COUNCIL on FOREIGN RELATIONS

Foreign Affairs Issue Launch with Former Vice President Joe Biden

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Speakers

Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
Penn Biden Center for Diplomacy and Global Engagement; 47th Vice President of the United States (2009 to 2017)

Michael R. Carpenter
Senior Director, Penn Biden Center for Diplomacy and Global Engagement; Former U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (2015 to 2017)

Presider

Richard N. Haass
*President, Council on Foreign Relations; A*uthor, A World in Disarray: American Foreign Policy and the Crisis of the Old Order

Foreign Affairs Issue Launch

Coauthors Joe Biden and Michael Carpenter discuss the article, "How to Stand Up to the Kremlin: Defending Democracy Against Its Enemies," which appears in the January/February issue of Foreign Affairs.

HAASS: Well, good afternoon.

I want to welcome one and all to today's Council on Foreign Relations meeting which, among other things, is here to launch the January-February issue of Foreign Affairs magazine. And I really do urge you all to read it. What a—like all of our issues, it begins with a cluster, and there is a cluster of about a half-dozen articles on a subject that doesn't really get the attention it deserves, which is how countries have either dealt with or failed to have dealt with the legacy of their own pasts, something I know intimately from my time trying to negotiate in Northern Ireland. But this deals with countries like South Africa, but also the United States, given our own complicated legacy, as well as Russia, China, and others. So I really urge people to look at it. It's just one step beyond the normal foreign policy conversation, but it's an important one.

The subject, though, today is another article in the—in the magazine. I probably should introduce myself. Should be familiar to everybody. My name is Richard Haass, by the way. I work here at the Council on Foreign Relations. (Laughter.)

CARPENTER (?): And I work for Richard.

HAASS: And we're joined today by the gentleman on my right, Joe Biden, who of course served as the 47th vice president of these United States and who now leads the Penn Biden Center for Diplomacy and Global Engagement. And let me say something about this center which is based here in our nation's capital. It officially opened its doors February 8th, and the mission of the center is to develop and advance smart policy and influence the national debate about how American can continue to lead in this century, and it's, quote, "founded on the principle that a democratic, open, secure, tolerant and interconnected world benefits all Americans." Close quote.

Full disclosure: the former vice president and I go back more than four decades. He was a newly minted senator, I was a wet-behind-the-ears young staffer on the Senate side of the Hill, and over the last 40-plus years we've had a continuing conversation about the world and our country's place in it, and the only thing I'd put as a caveat is I'm not sure we distributed the time equally in that conversation. (Laughter.)

BIDEN: This may be the only audience who will think it was you. (Laughter, applause.)

HAASS: Never go up against a pro, that's what I should have—should have known.

Sitting to the vice president's right is Michael Carpenter—your left—he's going to be our—is the senior director at the Penn Biden Center, and he's the former DAS—secretary—deputy secretary of Defense for Russia, Ukraine and Eurasia, and the two of them are co-authors of the recent article in this same issue: "How to Stand Up to the Kremlin: Defending Democracy Against Its Enemies."

Let me just say that their piece addresses many of the same issues as a just-published special report by our own Bob Blackwill and Phil Gordon on how to respond to Russia's intervention in the 2016 presidential election, and more broadly how to respond to the geopolitical challenge that Russia poses to the U.S. interests around the world.

And let me say, I returned from Moscow a few days ago, and I was struck by how limited this relationship is, our bilateral relationship. It's actually less to it right now substantively than it was during most of the four decades of Cold War.

I'm struck, too, by how different our views of the world are, but also—and it comes out in their article—by the case for at least exploring the possibility of limited cooperation in meeting the challenges posed, say, by North Korea's nuclear-missile program, on trying to reduce conflict in eastern Ukraine, or in Syria.

But with that, let me thank both of you for being with us today. Thank you for writing for our magazine.

And let's start. And again, I'll ask questions for a few minutes. Then we'll open it up to you, our members.

So let me start with a basic question, a scene-setter. Is it accurate or useful, either or both, to describe where we are with Russia as a second or new cold war?

BIDEN: I think that'd be a little bit of an exaggeration. I think, look, what we—the Cold War was based on a conflict of two profoundly different ideological notions of how the world should function. This is just basically about a kleptocracy protecting itself. That's a vast oversimplification. But I think that this is about the Kremlin, and i.e. Putin in particular, doing everything he can to dismantle the few structures that were, in fact, set up in Russia that were trending toward or at least squinting toward, as a famous founder of ours once said, squinting toward democracy.

And there's an overwhelming—I think a basic judgment has been reached that in order for Russia, with all its profound structural difficulties that it has, to be able to sustain itself and for this kleptocracy to continue, there's—it's much easier if you're dealing with 28 different nations not in union with one another, not a Western economy that is coordinated. And it gives them more room to wander and engage in the activities that they've engaged in, which is essentially when the wall came down, everything that was part owned by, quote, the Soviet government was now owned by apparatchiks personally.

And so I'm vastly oversimplifying, but I think there's a basic decision that they cannot compete against a unified West. I think that is Putin's judgment. And so everything he can do to dismantle the post-World War II liberal world order, including NATO and the EU, I think, is viewed as in their immediate self-interest.

