



## INTERVIEWS

In this issue of National Institute's *Journal of Policy & Strategy*, we present two interviews. The first is an edited version of the interview with Martin Kroupa, Head of Regional Development of the Post Bellum Nonprofit Organization, which runs the Memory of Nations nonprofit organization. This organization collects eye-witness accounts of people who lived through totalitarianism and war, and ensures their stories are not forgotten within the general public. From the start of Russia's full-scale invasion, Mr. Kroupa has been active in several campaigns supporting Ukrainian defenders and often travels to the frontline. Also included is an interview with James Anderson, former Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, and Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy, Plans, and Capabilities. Dr. Anderson comments on China's military buildup, its apparent drive toward nuclear superiority over the United States, and the dangers of Beijing's growing military cooperation with Moscow. He argues that the United States must confront China's increasingly aggressive behavior by strengthening overall U.S. military capabilities to deter potential Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific and elsewhere.

### **An Interview with Martin Kroupa, Head of Regional Development Post Bellum Nonprofit Organization (Czech Republic)**

***Q. There is a popular narrative emerging within the U.S. discourse that helping Ukraine is a distraction from countering China. Why is helping Ukraine important for the United States?***

A. In Ukraine, Russia is testing the collective West, and especially the United States as its leader. Russia wants to change the status quo, and it wants to deny the neighboring states' opportunity to choose a system of government. Countries in Central and Eastern Europe (perhaps with the exception of Hungary and Slovakia), perceive Russia's attack on Ukraine as an attack against themselves, even though we have the added security of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization membership.

China is observing what is happening in Ukraine. It is plausible to argue that had Ukraine not fought Russia so valiantly for so long, China would have already invaded Taiwan. Thankfully, the West's reaction was very fast, surprisingly for Russia and China. The lesson that China has taken away from Russia's experience in Ukraine since February 2022 is that the invasion of Taiwan must be a *fait accompli*, and that will be relatively more difficult, which gives us more time to prepare and strengthen deterrence.

Cooperation between Russia and North Korea would not be happening without China's blessing. In Kursk, we are seeing its first test, and it is a dangerous moment for Ukraine and for the West. North Korea will be able to gain combat experience, including latest in the use of drones and their incorporation into modern warfare. It provides Russia with much needed



manpower and material help, and if it is true that there are as many as 120 thousand North Koreans ready to fight for Russia, it will make a difference on the battlefield and worsen Ukraine's situation.

China has firmly planted its flag with Russia. It is lowering drone imports to Europe making it more difficult to supply Ukraine with an asset that is essential to prosecution of today's war. It is helping Russia circumvent sanctions. While we tend to think Russia, China, and North Korea as separate problems, there is no doubt that there is now an integrated anti-Western block and states in this block are coordinating among themselves against us. In contrast, we are still not as unified as we should be. Our enemies wish to rewrite rules of the international system and perceive the current power constellation as an opportunity of a century to remake the world order to their liking. They see us as enemies because of our values. That is why Russia invaded Ukraine and that is why China wants to invade Taiwan. These countries cannot stand the idea of prosperous democracies on their borders, because they are a vivid reminder of a failure of their own system. And that is also why the path to countering China successfully begins with Russia's defeat in Ukraine.

While Ukraine is much closer to U.S. allies in Europe than it is to the United States, Europe today cannot meet Ukraine's defense needs. But should U.S. withdraw its support and Ukraine was defeated, the U.S. alliance system would likely crumble. Global alliances are what makes the United States a superpower and benefit its economy. It would be much harder for the United States to pursue its interests in a world without alliances.

***Q. That said, governments in European states can undoubtedly do more in a conflict that is much closer to their borders than it is to U.S. borders. What can the United States do to facilitate them helping more? And what can these governments do realistically?***

A. Many in Europe understand why President Trump is unhappy about allies' unwillingness to appropriately fund their defense. Some of us see value in the United States and President Trump pushing the governments in European countries to do more on defense, but we also want to continue to see the United States as a global leader, including a global leader present in Europe. We've tried the multipolar system in the nineteenth century, and it didn't work out that great for us.

