrent can we rely on in the present situation and going forward?

[01:56:04] MEARSHEIMER: What are we deterring in your question?

[01:56:06] HELLESTVEIT: We are deterring an escalation to a nuclear war. We are also deterring future war in Europe, because that is not any longer a guarantee that we

have because this happened in February of 2022. Now I think that from a European perspective Putin, this was the sacrilege of Putin because he broke our illusion. You might call it a delusion, but it was the illusion that war between nations would never return to Europe, to the European continent. This has been a part of the European exceptionalism and it is now broken. Where does Europe go from here?

[01:56:50] BILD:

Now what we are doing in terms of the nuclear issue that we are discussing, I mean the signaling from the Americans is very clear, the signaling from the Chinese and the Indians is equally clear now. Will that be enough? We don't know. On other issues how do we seek to deter? Well, Sweden and Finland are joining NATO because we think that will give us more security. That's a conclusion that Norway and Denmark took in the late 1940s. I think Norway is highly likely to also increase defense spending. Norway is increasing its security cooperation with the US. Germany is substantially increasing defense spending, Poland is substantially increasing defense spending. Is this enough? I hope it will be enough because sorry to say, I think what's going to happen here is that we are going to be faced with a fairly weak Russia in the years ahead, because I see Russia that will go into, when they don't win this war, and I don't see them winning this particular war, I will see them going into a prolonged period of deep trouble. But that is a danger in itself. An unstable Russia is not a stable neighbor, so we need to safeguard ourselves, not necessarily against the Russians invading Ireland or the UK or Belgium, but safeguard ourselves against an unpredictable and dangerous regime that has a lot of other evil instruments of power. We've seen them using poisonous gas in European countries to murder opponents. It's a nasty place.

[01:58:33] MEARSHEIMER:

I think that with regard to your question, which is obviously a truly important one, Carl and I think about this very differently, the question of how to create deterrents and prevent nuclear escalation. Let's just go back to 2014 when the crisis breaks out. Crisis breaks out in 2014.

[01:59:58] BILD:

But John, short question, how would you prevent nuclear escalation?

[01:59:02] MEARSHEIMER:

I'm going to answer it, I'm trying to sort of separate myself from you or differentiate between how we think about this to get my hands around this whole issue, 'cause it is a great question and these are complicated issues that don't have simple answers. But so, let's assume it's 2014, the

crisis breaks out as you described it before, the Russians take Crimea. The question is what do you do then. Let's take Cecilie's questions that she just asked and apply them in 2014 after the crisis has broken out. John's view is you back off, it's clear that you're asking for trouble, that you're poking a stick in the bear's eye and that the bear will eventually lash out and you may end up in a nuclear war. I believe and Carl can correct me when I'm done that he would say we should double down, which is what we did, we doubled down. Then in 2021 when Joe Biden came into the White House we began to reinforce our commitment to Ukraine. It caused all sorts of trouble over the course of 2021. You all remember Russia mobilized its army, was threatening on the borders of Ukraine, and then in December, December 17th 2021 the Russians sent a letter to Stoltenberg and to Biden, demanding that Ukraine not become a member of NATO, that military forces be moved back to where they were in 1997 and so forth and so on.

So the question is what do you do then, if you could play this one all over again, it's December 17th 2021. I said at the time and I'd say now that's where we should have backed off and worked out a deal, because otherwise you end up with February 24th. So I think I know what I would have done before February 24th, but backing off now, it's almost impossible for me to imagine us backing off now, because I'm a minority voice, Carl is the majority voice, he's not interested in backing off, he's interested in doubling down. He's interested in winning in Ukraine, throttling the Russian economy with sanctions. Again, I'm a hardcore realist, I'm an offensive realist, I understand being hardnosed in international politics, but I'm more dovish I think than you when you're dealing with a state that has thousands of nuclear weapons.

