

Conversations with Bill Kristol

Guest: Eric Edelman

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KRISTOL: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome back to CONVERSATIONS. And we're having a conversation today on, what is this Monday, February 28th, in the afternoon. We have to specify the time since this war in Ukraine is moving so fast. And so many the other things are happening.

A conversation with Eric Edelman, with whom we've had seven excellent conversations, actually, on foreign policy and defense policy and related matters. This one, I really want to take advantage of Eric's long career in the US government, having served at very senior levels of the State Department and the Defense Department and The White House; that's pretty unusual. And having been Ambassador to Finland and then Turkey, actually both countries that, I don't think we would've predicted this maybe a few weeks ago, actually are playing some role in this Russia-Ukraine crisis. So, Eric, thanks for joining me today.

EDELMAN: Thanks for having me, Bill. I'm glad to represent the Northern and Southern flanks of NATO.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Yeah, that's right. That's good. Yeah, hopefully... well, we'll talk about that. That's kind of amazing, Finland suggesting that they might want to come in. So, there's a ton to talk about, and I think people have covered pretty well what's been happening though and some of the surprises and all that. But let's assume it's today, it's Monday afternoon, February 28th; President calls you in and says, "Eric, you've been at the high levels of government. You've been in meetings like this, where we have to consider what to do about the many choices we have and the many aspects of the situation we face. So tell me what I should think about." And let's begin with Vladimir Putin. It's his war, right? We can't really get away from that fact. And I think, not only have you been in meetings with Presidents and Secretaries of State and Secretaries of Defense in circumstances like this, you've actually been in meetings with Vladimir Putin, I think.

EDELMAN: I have. I was in the larger meeting that President Bush hosted with President Putin when he came to visit Washington in the fall of 2001, after 9/11. It was in the Cabinet Room. And it was a large meeting. I don't want to suggest that it was an intimate session with Vladimir Putin. I did join in a slightly more intimate meeting with Bob Gates and Putin when President Bush sent Secretary Gates to Moscow to meet with Putin in the spring of 2007, after the announcements that President Bush made about deploying missile defense interceptors to Poland and a ground-based radar to the Czech Republic, which famously was the occasion, or at least part of the occasion, for Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference, denouncing the US unipolarity and essentially announcing his intention to try, and in retrospect, overturn the international order. So, I had the privilege of being in some meetings with him.

KRISTOL: I was at that Munich Security Conference, and I watched it. It was pretty astonishing. That's such a polite place. And usually, even the people who don't like each other, pretend to be diplomatic and so forth. But I remember thinking at the time, well, he's reacting or taking advantage of European unhappiness with us about Iraq and that he's reacting to this decision and trying to bluff us out of it. And of course, President Obama did reverse all or a large part of it, I guess, when he took office.

But yeah, I got to say I did not appreciate at the time that this was laying the groundwork for 15 years of an attempt to undo NATO and unravel the liberal world order. But say a word about what it was like to be in these small meetings with him.

EDELMAN: Well, one of the things that struck me in the time was that President Putin does not tend to engage in eye-to-eye contact with his interlocutors. And I think, as we all know from everyday conversations, it's a little bit odd if you're talking to someone. And the tables we were talking across were much smaller than the [inaudible 00:04:13] oversized tables that he's been speaking to people at in more recent days, both foreign visitors and his own intimate advisors.

I saw you had tweeted out, earlier today, a picture of him meeting this morning with his advisors. And yesterday, when he announced the heightening of Russian nuclear forces alert status, he met with the Defense Minister and the Chief of the General Staff, General Gerasimov, and they were also at one of these enormously long, long tables. So, I mean-

KRISTOL: What's the psychology of that, do you think? That seems like a vaguely sociopathic kind of paranoid, or I don't know what, kind of thing to do.

EDELMAN: Well, I think that there was something I always thought a little bit off about his personality. But I'm not a psychiatrist; I don't play one on TV. And I try not to do too much psychoanalysis of political figures. But there clearly, in my [inaudible 00:05:21], seemed to be something slightly off. Now, this is also, I think, part of his professional training. He was a KGB counterintelligence officer. And counterintelligence officers are famously extremely paranoid. The world of counter intelligence is what people call "the wilderness of mirrors" behind which everybody is a potential double or triple agent. So paranoia, I think, comes naturally to Putin.

And I don't know what explains large tables. When you use those extremely large tables for his meetings with President Macron of France and Chancellor Scholz of Germany, there was some argument that, because they refused to take COVID tests before meeting with him and they didn't want to have the Russians getting a hold of their DNA for obvious reasons, maybe he, for prophylaxis reasons, wanted to be sitting far away from them. Although this seemed, even by those standards, excessive.

But with his own advisors, it's really quite striking. And I don't know what explains it. There are rumors saying he is very about paranoid about getting COVID. It's not clear whether he's actually been vaccinated or not, which is an interesting thing to ponder, why he would not be vaccinated.