In addition to continuing to push leaders of European countries to spend more on defense and make the case to the public why doing so is important, the United States ought to formulate a vision for victory and a plan of accomplishing it. Our way of life is under threat, and we are slow to wake up to the danger, including in the United States. It is clear who are our enemies, and it is past the time became more unified in countering them. In the face of brutality and corruption that we see Russia and China bring with them wherever they are, we know which system of government we would choose, and so do the Ukrainians.

Countries in Europe ought to wean themselves off their dependence on China, including with regard to key medicines. In a positive sign, the European Union has recently agreed that it would not negotiate with China bilaterally, but that countries will approach China together. That is a large step. But they are still not using their economic leverage as effectively as they

could. Perhaps there is room for compromise, in which countries in Europe help the United States with countering China, and the United States continues to help with Ukraine.

***Q. You have been in touch with soldiers in the Ukrainian military from the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion almost three years ago. How have needs of the Ukrainian military changed over time?***

A. That depends on which needs. With regard to the nonprofit sector, the Ukrainians first needed bulletproof vests, then weapon optics, and eventually more sophisticated equipment. They always need drones and vehicles to get to their positions on the front.<sup>1</sup> We also get specific requests from specific units we support. The nonprofit sector can help on the lower end of the spectrum, even though we are relatively close to purchasing a Black Hawk helicopter for the Ukrainian defenders. We just can't do it at a scale that governments can.

Nonprofits can also help to facilitate contacts between people from the West and Ukrainians on the frontlines. I have travelled to the frontlines many times, and the Ukrainian defenders are always touched when one makes an effort to go further than Kiev and shake their hands. The knowledge that someone is thinking about them and appreciates their work does wonders for their morale.

On the government level, the Ukrainians need air defense assets, long-range weapons (e.g. German Taurus), and antipersonnel landmines. Modern anti-personnel landmines are designed in a way that will not pose a threat to civilians once the war is over and are critical for securing access routes and Ukrainian positions because the Russians now changed tactics to send small assault groups that will not trigger anti-tank landmines.

Ukraine also needs countries to be consistent in their fulfillment of aid promises. Ukraine can currently stand up more brigades than the West is willing to equip. A lack of equipment is a serious challenge to recruitment because people fear they won't be properly equipped if they join the military.

***Q. What has been your experience with respect to the public's willingness in meeting Ukraine's needs, given that arms policy is usually domain of a state?***

A. The nonprofit sector plays an indispensable role in helping the Ukrainian defenders. In the Czech Republic, this cooperation happens in coordination with the Czech Army, which noticed at the beginning of war that the nonprofit sector could respond much faster to specific Ukrainian needs, perhaps due to less bureaucracy. That permitted specialization that leads to more efficiency. As a general rule, nonprofit organizations are also better than government institutions in communicating with the public and showing how Ukrainian soldiers utilize help.

The public needs to see that the help reaches individuals and supports specific units. People realize that weapons win war, and they do not hesitate to contribute to fund them.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Russians target Ukrainian soldiers' vehicles with drones.

This is a departure from a small donor's traditional focus on humanitarian needs, and is happening in, e.g. Poland and Slovakia, too. For example, our Memory of the Nation<sup>2</sup> public collection for bulletproof vests, drones, optics, or military health care is currently worth about \$25 million. The initiative Weapons for Ukraine<sup>3</sup> fundraises for specific military systems (drones, artillery pieces, plastic explosive, a tank, and even a Black Hawk helicopter), and has raised more than \$38 million to date. We have raised another \$8.5 million for drones through our "Nemesis" initiative.<sup>4</sup> These are impressive numbers for a country with a relatively small donor pool. And even though we are all concerned about the "war fatigue" and have seen poll numbers indicating a fall in support for aid for Ukraine among the general population, thankfully our fundraising remains strong, and we will be finishing this year in a better place than the previous one. That is a testament to the public understanding of the importance of defeating Russia in Ukraine.

The Ukrainians are culturally closer to the Czechs than the Russians, and Ukrainian is older than Russian and therefore easier for the Czechs to understand.<sup>5</sup> Czechs admire the Ukrainian willingness to defend their own country, a part of it stems from the Czechs' own regret that most of their own ancestors were not brave enough to fight when they ought in the past.<sup>6</sup> That inspires them to support Ukraine.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has increased the Czechs' appreciation for the Czech Army and its importance for Czech security. It has also led to a broader mobilization within the society. For example, there are now more Czechs interested in joining the Reserve component today than in the past.