[02:01:47] HELLESTVEIT: The audience has several questions dealing with what kind of scenarios could be realistic for the war in Ukraine to end. Now, given your distinctive positions, how would you see that, what would be a realistic scenario going forward for the war in Ukraine?

[02:02:05] MEARSHEIMER: I agree with Carl there, when you asked Carl that question in a slightly different form he basically said it's very hard to figure out where this train is headed. I don't know how this one is going to end. I do want to go to great lengths to make sure we don't end up getting incinerated in a nuclear war, but I don't know where it's going to end.

- [02:02:26] HELLESTVEIT: Because what I hear you say also from your intervention is that there is no obvious end to this war because Russia is not going to back down and the Ukrainians with the support from Europeans and the US is also not going to back down.
- [02:02:39] MEARSHEIMER: Right, I said that in my formal remarks.
- [02:02:43] BILDT: Go back to this Russia, Putin, Putin is not going to back down, and that might be a difference. I think there are a fair number of people in Moscow even in senior positions who would be interested in closing this war tomorrow if they could.
- [02:02:56] HELLESTVEIT: Would that include Crimea, withdrawing from Crimea?
- [02:03:01] BILDT: Probably not. So there we will be back to where we were, but prior to February the 24th where we did not have an agreement on Crimea, and I think it's going to take quite some time to get some sort of solution to Crimea. But I think the other issues I would not consider it entirely impossible that at some point in time we get the change that sort of they understand in Moscow that they're heading into something that is going to be dangerous for Russia, not because we are going to invade Moscow, that's not going to happen, but it's going to implode. And they will try to rescue what can be rescued and go for something that might be acceptable. But that will only be possible if we can give, and I think (I talk about) [1:51:37] the post-Putin, it's not going to happen with Putin, and it's also going to depend on us helping to secure and give a new future to Ukraine, because as I said, if we don't get a stable Ukraine we will not get a stable Europe, because then there will be a constant temptation for, I mean if you see some of the loonies that are paraded on Russian television these days, they're truly dangerous loonies parading there that will give temptation to them.
- [02:04:23] HELLESTVEIT: But we do not know where this war will end, we do not know where Russia will end up. What we do know is that there is a movement towards a geopolitical rivalry where you have the US and China, coming back to John's intervention, and the US–Russia. Now where is Europe in all this?

- [02:04:46] BILDT: In the --.
- [02:01:50] HELLESTVEIT: Excuse me, where is Europe in that picture? Because the rivalry is primarily the dyad between the US and China on the one hand and you depict it to be the US and Russia on the other, so it's tripolar dynamic, but where is Europe in that dynamic?
- [02:05:11] BILDT: In that particular dynamic. I mean we are, John mentioned the Taiwan issue as perhaps the most dangerous one, which really is a very different issue because it really [...] resolve the civil war from 1949, and the Chinese want to, or Beijing wants to in some sort of way primarily prevent Taiwan from going independent. They would consider that something completely unacceptable. So we are distinctly in favor of One China principle [...] define it somewhat differently, and we are in favor of a peaceful resolution to it and we are distinctly against trying to resolve that by military means. Then Europe is not a military power in that part of the world, we are trading power, we are diplomatic power, but we are not a military power in that part of the world.
- [02:05:59] MEARSHEIMER: Yeah, I think the United States is deeply committed to containing if not rolling back Chinese power. And that containment strategy has two dimensions to it. One is a military dimension and the other is an economic dimension. And in terms of the military dimension the Europeans are going to play hardly any role at all, I think we agree on that. Where the Europeans are going to matter is on the economic front, and this is a very tricky issue and there are of course now lots of articles in the media on this subject, but the Europeans are going to want to trade extensively with China. This is especially true given the negative economic consequence of the Ukraine war. And it's no accident that early last month the German chancellor went to Beijing and there was all sorts of evidence the Europeans are thinking about trading more and more with China. And of course the Europeans because they have these sophisticated economies with all these sophisticated technologies will trade technologies with the Chinese, which will enrage the Americans. The Americans are going to want the Europeans to help Washington throttle the Chinese economy. You are not going to have any interest in throttling the Chinese economy. You're going to have an interest in enhancing your prosperity, facilitating economic growth, and that means more trade with Europe. So I think there is a potential for significant tension between the United States and Europe over the whole issue of trade between Europe and China.