One could certainly speculate that, given the uncertainties about the Sputnik vaccine, that he might not be vaccinated for that reason. But maybe there's some underlying health issue. I don't know. People have speculated a lot about it; we don't know. But I do think it's fair to say: this is someone whose reactions are a little bit out of the [inaudible 00:07:31] for leaders. The [inaudible 00:07:37] of National Security Council meeting, that was held on Monday, in which he canvased the views of his senior leaders, including the ministers of the so-called Power Ministries, the intelligence and military leaders, was really quite striking in the sense that, not only was it on a distance compared to, for instance, and you know this from your own experience in government, the rather cramped quarters of the White House Situation Room, where people are literally on top of one another, was quite striking. But also, the degree to which he felt the necessity of publicly humiliating the Foreign Intelligence Chief, Sergey Naryshkin.

This was something that was videotaped. We know that because Defense Minister Shoigu's watch was visible, and it had different time from the time that it was aired, even though it was supposedly live. So, we know it was videotaped. But they didn't take out his humiliation of the stammering, stuttering, flop sweating, Intelligence Chief. And that says something about his psychology, I would say, as well. This was much more like a meeting of Saddam Hussein's revolutionary command [inaudible 00:09:05] or something like that than a typical Security Council meeting of recent vintage.

KRISTOL: I've always resisted, a little bit, the psychologizing like you, partly because, at the end of the day, you can't bet too much on it, right? So you just have to judge by the actions and the state of play, as it were. Let's begin with Russia though. What is state of play in terms of Putin's intention and goals and

strategy? Where the war actually stands? It's internal control, the economy, and all those different things. Give me a couple of minutes on how to think about Russia. And then, we can go to how to think about what's happening on the ground in Ukraine. And then of course, Europe, China. It's had such implications everywhere, really, what's happening.

EDELMAN: First, let's start with Putin's objectives. I think we actually have a pretty good idea of what his objectives are now, first of all, because he's said them repeatedly. He had a, I think, 5,000 word essay he wrote this summer and published — apparently making really good use of his time in isolation because of COVID — that reviewed the whole history of Russia's relations with Ukraine and tried to make the argument that Ukraine is not really even a nation. And this is something he has said to President Bush, among others. It's not a new view of his.

But we also have the evidence, over the weekend, of the apparently accidental publication of a document that basically said that, "now Vladimir Putin has completely and successfully resolved the Ukraine issue. And he's done that all on his own. And he's reunited Ukraine with Russia, as well as Belarus," in putting together a rebuilt or rejiggered Soviet Union. As you know, he said famously that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century. And clearly that is —

KRISTOL: This document, just to be clear, it seemed like it was a document prepared by the government, by the Putin's team, ahead of time, to be released after the glorious victory and after Kyiv fell or Ukraine surrendered or something. And then —

EDELMAN: Correct.

KRISTOL: — by mistake, it seems to have been put online, right? So it's —

EDELMAN: And then mysteriously disappeared when people realized the mistake, which highlights something by the way, which is: this all has been stage-managed and carefully orchestrated by the so-called political technicians around Putin who are the theorists of his quote managed or "administered" democracy. That's why these things have been videotaped, even though they're supposed to be live; why they went through this charade of having this meeting and then having his speech when they clearly were all taped at the same time. And we know that from the metadata of the tapes of the video.

And so, it's all clearly a managed, contrived operation. But that tells us what his objective is. It's basically to obliterate Ukrainian sovereignty and bring Ukraine back into a rebuilt Frankenstein version of the Soviet Union.

KRISTOL: So what does that say about what he does now? We're a few days into this war and several days in, and he's had more trouble than he expected, presumably. And now we see signs of escalation on his part, in terms of bombing of civilians and so forth. And huge tank convoys on the road to Kyiv. But then there's also sort of a negotiation or something like that. Or a claim that he's open to negotiations.

EDELMAN: Look, a couple of things, I think, worth noting here. One is: all of this, the desire to obliterate Ukraine and Belarus is driven, to some degree, by his actual fear of what could happen in Russia itself. It's not driven, in my view, as many suggest, by NATO enlargement or anything else.

Belarus had a falsified election a year ago. There was a massive upsurge of people in the street. For years, he's had a very uncertain relationship with Lukashenko, who's another dictator. But he seems to finally have decided that he's ready to just swallow up Belarus. And Lukashenko has essentially become a complete vassal of Putin's with lots Russian soldiers on Belarusian territory.

They just had a, obviously again, completely contrived referendum which, among other things, has repealed the ban on stationing of nuclear weapons on the territory of Belarus. Belarus had nuclear weapons on its territory when the Soviet Union collapsed. They returned them. They let the Soviets, the Russians, as the successor to the Soviet Union [inaudible] of arms control, but to take those weapons

back into the confines of the Russian [state]. And they banned the idea of having nuclear weapons on their territory. Now they're ready to have them come back.

In Ukraine, he was worried about a vibrant democratic Ukraine and what it said to Russians about the potential that they too could have a democracy and that they too could overthrow corrupt leaders, as they did in 2014 when Viktor Yanukovich was ousted in the revolution. And as they had done earlier in 2004-5 with the so-called Yanukovich's falsified election the first time around was overthrown by a popular uprising. And Viktor Yushchenko became president of Ukraine, someone who Putin later tried to poison.