***Q. Do you sense a greater willingness on Ukraine's part to negotiate with Russia in anticipation of President Trump's return to the White House? Do you think there is any compromise solution that would be acceptable to both Kyiv and Moscow?***

A. Putin cannot be trusted to abide by any treaties. Prior to Russia's full-scale invasion, the Ukrainian society was polarized. It unified in the face of Russia's aggression and brutality. Who would imagine that in the twenty-first century, an aggressor will target almost all energy infrastructure of a different country thus plunging its population into darkness and subjecting it to coldness? Let alone the Russian Army's atrocities against the civilians in conquered territories.

---

<sup>2</sup> The link to the initiative's web site and the collection can be found here:

[https://www.darujme.cz/projekt/1205934?fbclid=IwAR2\\_R19dP8vFn444fECozohunb66AdhUYtmNu8E4Tj2thr5ywuwnwfI0Ndjw%23prispevatele#informace](https://www.darujme.cz/projekt/1205934?fbclid=IwAR2_R19dP8vFn444fECozohunb66AdhUYtmNu8E4Tj2thr5ywuwnwfI0Ndjw%23prispevatele#informace) and here: <https://www.memoryofnations.eu/en/about-project>.

<sup>3</sup> The link to the initiative's web site can be found here: <https://www.weaponstoukraine.com/>.

<sup>4</sup> The link to the "Nemesis Drones" campaign can be found here: <https://www.dronynemesis.cz/en>.

<sup>5</sup> Czech, Ukrainian, and Russian are Slavic languages.

<sup>6</sup> For example, most Czechs did not fight after the now infamous 1938 Munich Agreement, which led to the Nazis occupying territories with German-speaking Czechs. Most Czechs did not fight when the Soviets invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968.

President Trump's unpredictability concerns Europe, even if it can be beneficial in small doses. He prefers to deal with countries in Europe on a bilateral basis, but the current mood within the Ukrainian society will not permit any agreement in which Ukraine is not an active participant. The Ukrainians' suffering and trauma caused by and endured under Russian aggression also preclude any agreement that would make the loss of Ukrainian territory permanent or make it seem permanent. Especially the military could have a difficult time accepting any such agreement, because it would make it seem like the tremendous sacrifice it has been enduring has come to naught.

The Ukrainians are very pragmatic about U.S. elections. They told me they will continue to fight, and they will look for partners wherever they can.

***Q. You are active in a nonprofit that documents and spreads awareness about the Communist regime's historical crimes, a topic that was a taboo in captive nations during the Cold War and has not been taught at schools properly until relatively recently. Russia and its authoritarian regime today echo the past. What would be the consequences of Ukraine's defeat for the Ukrainians and for other countries in Europe?***

A. Russia itself is not a unified state. There are ethnic tensions. In 1989, few wanted the breakup of the Soviet Union because we were afraid of the consequences. We should not be afraid of the breakup of Russia. Russia's imperialism is dangerous. We have to be prepared for a potential change of leadership in Moscow, which could also cause the fall of the Belarussian dictatorship.

I am extremely worried about Russia winning or even being perceived as a winner in Ukraine. Russia's victory will lead to increases in authoritarianism in European countries, because Russia's political system will be seen as victorious one. That would mean a failure of our values and cooperation, and for the United States loss of allies in Europe. A world without U.S. allies makes the pursuit of U.S. interests much more difficult, including against China.

\*\*\*\*\*

**An Interview with  
James Anderson, former Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy,  
and Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy, Plans, and Capabilities**

***Q. The Department of Defense has referred to China as the "pacing threat" for U.S. national security. Do you believe the United States is doing enough to deal with this pacing threat and to deter possible Chinese aggression?***

A. No, the United States is not doing enough to deter China. In fact, China is currently *outpacing* the United States in key areas, to include ship building and the deployment of hypersonic weapons. China's unprecedented military buildup presents a twofold danger.

First, it increases the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) coercive leverage in peacetime. This includes browbeating U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific, to include the Philippines and Taiwan, with gray zone activities designed to advance the CCP's hegemonic ambitions. Second, if deterrence should fail, China's military buildup will put the U.S. military at increased risk of defeat in the event of conflict.