- [02:07:53] HELLESTVEIT: Now is this not the challenge because we have no good deterrent to prevent war and instability in a more multipolar world and that means that we are moving over to more hybrid measures, now the new US defense strategy talks about integrated deterrents, which is not only military but which is also integrating all other kinds of domains, all the military domains but also sanctions and a number of other institutional measures. Now how does this look from the perspective of Europe? Is the EU ready for the world?
- [02:08:34] BILDT: I think to some extent Europe is more ready than the Americans are, in the sense that I said EU is very much a hybrid power. If you talk about all of the different elements of hybrid warfare, they are elements (where they're) [1:56:31] instruments in the hands of the European Union. We are not a military power, we don't have any armored divisions at all, but we coordinate cyber policies, we coordinate trade policies, we coordinate migration policies to a certain extent, not always a smashing success it has to be said. We coordinate security, domestic security affairs, that sort of thing that is necessary in order to meet hybrid threats. We have I think more instruments than the Americans have, for obvious reasons, because the US continent has not been fa-, as you said, you live in peace with the Canadians and the Mexicans, while we have been exposed to these sorts of hybrid things, and accordingly have more instruments.
- [02:09:33] HELLESTVEIT: So you think that Europe is well equipped for what is coming?
- [02:09:36] BILDT: I wouldn't say well equipped, but we are better equipped and we are equipping ourselves, that I would argue.
- [02:09:42] MEARSHEIMER: But what do you think of my argument that the Europeans are going to trade with the Chinese in ways that's going to anger the Americans?
- [02:09:53] BILDT: I mean we're going to trade with the Chinese, we do it, also the Americans do, American exports --.
- [02:09:59] MEARSHEIMER: Yes, but you know what I'm saying here, high technology --.

[02:10:01] BILDT: Yeah, yeah. On high tech there's an element of tension sometimes. We had these chip restrictions that came in the beginning of October that affects a couple of European companies that are less happy. There will be talks as a matter of fact on Tuesday in Washington in the Trade and Technology Council, see if we can sort out these issues. Yeah, yeah, we have a trade relationship across the Atlantic that is not without its tensions.

[02:10:27] MEARSHEIMER: Growing tensions.

[02:10:29] BILDT: At the moment growing tensions due to certain protectionist tendencies in American politics, but we normally sort them out. The relationship across the Atlantic, we are allies, whatever that means, but that doesn't mean that we are a hundred percent of the same view all the time, never been the case, not now either. And of course, the difference, I would say the fundamental difference between the European view and the American view on China is that for the US, correct me if you think I'm exaggerating, but for the US it's the fear of what I call 1870. 1870 was when US replaced Britain as the dominating power in the world in terms of economy, and there were consequences coming out of that. And the Americans of course fear that an increasingly economically powerful China will over time replace US as the dominant power in the world. I think that's grossly exaggerated, I don't think it will happen, but there's no question that that is driving a lot of the fears in American politics.

[02:11:39] MEARSHEIMER: Yeah. But you know, I think that you are right that that is the great fear, that the Chinese will overtake us, the United States, and I also agree that it is probably greatly exaggerated, but this gets to my earlier point that you never want to underestimate the extent to which great powers assume worst case assumptions or make worst case assumptions about the other side. So, when you bring NATO up to Russia's borders, even if there are no military forces, American military forces on Ukraine's territory, and even if it's going to take a long time for Ukraine to become a member of NATO, from a Russian point of view they assume worst case and they get really scared, because it's a security issue. And the same thing is true with the Americans looking at China. The Americans are scared stiff, as you pointed out, that China is going to overtake them. And great powers are just, they get very nervous, they get very antsy and then they pursue risky strategies. That's the point I've tried to drive home here.