So, this goes back a long way. It's deeply rooted in his psyche. And it's what he hopes to achieve. But I think it also highlights his fears about what could happen at home. And so, the sanctions really hit him in a lot of different ways.

First of all, they create, obviously a very, very difficult situation domestically, with the population as a whole, but it's also obviously hitting the oligarchs, who don't really control Putin. He controls them, but still they are a source of support for him. But also now they're going after all sorts of Putin's government cronies, and this has got to be heightening his paranoia about what could happen.

KRISTOL: So, what do you think? What happens in Russia and what should we be doing, as President Biden would ask you, in terms of just Russia itself? Because ultimately if Putin decided to turn around or if the Russians around Putin decided to remove Putin or whatever, that would be one very good solution, at least a partial solution to what's happened, obviously.

EDELMAN: My crystal ball is, not to make a bad pun, a little bit cloudy about exactly what would happen in Russia. I don't pretend to know because there's so many variables in play, but it's going to be a very dynamic situation. And he's going to begin to be haunted by memories of history here because failed wars in Russia have traditionally led to big political changes.

So, in 1905, the failure in this Russo-Japanese war led to 1905 revolution. The failure of the collapse of the Russian army in World War I obviously led to the Bolshevik revolution, in 1917. And the failed military intervention in Afghanistan, which began in 1979, took a decade, but led ultimately in part, no small part, to the collapse of the Soviet Union. And that's got to be, I think, on his mind.

So, how this actually plays out, what kind of combination of elite and popular distress that leads to a change, it might just lead him to reframe his calculus a little bit and maybe realize that he's overreached and that he needs to pull back a little bit. Although he's pretty dug in. He apparently had a phone call with Macron, I guess, yesterday, or, I'm beginning to lose track. Was it yesterday or this morning? In which he made it clear his demands haven't changed at all for now.

Given what I've just said, protraction, making this go longer and be harder is, I think, the friend certainly of Ukrainian independence and sovereignty, but also of our interest as well. I heard this morning a Ukrainian being interviewed who picked up arms and is fighting to defend his country, said, "This is no longer a war between Russia and Ukraine. This is a war now between authoritarianism and civilization." And I think that's actually a very good way to think about, in the largest sense, what is going on.

So, how do you make this more protracted? Obviously, you provide Ukraine with all the arms it needs to be able to defend itself effectively. And in the short run, I think that means getting them as many Javelin anti-tank missiles and as many Stingers or other forms of shoulder-launched anti-aircraft weapons, so-called MANPADS, as you can get to them. And that may start to become a little more difficult.

But I do think that Putin, from all accounts, appears to be quite frustrated that the military operation hasn't gone as well as planned. Yesterday there were rumors, I'm sure you've heard them, they were all over the internet, that Chief of the General Staff, General Gerasimov, had been fired. That doesn't appear to be the case yet. I say yet, because obviously if the failure continues on the battlefield, someone's going to get blamed and it's certainly not going to be Putin.

One of the reasons I think he had that security council meeting on television was I think there were probably some, at least if not open dissent, there were some laggards who were making it clear that maybe this wasn't the smartest thing to do. And he was trying to get all of them to make a kind of ritual sort of their acceptance and agreement with the decision in order to kind of enforce responsibility so that there'll be people for him to blame and fire, if it goes wrong.

KRISTOL: You mentioned the arms and that gets to sort of NATO, whether we're doing as much in your judgment as you think we should be doing and whether — And then the amazing turnaround of Europe, partly through NATO, partly through the EU, which we should talk about. But just one last thing on sort of more Putin specific, which is, what do you make of his talk about nuclear weapons?

EDELMAN: Well, I think it's important to kind of be clear about what he actually did. I mean, essentially he plugged in their system of nuclear command and control, so that it is at the sort of next level of — He did not put them on a high level of alert, at least as far as one can tell from open sources. What people who are more expert about the Russian nuclear command and control system than I am have said is that this basically enables the system to be responsive, so that it doesn't get caught napping on the ground and subject to a decapitating US first strike.

And since that's not in the cards and not in the minds of anybody in Washington who's responding to this, it therefore doesn't make it a particularly threatening situation in the sense that his forces are not ready to launch a first strike themselves.

So this is a form of signaling that he's using to try — And it's not the first time. He said in his speech on Monday that there would be enormous consequences for any country that interfered in what he was trying to do in Ukraine. So, he is making a kind of escalatory threat and hoping to cow the West, Europeans and Americans. And like most of the other things I think he's done, I don't think it's actually having the effect that he intended. I mean, I think if anything, although it certainly raised people's concerns, I think it's made people more determined that he needs to be thwarted before he becomes even more dangerous.

KRISTOL: Yeah. So, let's talk about that. I mean, that's really, I think, one of the biggest stories so far and the Biden administration probably deserves some credit for this, but it's also self-generated by the EU, by NATO. I mean, you've served in several of these countries and, I mean, what's happening is pretty astounding.

Maybe later we'll get to the longer term, even, implications of this, but just in the short term, it does seem like the administration's doing a pretty good job of working with the Europeans, not looking like we're telling them what to do them, letting them take the lead a little bit on everything from sanctions to humanitarian aid, non-military aid to military aid, I mean, and quite explicit and overt military aid. But, I mean, say a word about is that really that important? It's important for Europe, but it seems like it's pretty important for the actual conflict itself.