***Q. Chinese leader Xi Jinping has declared that “no one can stop” Taiwan’s “reunification” with China, calling it “inevitable.” Some analysts believe Beijing will be in a position to take Taiwan by force by 2027. How likely do you believe this scenario is?***

A. President Xi would prefer to subjugate Taiwan with political intimidation given the risks and costs associated with using military force. But he realizes this may not work, so he has commanded the People's Liberation Army to “be ready by 2027 to conduct a successful invasion of Taiwan,” according to former CIA Director William Burns. This does not mean that President Xi has already decided to invade Taiwan or that he will actually make such a decision in 2027. But President Xi's directive reflects the strong emphasis the CCP places on reunification, which, combined with China's military buildup, indicates that the risk of an actual invasion is real and increasing.

To reduce this risk, Taiwan must do more to enhance its own self-defense capabilities. This means, among other things, increasing its defense budget and enhancing its overall combat capabilities. For its part, the United States should expedite the delivery of previously approved arms sales to Taiwan, and provide further arms packages to help Taiwan defend itself.

***Q. What additional measures should the United States take to deter China from engaging in military aggression, either in the Indo-Pacific or against the United States directly?***

A. The United States needs to bolster its military presence in the Indo-Pacific. This means deploying more aircraft, ships, drones, and theater-range missiles and rockets to hold key PLA targets at risk. At the same time, the United States must do a better job protecting its key military assets in the region, as well as those of its allies. This means, among other things, hardening airfields and improving our military's ability to repair them quickly in the event of conflict. The United States should also deploy more THAAD and PAC-3 missile systems to the region to help protect key U.S. military bases in Guam and Japan from missile attack.

Complicating these efforts to protect U.S. interests overseas is that fact that the China threat now extends to the homeland. As former FBI Director Christopher Wray has emphasized in Congressional hearings, China has infiltrated U.S. critical infrastructure and prepositioned cyber assets to inflict panic-inducing “low blows” against the populace in the event of conflict. The U.S. Intelligence Community has also publicly acknowledged Chinese efforts to influence the 2022 and 2024 elections. The Trump Administration should emphasize that such actions are unacceptable for any power that seeks normal relations with the United States and that further meddling along these limits will result in painful sanctions.

Preparing better defenses against the Chinese threat at home and abroad will take time, effort, and a sense of urgency. Specifically, this requires the new administration to review its military requirements across-the-board, update its war plans, and increase its defense spending.

***Q. How do you interpret China's involvement in supporting Russia's military aggression against Ukraine? How broad is the Sino-Russian "no limits" friendship and in what other areas might it manifest itself?***

A. China's diplomatic, economic, and military support of Russia has been harmful to Ukraine and undermined U.S. and allied security interests in Europe. With its gray zone activities, China carefully calibrates its efforts to avoid crossing the threshold of outright military aggression against the United States. These efforts are nonetheless harmful to U.S. security on several fronts. They include China's global information campaign to undermine America's credibility as leader of the free world by promoting the narrative that China's rise and the U.S.'s decline are inevitable.

China and Russia's "no limits" friendship is more than just rhetoric. Despite a history of mutual suspicion and occasional tension, China and Russia have begun to cooperate more fully with joint military exercises in the Indo-Pacific. These include increasingly sophisticated naval and aerial exercises. The trendline of enhanced cooperation is likely to deepen in functional areas going forward, to include intelligence, cyber, and space activities, as well as in new geographic domains, such as the Arctic.

***Q. What are some of Beijing's weaknesses and how might the West exploit them in order to deter China from pursuing its hegemonic ambitions?***

A. China has overstepped its bounds with heavy-handed attempts to extend its power and influence in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. For example, China's preference of hiring Chinese workers instead of locals to work for its companies based overseas has engendered resentment in some African and South American countries. Similarly, China's use of debt traps to secure long-term leases to overseas infrastructure, such as ports and mines, have caused further concern among would-be borrowers in the Global South.

The United States must do a much better job exposing these and other malevolent Chinese activities around the globe. Simply shining a spotlight upon them can help undermine their effectiveness.