[02:12:54] BILDT: But I mean – not quite the same thing but Norway has a border with Russia, which is very close to Murmansk, which is their densest concentration of nuclear military power, that's been fairly okay since the 1940s. I don't think the Russians were particularly happy about Norway joining NATO, they were not, but it's worked. Estonia is a member of NATO, that is very close to St. Petersburg. The border city of Narva is closer to St. Petersburg than to Tallinn, they live fairly harmoniously together. That is not a threat. It works.

[02:13:33] HELLESTVEIT: But don't you see geopolitics leading to an escalation of tensions in the Arctic and in the north? Doesn't the fact that the Cold War was a bipolar situation that was relatively stable? We are now in a situation that is fairly unstable because we do not know exactly where we are heading and we have major states that are uncertain about the capabilities and the intentions of the others, and that brings us into a very dangerous territory.

[02:14:05] BILDT: It does, but the Arctic is essentially another thing and that is of course the fact that the ice receding, and that means that for example now if you want to go north of Siberia you can't go without the help of the Russians, simply not doable. 20–30 years down the road, 40–50 years down the road you might have a lot of commercial traffic going to the north of Siberia and that will invite a lot of legal and political issues, be that rivalry, be that something else, I don't think war is going to break out in the Arctic but we are going to face a number of new questions, primarily as a result of climate change I would argue.

[02:14:46] HELLESTVEIT: But that is also more urgent because we have climate cooperation among the major nations. How does the geopolitical rivalry influence our ability to move forward on climate? If you look at what has happened over the past ten months it isn't very optimistic, would you say?

[02:15:04] BILDT: No, I wouldn't. Although Russia was never a big player on global climate. They should've been because they're going to be profoundly affected by it and has taken them a long time to understand that that's going to be the case. China was the big one, India to a certain extent. We have I think it's 27 or 28 percent of global emissions are from China, and even if they are leaders in a lot of the renewables and other things now, they're also the leaders in coal emissions, which is the most dangerous thing. So,

one of the good things that came out of the meeting between Biden and Xi Jinping in Bali was that they restarted the climate dialogue. And the president of the European Council is in Beijing today in order to discuss primarily restarting the climate dialogue with the Chinese. Russia, different thing.

[02:16:02] HELLESTVEIT: But we know that war is a very, very detrimental activity for climate and for focus on climate issues. The emissions in Europe have certainly taken a different road and so has the situation with coal in Asia and so forth, so this is having very detrimental effects both on emissions but also on the economies, that we need to turn it around, so there are certainly some very unfortunate consequences for climate in the short to mid-term.

[02:16:35] MEARSHEIMER: I think to get in agreement on climate and to get agreements on how to deal with pandemics and to get arms control agreements, you need cooperation among the great powers in the system, the most powerful states. As we remember we shut down proliferation in the second half of the Cold War because the United States and the Soviet Union decided to create the NPT, the Nuclear Suppliers Group and so forth and so on. The great powers have to cooperate, there's not question about that. The problem that we face today is twofold. First of all there are not two great powers in the system like there were during the Cold War. There's not one great power, which is really the ideal situation, like there was in the unipolar moment. There are three great powers.