EDELMAN: The military aid or the cohesion of the alliance?

KRISTOL: Both.

EDELMAN: Yeah.

KRISTOL: I mean, just the actual practical things, the cutting off. Well, also the sanctions. A lot of that wouldn't work without Europe.

EDELMAN: Right.

KRISTOL: But it feels like there's really been a pretty impressive set of events that's gone way beyond what maybe even the administration hoped. I don't know if you'd asked the administration under truth serum a week ago, do you really think you're going to be where you are now in terms of unity on sanctions, unity on arms sales, Germany for the first time selling, I guess, weapons in the midst of a

conflict since 1945?

EDELMAN: Absolutely.

KRISTOL: Pretty astounding.

EDELMAN: Absolutely. Look, first of all, I think the administration does deserve quite a bit of credit for alliance management and maintaining alliance cohesion and kind of coalition maintenance. I think they deserve enormous credit.

I think in particular Secretary of State, Tony Blinken, deserves a lot of credit. He's been peripatetic in his travels. He's been working the phones diligently with our allies. And I think in part, this is a bit of a lesson learned from the catastrophe of the collapse of Afghanistan last summer. A lot of complaining from allies that they had not been sufficiently consulted. And I think the administration was painfully aware that it [inaudible] because Europe itself, not just a military operation with which we had been cooperating with Europe, that they really needed to work this, and to their enormous credit they did.

KRISTOL: But it's beyond coalition management, which is what kind of you did so much of in the old days, which is kind of holding the reluctant Europeans together and stick prodding them a bit so they didn't undercut us. We're now at sort of a whole different level, aren't we? Of kind of coalition, more like World War II coalition organizing, and going on the offensive, almost. Well, it's defensive, ultimately, against a Russian invasion, but offensive in the sense of doing things that none of them thought they would do on sanctions or arms, I suspect, two weeks ago.

EDELMAN: Well, I think it's hard to underplay how much of a shock this has been to Europeans.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

EDELMAN: And what's going on today as we speak in Kharkiv where clearly a war crime is underway, which is the direct targeting of civilians. And we should make no mistake about it. This war is a war crime. You've written about how this was Putin's war. That's absolutely correct. It is Putin's war. But we know from the Nuremberg trials that the crime of a unprovoked, premeditated, aggressive war of aggression is, as the Nuremberg tribunal said, the supreme war crime. As is targeting of civilians, which is what's going on in Kharkiv.

My suspicion is they're going to try and do in Kharkiv what they did in Grozny during the second Chechen War where they just basically obliterated and leveled the city. The difference is, Chechnya is very remote. There was nobody there to record what was happening, and this is happening in the heart of Europe, a couple of hundred miles from Berlin and the whole world is watching. And so I think it's going to be much harder to do this without suffering the repercussions.

So, the shock of this, I think, has been enormous in Europe at multiple levels. And we can talk about the ways that I think the tectonic plates are moving, but that certainly helped the administration rally the allies and maintain the coherence of this coalition with the EU; for instance, as you were saying, which is providing not just support for the sanctions, but also its own military assistance to Ukraine in the form of fighters that, and it looks like old Russian fighters that won't require Ukrainian pilots to have to retrain on them, which is a good thing. But also in terms of other steps that have been taken.

So, a lot of it is, is Putin has helped. I mean, the other thing I would say is that the administration has, since November or so, been engaged in what I've described as deterrence by disclosure, which is to lay out the intelligence that they were getting about Putin's intentions and what kind of military operation he might unleash on Ukraine to try and first of all, deter him a little bit by getting him to deny that was his intention. But to buy them time so they could engage in some of this diplomacy, sort of [inaudible] before the war and line up the Europeans to be willing to engage in all this.

And I think the vindication of that intelligence has turned out to be a big win for the administration on multiple fronts. One, I think it's convinced the Europeans that we know what we're doing and talking

about, which hasn't always been the case in the past because of the intelligence failures over Iraq and Afghanistan.

But also, I think, has wrong footed Putin on the information operations front, because it's created a predisposition to disbelieve anything he says because we've made him put down markers which have been revealed to be lies over a period of months.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's so interesting. Say a word about Finland and Turkey, the two countries you were ambassador to, and Germany, which is such a huge story, just a word on each, because it gives people, I think, maybe a sense in a more granular way of just how much, as you say, the tectonic plates have shifted.

EDELMAN: Well. So, Turkey of course controls access to the Black Sea because it controls the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus, and under the Montreux Convention that was reached in the 1930s, they can close the Bosphorus in time of war and therefore close the Black Sea. [inaudible] they've been a little bit ambiguous about whether they're going to do that or not.

I mean, they've said that there's a state of war and they can close it under Montreux. They've made some other statements about, under Montreux, that Russian ships that have left the Black Sea, but are home ported in the Black Sea can return. But Russian ships that are not part of the Black Sea fleet are not supposed to enter the Black Sea. Moreover, ships return under the Montreux convention are not supposed to take part in hostilities.