HAASS: Michael, let me ask you a variant of the same question. And it picks up on what the vice president just ended with. If you had to describe, in an elevator, what you think the essence of Russian national-security strategy is, how they—how they would define success for themselves, what do you think it would be?

CARPENTER: So I think Russia has three principal goals. One is to weaken Western democracies internally. Another one, as the vice president said, is to divide the countries of NATO and the EU internally, to deal individually with those nations, as opposed to with a united front. And then third is to undermine the rules-based international order, which, from Moscow's perspective, is slanted in favor of the United States because it promotes norms of democracy, because it promotes certain other norms in the international sphere—territorial integrity, sovereignty—that Russia sometimes feels it can transgress when it wants to.

And so what Russia has essentially done is it's taken the fight from what was originally just contained to the post-Soviet space and taken that fight now to Europe, to the United States, by subverting our institutions internally, by using sometimes hard power, but more often corruption, energy, information, and cyber to be able to undermine these democratic institutions, as I said, internally.

HAASS: However one might describe U.S.-Russian ties, they are not good. And looking backwards over the last quarter of a century, in some ways it's anticipating what history will grapple with. Was this inevitable? Was there something about the nature of America, America's definition of what world order consisted of, something about Russian political culture that essentially—despite the optimism 25 years ago when President Bush 41, my boss at the time, talked about a new world order—was it inevitable? Or to some extent, does Western policy bear some of the responsibility for the current state of affairs? Obviously higher on the list of certain people would be NATO enlargement. Did we have to get to where we are, or could it have been avoided?

BIDEN: I think it's hard to say if it could have been avoided, but it's more easily able to identify why it didn't happen. And it wasn't, in my view, because of the expansion of NATO. As you may remember, that was my primary responsibility on the floor of the Senate with Michael Haltzel. And the only time I had a real serious and elongated disagreement and debate with Pat Moynihan was on the expansion of NATO. And his argument was, to vastly oversimplify it—it was much more articulate than I'm about to state—but was that this is not the time to worry the new leadership in Russia that they're about to be surrounded and overtaken, et cetera.

I don't see—I ask the reverse question all the time, is what happens if we didn't have NATO. Does anybody think if NATO did not exist, the expansion of NATO did not occur, and somehow the fact that a KGB thug ended up in control of that country would have been altered? I don't any evidence that suggests that would be

the case. Matter of fact, I would argue that you would very much likely see more use of military power and force. And one of the things we talked about, and I'll not go any further, is that as all these Eastern and Central European countries were, quote, "freed," they all had their own agenda, their own historical fears, their own concerns. And they're all engaging independently in activities and actions that could have been very destabilizing—destabilizing to the whole region.

And so part of what we did was to stabilize and give some assurance to each of those countries that they should yield toward what would be more considered to be basic democratic instincts and policies, than to go the route some of them were considering going. And so I don't think—I don't think that the expansion of NATO, history will—it will be a debate that will continue—was the reason why the instability to the extent that it—that it was inevitable that Russia would take the role that it took. But I do think there were a number of things, when you think about it, as you've written about—and many of you have—there is—

HAASS: You're not going to mention the name of the book? (Laughter.)

BIDEN: You just made me forget the name of the book right then. (Laughter.) But it's a very good book. I strongly urge you to buy—urge you to buy two copies. (Laughter.)

But think about it. I mean, look at all the countries in the world, including in this hemisphere, that are coming out from under what has essentially been somewhere either decades if not an entire history of corruption and dictatorships or oligarchs running those countries. And it's really—and I've spent a lot of time. I mean, I've spent more time I would—I know I spent more time than any member of our administration trying to deal with making sure that this revolution of dignity did not blow up in the face of what is a great opportunity for Ukraine. But the corruption is so endemic and so deep and so consequential it's really, really, really,

really hard to get it out of the system. So I think there were some—you know, there was at least 100 years of history and beyond in Russia that made it difficult to actually set up these institutions in the first instance.

HAASS: Michael, as you and just about everyone in this room, I know, knows, last month this administration published its first National Security Strategy. And among other things, it called for the United States to rethink the policies of the past two decades when it came to several countries, China and Russia—so let's focus on Russia, given our subject today—and it described those policies as being based on the assumption that engagement with Russia and its inclusion in international institutions and global governance would turn it into a benign actor and a trustworthy party. And the National Security Strategy goes on to say that this premise has turned out to be false. Do you agree with the National Security Strategy, then?

CARPENTER: So I don't think the premise that engagement with Russia is destined to fail, especially if one steps back and looks over the long run. Certainly, what we've seen is an increasingly revanchist and aggressive Russia acting out both on its periphery, in Europe, here in the United States.

You know, looking back, I think we can also see that there were some missed opportunities. But, you know, the goal of integrating Russia into both international economic institutions, the WTO, the IMF, and the World Bank, after the fall of the—collapse of the Soviet Union, but then also more sort of norms-based institutions, like the Council of Europe, I think that was the right choice to make then.