The second problem is, the young woman named Eliza Gheorghe who wrote an article on proliferation during the Cold War and her argument is the more intense the security competition between great powers, the less likely it is you'll get cooperation on proliferation and assorted issues, because the great powers really don't want to cooperate, they want to contest each other. And she shows that you got very little cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union on the nuclear proliferation front in the first half of the Cold War. It was with the coming of détente where you got more cooperation between the United States and the Soviets that led to cooperation on the proliferation front. Anyway, all of this is to say when you look at the fact that we have three great powers that you have to coordinate and that you have an intense security competition in East Asia between the United States and China, you have an intense security competition, almost a war between the United States and Russia in Europe, it's no accident, ladies and

gentlemen, that Xi Jinping recently told John Kerry that he was not interested in cooperating on climate. And it's no accident that the Russians have just made it clear that they're not interested in cooperating on arms control with the United States. So I think we're going to have a lot of trouble garnering cooperation on this set of issues moving forward because of the change and the structure of the system, moving to multipolarity, and the intensity of the competition.

[02:19:21] HELLESTVEIT: Do you share this view?

[02:19:23] BILD: I think we are back in climate talk with the Chinese, that's a good thing. But otherwise, I share, I mean, the achievement of the Cold War, if one might use that particular word, was that after both the Russians and the Americans, the Americans first and the Russians somewhat higher, went for, whatever, 30,000 nukes each, huge quantities, they both said this is insane, they phrased it somewhat differently perhaps, and agreed on a framework for strategic arms limitations that's taking them down to 2,000–3,000 deployed warheads. Huge, huge difference. And whether that can now be maintained remains to be seen. I agree that this becomes-, and then we had the Brits and the French and the others, but very small numbers of nukes, so the Americans and the Russians agreed it doesn't really affect the balance. Now the Pentagon report data of the day say that the estimate is that the Chinese are going to go for 15,000 warheads. Now that changes the equation fundamentally, and whether they can adjust (two-party) [2:08:15] thing with 2,000–3,000 warheads each and bring in 15,000 Chinese, becomes virtually impossible. Because if you are American you say we need to deter both the Russians and the Chinese, so we need to both deter 2,000 Russian warheads and 15,000 Chinese warheads and we can't do that with 2,000 American warheads. And you could do that equation from the Chinese side and do that equation from the Russian side, this is going to be very, very destabilizing in the years ahead.

[02:21:05] MEARSHEIMER: Yeah. And the Americans pulled out of the INF Treaty, we remember the INF Treaty well, which was where we basically eliminated medium-range nuclear missiles in Europe.

[02:21:17] BILD: Because Russians violated it, but what the Americans --.

[02:21:20] MEARSHEIMER: But we would've pulled out anyway, because the Chinese are building medium-range missiles and we wanted to be able to build medium-range missiles to combat the Chinese.

[02:21:30] BILDT: Yeah, but the-, yeah, okay.

[02:21:32] HELLESTVEIT: But this is the issue of parity, isn't it, that when there is a third party increasing its stockpile you either go out and everybody has no restrictions or everybody goes into a new agreement which restricts all three of them.

[02:21:45] BILDT: Gets complicated.

[02:21:47] HELLESTVEIT: Gets complicated, is there a prospect for that type of agreement in the next couple of, or short to mid-term, do you see, between the US, the Russians and the Chinese on limiting the nuclear race?

[02:22:02] MEARSHEIMER: I think the key, getting back to my earlier point about the Eliza Gheorghe argument, it all depends on the intensity of the competition. The problem is we have in East Asia today an intense security competition already between the United States and the Chinese, and we have an intense security competition for sure between the Russians and the Americans. And garnering a meaningful sort of agreement on an issue like arms control or proliferation or climate, I think it's just going to be very tough with that competition.

[02:22:42] BILDT: I don't disagree, I still think that over time it might be possible. And the reason for that is self-interest, because the decisionmakers in Washington, in Moscow and in Beijing know that an all-out nuclear war is the end of it. And accordingly, at the end of it is self-interest in having some sort of moderating agreement.