Now, whether they're going to enforce all that or not, I will have to see, but this is really kind of a pretty dramatic change. I mean, Erdogan, President Erdogan, has made some very strong statements about the war needs to end immediately. We need to have a peaceful solution.

And he has been carrying on a very interesting, complicated relationship with Putin and the Russians for some time. He has been purchasing from them the S-400 air and missile system, which is at loggerheads with the United States and got him kicked from the F-35 program.

But now he is on the other side. Not only is he on the other side in terms of declaratory policy, but one of the most effective weapons that the Ukrainians have wielded against the Russians in the fighting has been the T2 Bayraktar drone that is produced in Turkey and has been exported to Ukraine. It's also been very effective in Libya, Syria and in the conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh. One would've thought the Russians would've learned from this how to deal with it, but apparently they've not found a solution to it. It's been responsible for many of the videos you've seen of incinerated Russian truck columns, BMPs, tanks, et cetera.

So the Turks are playing a very interesting role in whether this can be leveraged ultimately into bringing Turkey much more into the Western fold than it has been in recent years. I think it's an open question. We'll have to see, I have some doubts about that, but it's worth exploring for sure.

Finland was of course a neutral country. Finns get appropriately I think very angry when they hear the term Finlandization used for instance as a potential solution for Ukraine. The idea that somehow Ukraine would be neutralized as Finland was during the Cold War.

Finns I think object to it because first of all, they were the only country that bordered the Soviet Union that was occupied by Soviet troops during world War II, which saw the Soviet troops return to their border. Moreover, territory that was held after the war for 10 years by the Soviets was returned to Finland, the [inaudible] Naval Base and the Hanko Base.

The Finns fought valiantly during the Winter War of 1940, when again, they were subject to a unprovoked, premeditated war of aggression by Joseph Stalin. And in many ways it resembles what's going on in Ukraine. But they inflicted enormous casualties on the Russians. The Russians ultimately had to negotiate a kind of cease-fire with the Finns, who, because they were abandoned by the West during World War II, ended up essentially de facto as allies of the Axis.

And so after the war they were treated as a defeated power, but a lot of that was circumstances out of the control of the Finns. And so from the point of view of Finland, they fought a very tough war, they got the right to retain their independence, although they had to also [inaudible] public criticism of their very, very big Soviet neighbor. The old joke in Finland before the end of the Cold War was, Norway has [inaudible] Sweden, and Finland has a very, very long border with the Soviet Union. So the Finns were forced to — So the idea —

KRISTOL: So they were never part of NATO and therefore —

EDELMAN: They were never part of NATO, they were always neutral, but it was an enforced neutrality, purchased at great cost of treasure and blood by the Finns. I think we should really stop the discussion of Finlandization. Perhaps after 150,000 Russians have been killed in the current war, we could maybe return to that conversation.

But Finland's been neutral, was neutral throughout the Cold War. But in the post Cold War, it has purchased US aircraft, they bought F-18s, and then now they've bought a joint strike fighter for their future combat aircraft. They have predicated their national security doctrine on close cooperation with NATO, with the option of NATO membership being kept open.

The public has been divided in Finland. I think about four years ago in polling, 20% of the public favored NATO membership, but as you and I have already discussed, the polling that's come out today, a new poll by ULE the national television broadcaster says 53% of Fins now favor NATO membership, thanks to Putin.

KRISTOL: That's amazing though. Prior generation they're used to Finland being as you say unfairly in a sense, the symbol of neutrality and the limits of NATO, and now they seem to, it could quite really happen I guess that they'll join NATO.

And Germany, which for how many years now has stayed out of war sometimes to our frustration, wouldn't help that much in the Balkans and so forth. They were on the peacekeeping side, they never would do the actual helping of the fighting and maybe that was reasonable honestly in some ways. But Afghanistan, they would only fight in the daytime. There were all these complaints about Germany, right? If you were on the war fighting side of the US. Now they're doing things that I think, they've shocked themselves at what they're doing, or certainly what the observers there are, if you read the German press.

EDELMAN: It is amazing. The Chief of Defense posted on Twitter a long tweet about the continual underfunding of German defense over the previous two decades. Now chancellor Scholz has in effect doubled its defense budget and reach the 2% threshold of GDP that NATO sets as a goal for its members and perhaps enshrine it in the German constitution.

So it is a huge change throughout Europe, and one gets the sense that this has been profoundly shocking, as I said because it is in the center of Europe, it's not in some far away place that people can pretend has no connection to their security.

I think it's really revolutionizing the security situation in Europe. And I wouldn't at all be surprised, there was earlier today I saw that there was an effort in Finland by petition to schedule a referendum on NATO membership, which already had something like 69,000 signatures. It'll be interesting to see what happens on that score.

I think there's probably a lot of Fins who remember back in 19, I think it was '94 when Finland and Sweden, it was anticipated would apply for EU membership together. Sweden went ahead without consulting Finland and dropped its application for EU membership one day, and Finland followed the next day. There were some noses out of joint about that in Finland.

I'm sure some Finns would be very happy to kind of return the favor on NATO membership. Or if either one of them were to drop an application for NATO membership, the other would follow pretty quickly I

think.

