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"The War in Ukraine – How Putin Has United the West"

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Anja Schüler: Hello and welcome to the HCA podcast, coming to you from the University of Heidelberg, my name is Anja Schüler. It has been eleven weeks since Russia attacked its neighbor, Ukraine, eleven weeks of relentless fighting, destruction, and human suffering. The West has reacted remarkably united, imposing and widening sanctions, coping with the refugee crisis, and supplying military equipment. Just this week, President Biden agreed to send weapons to Ukraine more quickly, and Congress prepared to consider a large new aid package. In today's episode, we're going to take another look at the developments in Ukraine, the course of NATO, and particularly the United States. I'm very much looking forward to this conversation and having John Deni back on the podcast. He is research professor at the U.S. Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute and an adjunct lecturer at the American University School of International Service. Previously, he worked for eight years as a political advisor to the U.S. military in Europe, and during that time, he also was an adjunct lecturer at the University of Heidelberg's Institute for Political Science. John Deni holds degrees from the College of William & Mary, American University, and George Washington University. Some of you might remember him from a podcast we did last year – a talk about his book "The Coalition of the UnWilling and the Unable: European Realignment and the Future of American Geopolitics." Because he is a U.S. government employee, we need to note that the comments John Deni makes today are his and his alone and do not reflect those of the United States government. John Deni is joining us today from just outside of Washington – welcome back.

John Deni: Thank you, Anja. Pleasure to be with you today.

Anja Schüler: So, John, as I was preparing for today's podcast, I revisited the talk we had in March of last year about your book, and you were very clear about the threat Russia was posing to Europe. You called it an acute threat, citing Russia's large-scale military exercises that looked like preparations for an invasion. So here we are; we now know this invasion happened.

John Deni: It's stunning, really. There's no doubt about it that this has resulted in a watershed moment, certainly in European security and maybe even in global security. I think it's pretty clear from what Russia has done that this has really upended the security in Europe. Examine just what the reaction has been now by the allies, by our East European allies in particular, but really across Europe, and the sea change that we are seeing now in both policy and strategy, in the rhetoric that our political leaders are using across the West. It's of a nature that one could not have guessed just three or

four months ago, prior to this unprecedented invasion of a neighbor. It's really shocking to witness, and yet it remains still a grave situation.

Anja Schüler: We're having this conversation on the day after the annual victory parade in Moscow that marks the defeat of Nazi Germany. So, yesterday we heard President Vladimir Putin defiantly praising the Russian military force. But nothing in his speech signaled an escalation of the war in Ukraine, something many observers had suspected in the days leading up to the commemoration. So just a quick recap – what does the situation in Ukraine look like to you? Things are obviously not going as expected for Russia. Have the Russian goals maybe changed?

John Deni: Well, it's certainly the case that things have not gone as Russia had expected. It seemed clear from the outset that the Russians expected a quick victory. We saw their efforts along four or five lines of attack or axes of attack into Ukraine. One of them included what some have called in the U.S. a "Thunder Run" reminiscent of what the U.S. did in the Iraq War twenty years ago. This effort to make a dash for Kyiv in the hopes that the government would, and I should point out, at that time, the unpopular government in Kyiv, flee and that the Ukrainian military, especially its leadership, would fold along with the departing government – that obviously did not happen. And as we've seen, the thrust toward Kyiv is now largely concluded, at least in the first phase of the war. Now we see the effort appears to be in the East, in the Donbas area. Now, all that said, even though the Russian aims appear to have changed, it is still an exceptionally grave situation that Ukraine and the Ukrainian people are facing. If the Russians are able to succeed in the East, there's speculation that Russia may annex outright parts of Ukrainian territory; they may consolidate their military position in the East and continue on to Kyiv or to other parts of Ukraine. So, to think somehow that Ukraine is out of the woods here, even though that one or more of these initial efforts failed, I think is premature. I think it's safe to assume the war is going to unfold for some period of time. And as I mentioned, in my view, Kyiv is still under a grave threat.