[02:23:03] HELLESTVEIT: Can I then again ask you about the rest of the world? Because if you zoom out and you look at the reactions from medium or regional powers, such as Brazil, South Africa, Nigeria, Thailand, Saudi Arabia and

so forth, they had, most of them, as you said, 141 said we do not accept this aggression that Russia made towards Ukraine, but after some time quite a lot of them were not willing to go along with excluding Russia from various international institutions. And there is this interest, it seems, in the Global South, to kind of stop or at least to reduce the tensions between the great powers because they are also suffering quite heavily from this increasing rivalry between the great ones. How can they play into this equation? Quite a lot of humanity is actually living in these countries, can they have a positive influence on this?

[02:24:07] BILDT:

As you say they are deeply concerned and they're also affected. We've seen food prices go down somewhat, we've seen the energy prices, it all affects them negatively, we've seen economic effects, that is to the detriment of these countries, as result of the war. So they have an interest of course in stopping the war, we all have an interest in stopping the war. Most of the countries of the Global South voted with us on those resolutions, including by the way Indonesia, Brazil, Thailand and those. Some were on the fence because they think they can play a role in between. Will they be able to do that, Chinese or Indians? Remains to be seen. So far not. The Russians have been fairly dismissive so far of attempts. At the moment we have the Emirates and the Saudis trying to do it. The only ones who've been able to do some mediation, grain deal and some prisoner exchanges have been the Turks so far. So, there is a role for some powers in order to be able to engineer some partly important agreements, but I don't think they will settle the war, so I'd say.

[02:25:19] MEARSHEIMER:

I think that in the West we believe that there are good guys and bad guys in the international system, and we are the good guys and the Russians are the bad guys. And what we expect is for countries outside of the West to see this conflict through the same lens that we see it, and we expect them to view the United States and its European and East Asian allies as the good guys. We occupy the moral high ground in our story. I think if you get outside of the West there are very few people who accept that argument. And there are many people who think that the United States is a thuggish state, who think, quite correctly, that the United States is a ruthless great power. If you're a Norwegian it's easy, given the circumstances that exist in Europe, for you to think the United States is a wonderful ally. But there are many countries around the world where that is not the first thought that comes to their mind when they think about the United States.

[02:26:38] HELLESTVEIT: But if we look at the world today, the numbers from Uppsala in Sweden and the Peace Research Institute in Oslo indicate that the number of armed conflicts in the world has never been as high since the Second World War from 2018 up until today. Now they are low-scale, simmering conflicts, but they can escalate, they can quite easily escalate. Many of them depend on international institutions' assistance and even the UN Security Council. What will happen if this going forward will kind of bring the UN Security Council back to a stalemate as we saw during the previous great rivalry between two superpowers.

[02:27:28] MEARSHEIMER: You talk about the UN Security Council like it's a separate entity, like it's a big god up in the sky. The UN Security Council is comprised of a handful of powerful states and in particular three great powers, and it's not what the UN Security Council will do, it's what those great powers will do. And the argument I was making over the past ten or so minutes was it's going to be hard to get those three great powers, and the French and the British as well, to coordinate their efforts to deal with issues like proliferation and so forth and so on. It's also going to be hard to get 'em to help shut down potential conflicts, and in fact given what we experienced in the Cold War, the old Cold War, I think that the great powers may try to exacerbate those local conflicts around the world to take advantage of the situation and hurt the other great power.

[02:28:27] HELLESTVEIT: Do you share this view of the UN Security Council, Carl?

[02:28:31] BILDT: Well, I mean the Security Council is essentially the five permanent members and then you add a couple of others that are there for the time being. We should not forget that the Security Council was essentially blocked, stalemate, during the entire Cold War period. It was a Soviet veto, occasional American veto, all the time. You couldn't do anything on the major conflicts of that day. Then we had what John called the unipolar moment, '90s and some years after that, when it was possible to get agreement in the Security Council and actually do things. Significant things were done in that particular period in agreement between the Americans and the Europeans and the Russians and the Chinese, it moved forward. And now we are back to a situation where one of the big issues of the day, Russia-Ukraine, to (take that) (-) [2:17:05], complete stalemate and completely blocked. And that of course is to the detriment. So far they have been able to get agreements on a couple of other things, but there's no question that we go back a far more difficult period for the multilateral cooperation that

particularly we Europeans, less the Americans, has to be said, but particularly we Europeans considered essential in order to address the climate or health or the different global challenges that we are facing. We do have an element still of cooperation, although that's probably gone by now, on the Iran nuclear dossier, which is one of the dangerous ones that we have on the horizon as well.