KRISTOL: That would be something. Okay. So the President says this is all very interesting. We should also talk about China the next time we meet and Taiwan and what lessons you would have there and energy policy going forward. But okay, I'm President, I've got to make some — What do we need to be doing? What's your basic advice for me going forward? "I thank you for the compliments on the diplomatic efforts, and you didn't like what I did in Afghanistan, but okay here we are at the very end of February. What's your advice?"

EDELMAN: I think the most important thing here and I do want to talk a little bit about Asia as well. This is one of those big events I think in history that shifts tectonic plates geopolitically. And there is always a temptation in government, particularly when you're sitting in these inter agency meetings at the deputies' level or the principal's level, or the NSC where the president is chairing, where there are all sorts of cross pressures, there's domestic politics, there's budget issues, there's looming elections, there's legislative politics, alliance considerations, all these things are pushing up against one another. There is always, I think a tendency to — rather than maximize our gains to satisfaction, to come up with some middle solution that leaves everybody, without it being too angry at how the outcome came.

This is something that Churchill describes in his — one of the early chapters of *The Gathering Storm* where he talks about the run up to World War II, how well intentioned people decided to take half measures rather than responding fully to what was going on. I think this is an opportunity and a time for being bold and for making maximal efforts to take advantage of the changes.

In East Asia for instance, for those who think that we should only prioritize China, this should be an indication, what's going on in Ukraine has got to be giving people in Beijing pause about how easy it would be to launch a military invasion of Taiwan. Maybe not so easy. And maybe not so easy to subjugate a highly motivated nation that's used to being independent and free and wants to stay that way. Taiwan is not Hong Kong.

And so this is I think a big wake up call. We've seen former prime minister Abe of Japan say that it may be time in East Asia for the kind of nuclear sharing arrangements that we have in NATO, where NATO is a nuclear alliance that has what we like to call shared responsibilities and shared risks. So even some of the non-nuclear states in NATO train their pilots to fly dual capable aircraft that would in the event of a nuclear war would actually deliver nuclear weapons on target. God forbid that we ever get there. But it is a major and important element of deterrence. The ability to do that is actually the fundamental underpinning of deterrence because deterrence only works, if the other side thinks you're actually ready to use nuclear weapons. It's the terrible [inaudible] of deterrence.

So the fact that this is now being booted about in East Asia is, this is the very time for big think and big changes, much as the period of 1948 to '50 was in the Truman Administration.

KRISTOL: I guess, short-term yeah. And thinking about it that way really would be transformative. I do feel like even for people like me who are on the hawkish side, it's been about maintaining NATO, defending the post Cold War, which I think both of which are very important and I'm happy to have been on the side of — we've been fighting on and that because I think it's been a good order and it's done a lot of good for the world and so forth.

But I do think it's hard for people in government, especially when you've grown up defending, suddenly think about reinventing in a sense. But I think what you're saying is that this is the time and in a way you can say, "Well, let's do that after the immediate crisis, because it's too complicated now, there's too much going on," which I would sympathize with, poor Tony Blinken as you say, working 16 hour days and stuff. But you do need to strike while the iron is hot, don't you think, or at least lay the predicate for the bigger and bolder thinking right now.

EDELMAN: Yes. You're right, of course, the bandwidth that the people in government have is going to be very, very limited because dealing with these crises is incredibly overwhelming. That I can sympathize with enormously from my own experience. These are difficult times for everybody, people are operating

on not enough sleep and overwhelmed by information, over-stimulated by information as it were, with crucial life and death decisions and decisions with implications for escalation that are quite serious.

Again, I think we can't be cowed by Putin's nuclear threats, but we can't discount them either. You've got to carry these two somewhat contradictory thoughts in your head at the same time.

My former foreign service colleague John Herbst who was our ambassador to Ukraine back during the Orange Revolution, actually has a great way of phrasing this. He says, "It doesn't cost Putin anything to make these nuclear threats. If he were to actually use nuclear weapons, it would end up costing him everything."

I think that's the right way to think about it. Or as French foreign minister Yves Le Drian said, "We too are a nuclear power." You're not the only one with nuclear weapons.

So, it's important — I think the administration has been smart not to rise to the bait and go to DEFCON 3 or whatever, as we did during the 1973 Middle East War. Different time, different circumstance, different kind of Russian leadership that required different means.

But even though this is a very overwhelming circumstance and everybody is maxed out in terms of their time and attention on the issues, they should find a group of folks who they can put aside and think big about it. This is what Acheson and Truman did with Paul Nitze when they asked him in the fall of 1949 after the Soviet nuclear test that was earlier than people anticipated, it was going to be at least another five years before they had their own nuclear weapons, but it ended the US atomic monopoly on which we had complacently been planning our national strategy.

They asked him to take another look at [inaudible] which led to NSC-68 which was a very important document that changed our fundamental national security strategy, tripled the defense budget, led to a very large, both conventional and nuclear, buildup that formed the fundament of our national strategy for the next 20 or 30 years really.