Anja Schüler: So let's maybe consider the reaction of the West to this war. As a historian, I cannot help but notice that the Cold War vocabulary is definitely back; there's talk of containment, of nuclear deterrence, of economic decoupling, of course of sanctions, and of political isolation. Are we seeing a return to a Cold War situation?

John Deni: I'm not so sure it's really a return to the Cold War days. I think the biggest difference we can talk about between this time and then is the lack of an ideological angle to this competition or conflict between the East and the West. Now, I know that there are some in my country, elsewhere in the West, who are trying to frame what is unfolding now as a contest between democracies and authoritarians, and that may stick ultimately. But at this point, what we see unfolding in this great power competition, the strategic competition, it really doesn't have that ideological angle. That said, the nature of the competition, I think, is as all-encompassing as it appeared

in the Cold War. By that, I mean it is unfolding now in the political realm, the economic realm, the military realm, the diplomatic realm – on all of these fronts, we are facing really an unprecedented assault by Russia, but also China, on Western democracy, on international norms, and now, in fact, on the security and the sovereignty of certain states that border some of these competitors, specifically Russia and China. So, I think this is likely to continue unfolding; the competition is going to continue unfolding in this manner over the coming years. This is just the latest manifestation of it. I think I'm not alone in being relieved in seeing how the West has responded. You know, we thought that there was a change in the security environment in 2014, and it certainly was a change following Russia's first invasion of Ukraine, but the nature of our response to that was a little more slow-moving in retrospect now - maybe a little more timidly than it should have been. I think the response to this crisis, the scale of the crisis and the brutality of it, has really caused a focus of the minds across the West in a way that the 2014 events did not. So the unity of the West has really been unprecedented and, I think, in many ways unexpected. The change, as I mentioned at the outset here, in terms of the rhetoric and the approach toward Russia across the West, has really been refreshing to see. There are many of us in the West who've been calling for just this kind of an approach toward Russia, but that has not been taken up by all of the allies, as we see it now following the events of February this year.

Anja Schüler: And let's remember, of course, that the Cold War didn't end very favorably for the Soviet Union. Of course, you're right to point out that sort of this ideological angle is missing. Now, if we look at the period immediately following the Cold War, some would argue now, leading up to 2014 or even a little bit beyond that, was marked by somewhat of an outreach and efforts to include Russia. Now, in a recent article in *Foreign Policy*, you argue that that approach has failed and that Washington, in fact, needs to erode Russia's power. What could that look like?

John Den: I think if we look back at the roughly twenty-five now, nearly thirty-year-old post-Cold War period, you mentioned it at the beginning of your question here, that didn't end so well for the Soviet Union. And that's certainly true insofar as the political entity of the Soviet Union fell apart. But if you examine where the Russian people are today in terms of their standard of living, they're much better off than they were during Soviet days. They went through a very difficult time in the 1990s as they transitioned to a form of capitalism, more open forms of government – not quite democracy, but certainly more open than they were in the Soviet era. During that period, the West made a substantial effort, not just in my country, the U.S., but across the West. The approach of Germany, the U.K., France, the U.S. – our approach was very much in common, and that was to try to reach out to the successor states of the Soviet Union, principally Russia, and pull them into the community of nations, as we called it. How do we do that? We did it in a number of ways. We try to do this economically by providing the Russians direct aid and assistance. We did it diplomatically by inviting them into the G-7, for example, giving them a seat but not a