[02:30:02] HELLESTVEIT: But doesn't exactly the JCPOA with Iran illustrate that the climate for cooperation is very, very different now compared to what it was only seven years ago at the global level when the permanent members of the UN Security Council, including the Germans, were involved in negotiations with Iran in order to prevent proliferation of nuclear weapons and they made that in 2015 and after Biden came in and said we aren't going to back into that agreement, that is impossible to bring to a close?

[02:30:35] BILDT: Although in all fairness that particular issue has of course been messed up profoundly by Washington, primarily Trump, but also that Biden didn't go back into it as soon as he should've done in my opinion. But that's a separate issue.

[02:30:47] HELLESTVEIT: But in a situation of global rivalry there can be many reasons for the mess up.

[02:30:53] BILDT: Absolutely.

[02:30:53] MEARSHEIMER: Yeah, Just on that, and I agree with what you said about the United States messing it up, it'll be very interesting to see if the Iranians really do go down the nuclear road and go beyond significant enrichment to actually developing a bomb what the Russians will do, because five years ago, ten years ago the Russians would've jumped in and worked with the United States to prevent Iran from getting nuclear weapons. I'm not sure that would be the case moving forward. I mean this is part of the negative fall-out that you get from the US-Russian conflict over Ukraine.

[02:31:32] HELLESTVEIT: So what you are saying, what I'm hearing from both of you, and now you are going to prepare your closing remarks, is that the world is heading

for kind of troublesome water beyond also the war in Ukraine. We don't know where that is heading and it doesn't really have a very obvious end, but whatever it will be it will have major consequences for the security of Europe. In addition, we are heading for a world where global rivalry is growing and the global institutions are not really very well set up to tackle those huge challenges ahead. Is that what I'm hearing you say? It's a gloomy picture.

[02:32:17] MEARSHEIMER: I think that's fair to say.

[02:32:19] HELLESTVEIT: And here I now invite you for your closing remarks.

[02:32:22] BILDT: Which you already delivered.

[02:32:27] HELLESTVEIT: This was the moderator's privilege, so I invite you Carl to give a couple of reflections at the end.

[02:32:37] BILDT: Which will be, I fear, somewhat repetitive. As I said, this particular war, and sorry to be somewhat preoccupied with it, but we are sitting in Europe and this is the by far biggest war that we've had since 1945, it's going to have consequences for decades to come, and how we get out of it remains to be seen. It is Mr. Putin's war, I don't consider it's Russia's war. I think it's Putin's war. And we need to look into a future where we can both, as I said, secure and help Ukraine, because Ukraine is a big country, it's the second biggest country in Europe after Russia, and if you take that enormous landmass that is Ukraine and if you have instability and divisions and conflict over that one, I think it will not be possible to have stability in the rest of Europe, so defending and securing Ukraine is the basic condition for us having stability in Europe in the years to come.

The second is, as I've said several times, is let's see what happens with Russia. I think Putin is going down in history as a man who created enormous damage to his own country and its prospects. It's 140 million people, huge natural resources, huge human talent, they could do something, but instead they are engaging in large-scale war, they are being subject to, as we said, sanctions and other things. It is unavoidable that they will sink down in the league of nations in every

single respect with social and political and economic consequences for those 140 million people, it's not going to end well. And that's not going to end particularly well for Europe as a whole. We need to reinforce the cooperation that we have in Europe in order to handle security and other threats. There will be a stronger NATO with Sweden and Finland, I would believe, and there will be a stronger cooperation between the European Union and NATO. And I hope that the Americans for all of their preoccupation with China will stay engaged on this side of the Atlantic as well. I think they will, although their main focus is going to be in China.