KRISTOL: Yeah. That was after different countries in Europe had fallen to the Soviet Union from '45 to '48 and the Berlin Airlift. So yeah, they reacted to the crisis by doing things like the Berlin Airlift, but also by rethinking the internal structure of the government and the [inaudible] policies, right? People remember the Marshall Plan, but —

I guess that's a question, wouldn't you tell the president — If I were there, I would add to what you're saying and then build on what you're saying. A, it's the time to make a case to the American people, and I wanted you to talk about this a bit, about why we need a big defense budget, and probably a bigger one, frankly, than we have, which is why we need to have intelligence capabilities and diplomacy.

It's not all hard power either, but soft power. Maybe we've stinted on all of those and not thought about them in an imaginative way. This is why we believe in the more or less free trade regime we've had, especially with friends and allies, because you know what? One reason these countries were willing to do things is, we're much closer to them than we would otherwise be if we were pursuing America First protectionist policies, energy policy, is a whole different area, maybe that needs its own conversation, with the kind of transformation —

But Germany, I did think they reversed themselves, right?, on closing some of those nuclear plants, which they had cheerfully decided it was a great symbolic thing to do. Because nothing is serious anymore, so why not just close safe and secure nuclear plants so we can hope that it gets made up by renewables in 10 years or something. So I just think helping them think in a big way about all this, partly in defending the order that we've been living in, but also in moving it forward, is a big challenge.

EDELMAN: I agree with that, Bill, totally. And I think the administration came in with a predisposition that it needed to focus almost exclusively on China, and that everything else was secondary.

And at one level, there's something that's correct about that. In the long term, China is the biggest

strategic challenge we face, but we have played an outsized role in maintaining this liberal order since the end of the Second World War went through a long, hard, Cold War to vindicate it. And we can't just focus on China because security is essentially indivisible in the modern world.

And so I think it would be great for the president to make the case. I think you've got to make the case that if you really want to take on the same role we've had of being the formulator, organizer, framework creator, as we've been doing in this crisis for global order, then I think you've got to say, well, we can't just focus on China because it doesn't work that way. The world imposes itself on you.

And we have to be able to do at least Russia and China at the same time. And we have to also deal with these lesser, and I don't want to say nuisances because one of them has nuclear weapons, the other may soon have them, North Korea and Iran, not to mention violent Muslim extremism. There's a lot of other things we're going to have to deal with.

And as Secretary of Defense Mattis has testified, if you want to deal with all of that, we're going to need probably at least, he then said 3 to 5% real, that is beyond inflation, growth annually in the defense budget. And I chaired a commission four years ago with Admiral Gary Roughead, the former chief of Naval Intelligence, and we adopted that 3 to 5% guideline as a notional target for what the US ought to be spending on defense.

Today, I think it needs to be closer to 5% than three. We got 3% for two years under Trump and then it went flat again and now we've got inflation, so I think it's got to be 5%.

And to people who say, "Oh my God, you're talking about \$900 billion or maybe a trillion for defense." We've just appropriated four and a half trillion or something in the last two and a half years to deal with COVID, we can afford another \$200 billion to deal with defense. Because the cost of, as we're watching play out on our TV screens, the cost of underinvesting in deterrence ends up being much higher than funding adequate deterrence.

KRISTOL: You and I have discussed before in some of these other conversations, the challenges here at home and getting people who have gotten used to a pretty friendly world order, with some setbacks granted at times, but still basically a pretty friendly world order over decades now. And certainly the last three, since the end of the Cold War, to get mobilized and to see what's at stake. I have a sense, I'm just curious what you think of this, this is not your professional study, but you understand the relationship between domestic opinion and foreign policy. This has always been a concern of intelligent people, thinking about foreign policy.

Do you think this could be a moment where somehow seeing this in real time, just pulverizing this nation that just wants to be left alone, and it's the idea that — This was not a complicated case where there are two aggressive nations, each with designs on each other's territory or whatever. This is Ukraine just trying to, in a tough neighborhood, work its way up the economic and political ladder, so to speak. And just getting this brutal, and as you say, unprovoked assault by a dictator who seems both incredibly pernicious, but also somewhat crazed.

Could it be a moment where the public says, "Yes, you know what? Let's get more serious about this and let's not fall for facile formulas of either the left or the right: 'Nation building begins at home,' or 'America First' and all this." As I say, could it spread to a much broader understanding of the case for international engagement and leadership. And not just on the defense budget, and that's part of it, a large part of it, but as I said, unrelated issues as well.

EDELMAN: It's not just about defense, it's also got to be about our diplomacy, about our intelligence, about our economic diplomacy. I think we have to move to free and fair trade.

Trade has sometimes not been completely fair and that's a legitimate criticism. But we have to get away from the idea that trade wars are "good and easy to win" because they're actually not. And we know that from the failure of the trade deal with China that Trump did and the damage that he did to our European alliances with a lot of these tariffs, that frankly had to be undone to some degree by the Biden

administration when they came in.

KRISTOL: So if President Biden says, "That's great advice. I'm going to find my [inaudible] we're going to do the big think stuff, I'm going to get—" I do think that's one thing people hadn't even thought of though, like the US trade representative and the Commerce Department, they have some roles to play in this broader effort, though maybe not in the next — But then the president says, "Okay, we're closing up here. Short-term, medium-term, what do I need most to focus on, worry about, or what opportunities do I need to see? So many things going out at once and this guy is telling me I should place a call to the president of Finland to thank him for wanting to be in NATO and this guy's telling me I need to meet with the defense people to talk about munitions." What's the core of the president's job over the next days and weeks?