Further, the United States should also keep a laser focus on President Xi's anti-corruption campaign and harsh treatment of its minority populations, including the Uyghurs. The more the CCP is forced to defend its actions at home, the more difficult it will be for them to undermine U.S. interests abroad.

**Q. You have written that the great power rivalry between the United States and China “almost certainly will last for decades to come” and that “most great power rivalries ultimately end in bloodshed.” Do you believe a conflict between the United States and China is inevitable?**

A. It is important not to buy into Chinese narratives about historical determinism. There is nothing set in stone about China’s rise or America’s decline, though Chinese leaders and propagandists relentlessly push these narratives. Nor is military conflict with China inevitable. But armed conflict will become increasingly likely absent stronger U.S. and allied measures to deter China.

**Q. China has been dramatically expanding its nuclear capabilities well beyond its self-proclaimed “minimal deterrence” posture. Former USSTRATCOM Commander Adm. Charles Richard has called China’s nuclear expansion “breathtaking” and a “strategic breakout.” Do you agree with this assessment? To what do you attribute China’s significant buildup of its nuclear weapons capabilities? Is China engaged in a “race to parity” with the United States?**

A. Yes, I agree with Admiral Richard’s assessment. China is clearly casting aside its longstanding policy of minimal deterrence in favor of a far more expansive and assertive posture.

The conventional wisdom among most Western analysts is that China is seeking “parity” with the United States. As an abstraction, parity does not sound particularly threatening. Indeed, many strategists believe that parity is conducive to stability. But the strategic landscape the United States will face in the future will be more far complex—and far more dangerous—than what it faced during the Cold War given future projections regarding Russia’s and China’s nuclear arsenals.

The conventional wisdom that China will seek nuclear “parity” is no more than an assumption. *Based on other Chinese military developments, it may well be that China’s ultimate aim is to exceed U.S. capabilities and achieve nuclear superiority.* In this vein, it is worth recalling that China was not satisfied with achieving numerical parity with the U.S. navy. In fact, the PLA now has a larger navy than the United States—and one that is currently projected to extend its numerical lead ever further given China’s ship building capacity.

**Q. As a former Deputy and Acting Under Secretary of Defense for Policy in the first Trump Administration, what advice would you give to President Trump regarding the importance of confronting China?**

A. U.S. efforts to “compete” with China are no more likely to succeed in the near future than they have in the recent past. The United States is engaged in a long-term systemic rivalry with a determined and powerful foe. A more confrontational approach is thus necessary to reverse China’s increasingly aggressive behavior. For this approach to be credible, the United



States must increase its military capabilities and induce key allies and partners to do the same.

The sooner President Trump releases his National Security Strategy, the better. By clearly outlining his strategic priorities and intent, the President can help ensure that key departments and agencies with national security responsibilities will row in the same direction regarding China.

Likewise, the sooner the incoming Secretary of Defense issues his National Defense Strategy, the better. This document should be squarely aligned to support the president's National Security Strategy. To be useful, it should dispense with bland rhetoric and outline specific priorities and actions the Department of Defense must take to enhance deterrence and enhance its warfighting capabilities.

On this theme, I recently had the good fortune to co-edit a volume entitled *Confronting China: US Defense Policy in an Era of Great Power Competition* (Praeger Security International, 2024). This book is chock-full of practical recommendations, written by experienced and senior-level former national security officials, to improve U.S. deterrence posture and military capabilities across a range of functional and geographic areas. I hope incoming administration officials will find this book timely and helpful.

**Q. Some have argued that the United States should shift resources away from Europe and support for Ukraine and toward bolstering deterrence against China. Do you support such a shift?**

The United States does not need to shift resources from Europe to the Pacific. In fact, many shorter-range U.S. weapons systems prepositioned in Europe would be ill-suited to the Pacific theater, which requires longer-range systems given its geographic vastness. The United States needs to bolster its defenses in the Pacific *and* get its European allies to increase their military support for Ukraine to help strengthen Kyiv's leverage for eventual peace negotiations.

More broadly, it should be emphasized that there is no either-or choice between defending U.S. interests in Europe and the Pacific if the United States intends to remain a superpower. Washington must counter aggression on both fronts, whether it involves Russia's overt military intervention in Ukraine or China's relentless gray zone activities targeting the United States and its security partners in the Pacific.