Then we need also to look at what's going to be the consequences of the rise of China. They are not invading any other countries for the time being and haven't done it lately. The Taiwan issue should be handled with extreme care. I can be worried about some of the tendencies I see both from the Chinese side and from the American side that could lead to tensions. I am moderately hopeful that that would be possible, and then I would hope that we would be able to, while we handle the war in Europe, that we will be able to focus also attention on all of the global challenges that we have. The pandemic is still there and there could be another one around the corner. Climate change with all of the consequences is distinctly there and must be handled. Migration pressures, Africa, there's an abundance of issues that needs to be handled. But the war has to be the number one priority for the Europeans because that's the security of Sweden and Norway, not only the security of Ukraine, as we move ahead.

[02:36:12] MEARSHEIMER:

Carl and I obviously have differences about what caused the Ukraine war and I don't want to focus on that in my closing comments. I want to focus on moving forward and how to think about Russia in the years ahead.

I think that he and I have a fundamentally different view on how to deal with Russia, and that is Carl believes that being tough with the Russians, teaching them a lesson and winning back Ukrainian territory is the way to go, whereas I tend to think that being tough with the Russians is a mistake. And I think that you want to remember that if this turns out to be a disastrous policy for the Russians as Carl said it will be, they're still going to be there. They're still going to be there, they're not going away. And they're still going to be quite powerful. This is a really big country with a lot of people, a lot of human capital, many nuclear weapons, and

you want to ask yourself what a humiliated and weakened Russia is going to do.

And this is the question you want to ask yourself, it's the question that the Europeans and the Americans faced after World War I with Germany, what do you do with Germany, do you humiliate Germany, do you try to rehabilitate it, how do you think about dealing with Germany. And this is the question that you want to think about. My view is that backing off and trying to work out some sort of modus vivendi is not a really great solution but it's better than Carl's solution. My view is that you want to do everything you can to remove those incentives the Russians will have to cause trouble in the rest of Europe. You want to understand that if you back the Russians into a corner and you humiliate them, they're not going to roll over and play dead. Let me just go to the Western hemisphere, you know we have the Monroe Doctrine, I meant to talk about that this evening but I didn't. We have the Monroe Doctrine and that says that no distant great power is allowed in the Western hemisphere with military forces. You cannot bring military into the Western hemisphere if you're China or the Soviet Union or Germany or Japan, and you cannot form a military alliance with anybody in the Western hemisphere. If China were to form a military alliance with Canada and Mexico we would go ballistic.

Now, the case you want to remember that proves this is the Cuban missile crisis. The Soviets put missiles in Cuba and we had this crisis and Kennedy and Khrushchev cut a deal and the missiles were removed. We still have sanctions on Cuba to this day. We still have our gunsights on Cuba. We have not forgotten. We remember. Great powers don't forget. So, you want to understand that if you box Russia in and you treat it like a pariah and you weaken it, they're going to be looking for ways to cause you lots of trouble. These Finns and these Swedes who think that joining NATO is a really good thing, I don't know about that. I don't think the Russian threat is that great, the Russian conventional threat, and I think you're giving the Russians all sorts of incentives to cause you trouble. So, my bottom line moving forward, and this is hard for a realist to say but I'll say it, if anything what we ought to do moving forward is try to back off as much as possible with the Russians and work out some sort of modus vivendi. That's certainly in your interest, and then it's in your interest but not in our interest for you to trade with the Chinese and become richer and richer. Thank you.

[02:41:07] HELLESTVEIT: Thank you very much to Carl and to John for fears, positions and provocative statements, and the good manners of identifying where you actually agree. Thank you for a very thoughtful and somewhat somber debate. Thank you.

[02:41:25] [END]