EDELMAN: Well, first of all, I think in the short-term, the major thing is to get, as I said I think earlier, as many Stingers and Javelins into Ukraine. The most important thing is that Putin cannot succeed in doing what he's doing.

Now, success may take a while. A lot of military analysts say that the Russian military has not brought the full brunt of its power to bear, and we're seeing some of what they may do in Kharkiv today. But it may take longer because it may be a protracted resistance that takes place to Russia. I think they're going to have a lot of trouble, even if they subjugate the major urban areas, even if they take out the Ukrainian government, it's hard to imagine that in the light of what's going on, that they're going to have any kind of popular support for a Quisling government that they might try to install.

So the first order of business is to thwart Putin and make sure he can't succeed. The second order of business in the mid- and long-term is to take advantage of the fear that Putin has created to shore up institutionally, both our alliances in Europe, but our alliances in East Asia. Some of them may require different kinds of structures, the Biden Administration has already worked hard to use the so-called Quad, which is India, Australia, US, and Japan, to provide a more multi-lateral framework for the traditionally bilateral defense and security relationships we've had in East Asia. And that's fine, but I think more needs to be done. And what exactly the form it should take? I don't know, whoever the Paul Nitze is, who is sharpening his pencil or her pencil right now to go write this, I can't say for sure.

But I think we really need to realize that the arrangements are very pliable right now because of what's transpired. People are willing to contemplate new kinds of things, that a week ago they would never have thought possible, as you pointed out. So let's think big. We should think of things we haven't thought about before, in terms of strengthening the alliance of democracies around the world.

What's happened is, for a long period of time, we've thought that democracy has been in retreat and the authoritarians have been on the march. This is the point in time to stop it and reverse the trend, and that's how I think we ought to think about this.

KRISTOL: Oh, that's great and that is an appropriately big way to think about it. And there's a million practical things, as you say, that follow from it.

But I think you're right to close and the focus on the big things: you cannot let Putin succeed. And I would almost say because of everything that's happened incidentally, the difficulties he's had, the rallying of the other nations, the remarkable efforts of the EU and NATO and stuff. If despite that he succeeds, it's almost even worse.

The stakes have gone up and also, there are many more chips on the table now than even two or three weeks ago, when obviously, we were terribly worried about what would happen in Ukraine and stuff. But the way that, this is I guess how history works, the way it's preceded has caused it to be a much bigger moment than even we expected.

EDELMAN: Yeah. And I think my one council is that we need a Churchillian, never despair attitude. I hear and see a lot of defeatism. The poor Ukrainians. Yes, it's terrible, what's happening to them, but they're never going to be able to stand up to Putin.

And others are going to say, “Oh, you blood thirsty neo-con warmonger monger, you, you want to fight to the last Ukrainian.” No, what I want to do is enable the Ukrainians to do what they clearly want to do, which is to fight for themselves. The Ukrainians have demonstrated in a way that I don't think anybody thought was possible, that they want to be part of Europe, they deserve to be a part of Europe, and ultimately now, they deserve to be a part of NATO. I think that will be the ultimate end of this at some point.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

EDELMAN: It may be a decade, but it'll happen.

KRISTOL: No, they've really shown us what Europe and NATO mean, and all those people who were mocking and many on the right, some on the left. “Europe, what is that really?” It turns out for all that, you and I have I'm sure a million criticisms of the EU in different ways and all that —

EDELMAN: Sure.

KRISTOL: — it really means something. It turns out that it's not an empty kind of thing and it's not just cheap fares within Europe and a nice standard of living. When Ukraine says, “we want to be part of Europe,” they mean, we want to be free. And that I think, is a good reminder.

EDELMAN: They want to be free to choose their own leaders, and they want to be part of the civilization that we have built since the horrible war of 1939 to 1945. Someone today said there are two people who have ordered the destruction of Kharkiv: Adolf Hitler and now Vladimir Putin.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Let's hope that this ends the same way in the sense of the victory of civilization over autocracy, but really almost barbarism at this point.

EDELMAN: Absolutely. I don't think we have a choice.

KRISTOL: Eric, thank you so much for this conversation here. You've been swamped and I know dealing with your normal job and then giving interviews and giving advice informally on this. But I think this has been very helpful, I think, just to think about where we are and where we're going.

And I hope President Biden watches this, the hour or two after we release it, and then you could be the Paul Nitze. But I think at least people in the administration will watch it or read the transcript, so I feel we're doing our bit here to help, even though from the outside. So Eric, thanks for taking the time to join me today.

EDELMAN: Well, Bill, thank you for having me and I hope the next time we do a conversation, we can raise a glass and I'll make my normal toast: confusion to the enemy.

KRISTOL: Yeah, and pay tribute to the people of Ukraine, that's for sure.

EDELMAN: Absolutely.

KRISTOL: Eric, thank you. And thank you all for joining me on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]