vote at NATO's table. We did it by pulling them into the IMF, the World Bank, and then we did it in terms of the military front as well. My own country withdrew 200,000 troops out of Europe in the wake of the end of the Cold War. All of our European allies downsized. Nearly all of them gave up their ability to conduct what we call conventional maneuver warfare, large-scale conventional maneuver warfare, the kind that we could do during the Cold War. All of that ended. If you look at defense budgets as well across Europe, not everyone decreased their budgets, but most, on average, saw defense spending decrease. So we have this twenty-five-year period of Western, you could almost say, pacification at the end of the Cold War following its end, as well as efforts to reach out and pull the Russians in. Now, that was generally unsuccessful, that twenty-five-year effort, and we've seen the result of that. The Russians have generally rejected any strengthening of their democratic institutions. In fact, we've seen a significant weakening of them in Putin's tenure. We've seen them use economic tools of interdependence, such as energy, as a weapon against Europe in particular. We've seen them engage in assassination efforts of opposition figures across Europe, and we've seen them now in Italy.

Anja Schüler: That's very Cold War, isn't it?

John Deni: Well, maybe it has become that way in some respect, right. Some elements of this, as I mentioned, are going to look like they were in the Cold War. But now we've also seen, and maybe this is also reminiscent of the Cold War days, Russia invades two of its neighbors, Ukraine twice and Georgia. So this kind of activity, to me, is a clear and unabashed rejection of the Western strategy of inclusion and openness. And if you want, we can talk about why that's the case, but it's obvious the strategy has failed. And I think that has now become obvious and admitted as much by many American allies in Europe.

Anja Schüler: I would also like to ask you another somewhat related question, but only because you brought it up in a recent article in the *Wall Street Journal*. There has been talk about whether a coup d'etat in Moscow would, you know, maybe not solve this situation, but maybe change something. Is that even a realistic scenario? And how dangerous is it?

John Deni: You know, I think a lot of observers in the West when they look at Russia, see it as a unitary actor. That it is a country that has a single head, the top of the pyramid, and that's Vladimir Putin. And so when you think about, well, how do we change the situation, wouldn't it be great if Putin were not there? I think that's a natural impulse on the part of many observers in the West. But I think the fact of the matter is: that sort of a change, whether it's a coup – which I think is highly unlikely and frankly dangerous to even speculate about for officials in the West – I think in the end, if it were to occur or if Putin were just to pass away – I mean, after all, he's just beyond the average life expectancy of the male in Russia. So when and if he passes from the scene, regardless of how, I think Russian history, and specifically its geopolitics, point in the direction of a continued sort of zero-sum approach toward the

West that we've seen under Putin, Medvedev, and even Boris Yeltsin in the second term. All maintained, all embraced a zero-sum approach to Western relations. The reason for that is very simple: They realize more political benefits domestically when they demonize the West. This has been longstanding in Russian politics, not simply since the end of the Cold War, but during the time of the Soviet Union and also before that, the time of the czars. A zero-sum approach to the West strengthens the political standing of Russian leaders, regardless of what time period we're talking about. This phenomenon dates back a couple of centuries. So to think that if Putin were to leave the scene, some successor would suddenly shower the West with compliments, and there would be peace and love breaking out in Europe, I think, doesn't stand up to the test of history, much less logic.

Anja Schüler: And it will probably also not result in a withdrawal from Ukraine. Now, since you're an expert on security policy and intelligence – last week, we learned from high-profile leaks that the U.S. made intelligence available to the Ukrainians that aided the killing of Russian generals and the sinking of the battleship *Moskva*. How far can the U.S. go without becoming a belligerent power?

John Deni: Well, I think it was no secret that the U.S. was providing intelligence to the Ukrainians. I think we've been clear about that, really, even before the invasion began. It seemed clear from open source reporting from the newspapers that the U.S. was providing information to Ukraine on Russian force dispositions across the border in Belarus and Russia. The fact that this might be somehow connected to what Ukrainians are doing on the ground, that probably shouldn't surprise us. I think the way the U.S. officials have spoken about it is that we provide this intelligence to Ukrainians, and then they decide what to do with it. How far can the U.S. go before it might be viewed as a belligerent? You know, that's a question that only Vladimir Putin can really answer. My sense is that the kinds of things we've been doing, providing intelligence, providing arms, ammunition, other equipment, and supplies to aid the Ukrainian effort, I think as long as that unfolds outside of Ukraine's borders, it seems clear from Russian actions so far that that's being tolerated. Now, will that continue indefinitely as the war lengthens in time? I'm not sure; it would really be impossible for me to speculate on that. My gut instinct is that if the war drags on, Putin will become increasingly less tolerant of it. We've seen indications of that insofar as the Russians have struck at rail lines and the utilities that supply them, energy utilities that supply them in western Ukraine. So, its tolerance may diminish over time, but I think at this point, it's pretty clear what the U.S. is doing and has been doing in terms of assistance to Ukraine, it seems likely that that level of assistance will go on.

Anja Schüler: Since we are speculating a little bit at this moment, and since we're talking about the broad assistance from the West for Ukraine, if we are maybe looking at a possible end of this war, what outcome would be most favorable for NATO and the West? In other words, what's your most optimistic scenario?

John Deni: My most optimistic scenario is one in which the Russian government is drained significantly by this effort, its military effort, but also drained by the economic sanctions that the West has imposed, also drained in terms of its soft power, diplomatically drained, if you will, by the way in which it's become kind of a pariah state, frankly, in much of the world, not all of the world, clearly when we think about China, but it's become a pariah to many in the world – certainly across the West. I would like to see that draining continue in some way so that, over time, Russian power is diminished. I mean this in the broadest sense. Why is that? Well, it seems to me that if we can diminish Russian power over time, we will make it much more difficult, much more costly, not impossible, but much more difficult for the Russians to, on a whim, threaten the vital interest of the West, as they have done on numerous occasions over the last decade or more. It's that threatening of Western vital interests that I think we should aim to minimize. So that would be the most optimistic scenario, in my view. I think in the short run, a more likely or perhaps the most likely outcome is that Ukraine is able to recapture much of the land that the Russians have taken over since February and that we then begin some kind of progress toward a political end to the war. Now, that may not solve the problem of the occupied territories; the territories of Ukraine have been occupied since 2014. And frankly, I have a difficult time seeing how President Zelensky of Ukraine can simply turn his back on their territories, including Crimea. I think at this point, the Ukrainians have shown themselves to be very capable of resisting the worst that Russia has to throw at them. I'm still concerned that the Russians could unleash more. But to this point, Ukraine has proven itself to be very capable. I think that is creating some political pressure domestically on President Zelensky to ensure that he doesn't negotiate away everything that the Russians have taken.

Anja Schüler: Which I think would have been more likely at the beginning of the conflict than now.

John Deni: Yeah, I think so. It was at that point that the threat looked especially worrisome. And in that kind of an existential situation, I think there was probably, as you're saying, greater pressure on the government in Kyiv to perhaps negotiate a solution that would wind up or end up with a rump Ukraine, so to speak.

Anja Schüler: Okay, I'm glad we're ending this on a somewhat upbeat note, although, of course, we would like to be more optimistic. It looks like this war is going to drag out for a while. So maybe we'll have you back on the podcast sometime. And since you were so prophetic, sadly prophetic, in your last podcast, we'll have to see how this goes. Thank you so much, John Deni, for these insights about the situation in Ukraine and NATO's role in it. I am afraid that, as I said earlier, that this will not be the last Ukraine update in our podcast. But thank you so much for taking the time today.

John Deni: My pleasure. Thank you, Anja, for the invitation.

Anja Schüler: It was a pleasure talking to you, even if our topic was a little serious. And this wraps up the current episode of Quo Vadis USA?; my name is Anja Schüler. Our podcast is produced at the University of Heidelberg with support from the Jacob-Gould-Schurman Foundation. As always, I would like to thank Eléna Brandao-Mecker and Julian Kramer for technical support. And I would like to thank you for listening. We will be back soon with another episode, so stay tuned, and please stay healthy.