Obviously, we've—and, you know, and going back to your question about was this inevitable, I mean, there was a certain sort of original sin there where the ex-KGB elite, as the vice president alluded to, sort of captures the institutions of the state in Russia. And you can't get around that. And you saw that play out, you know,

prior to the last administration. You saw it in Georgia in 2008, with the cyberattack on Estonia in 2007. And yet, there were still sort of contingent events that shaped the flow of Russia's leadership and how it responded.

And one of those, by the way, was the mass protests in Russian cities in the winter of 2011, 2012 where all of a sudden you had the Putin regime, which seemed so stable, had been riding these high oil prices for years, starting to look fragile. I mean, there was one event where Putin shows up at a mixed martial arts competition amongst a crowd that's basically his base and they're jeering and booing him. And so that had a profound impact, followed up, as it was, on the Arab Spring in terms of internal calculus about how to interact with the West.

And we saw that the result of that ended up being confrontation. I don't think it was inevitable. I don't think that having tried to integrate Russia into those institutions was a mistake because there's still history ahead of us and we need to have that play out.

HAASS: So even if it might have been—or either failed or might have been a mistake in the past, it doesn't—you're both basically saying we shouldn't give up on the possibility.

CARPENTER: We need to—we need to look—

BIDEN: But I don't think we can give up on the possibility. I don't think we can give up on the possibility. I don't think we should be naïve about it. I think we have to do a number of things in the meantime to make it clear to Russia that they are going to pay a price for many of the things they have done, in addition to making sure that we just, in effect, advertise to the Russian population and to all of Western Europe what they're actually doing.

I mean, here we are, we're talking about Russian interference in the United States, whether there was collusion between the Trump administration and Russia. That's obscured a much larger discussion that should be taking place about whether or not what Russia is doing in the rest of the world right now and what Russia is doing in Europe right now. And part of it is just pulling the—pulling the Band-Aid off.

And for example, we recommend in here an international commission. Immediately, we got response from a number—I got response from a number of European leaders wanting to set up an international commission, an independent commission made up of all parties, the mainstream parties in Europe, to actually spend time and do what we haven't done here, look at what Russia is doing in Europe right now that their publics do not know. Because when they do know it, their influence diminishes precipitously, like it did in France in this election, like it has in—but part of this is that there is not much discussion. And our leadership has been abdicated.

Your point is there's three ways you lose power. One is just, you know, abdicate. Well, that's what we're doing. And part of it is just going out and telling—it sounds almost sophomoric—tell the truth, lay out what's happening out there and get the international community to join in in terms of providing the hard data after some serious looks as to what is going on.

And the second thing is, if you're sitting here—and when my grandchildren are writing their senior thesis to some great university about what happened to Russia, in 2018 what was the consensus in America about what Russia was going to look like in 2030? Well, you know, I wouldn't want to have to be in a position—I often say to classes I teach, I would not want to be in a position, no matter what approach I took, of having to lead Russia. Look at—look at the state of Russia now. They're in enormous decline. They're—by any definition, these guys are on a toboggan run. The question is when the run ends. You know, they have a second-rate military power. They have significant advantages geographically, where

they're engaged. They have a nuclear arsenal that is—can blow up the whole world. But in terms of their efficacy, their capacity is de minimis compared to ours. They're in a situation where they're an oil-based economy. You have Gazprom going from a market value of something like $350 billion to $50 billion in the last 10 years.

What do you do if you are a democratic leader of Russia? What do you do? How do you provide jobs for your people? Where do you go? How do you build that country, unless you engage the West? I don't know how that happens.

And so I haven't given up hope. I'm not naïve about it. As you've noticed, I've been a very strident voice in my—the last administration about Putin and Russia, as I am now. But that doesn't mean that this is a fait accompli that this is the way things are going to be.

Now, the last point I'll make is—you all know it better than I do—that, you know, when nation—my dad had an expression, never back a man in a corner whose only way out is over top of you. Well, you know, take a look at Russia now. Where do they go? They're incredibly dangerous as they continue to engage in this precipitous decline. Their life expectancy is changing. They're expected to be a 20 percent smaller population by 2050. I can go on. And so the—it's going to be a really tough, tough time to get them to the place where their citizens think they have any future.

And he's—and the last point. This new, phony nationalism and populism that is being used by charlatans all across the world right now, the only thing keeping Putin where he is is that it's the United States is the enemy. He's going to demonstrate that they're powerful again. But eventually he's going to have to produce something, and I don't see where it gets produced, absent a change in behavior.

HAASS: In the piece, the two of you say that there's no truth that the United States—unlike what Putin seems to believe or say, that the U.S. is seeking regime change in Russia. So the question I have is, should we be? And if not, if we shouldn't be seeking regime change, what should we be seeking in the way of political change inside Russia? What's an appropriate agenda for the United States vis-à-vis Russia, internally?

BIDEN: Well, first of all, there's a lot of brilliant minds sitting in front of me, and for me to presume to tell you what the answer to that question is. But I have an opinion, as you might guess. (Laughter.)

HAASS: Plus, you're sitting here and they're not, yeah.

BIDEN: That's right. (Laughs.) Look, folks, we can't make this about a conflict between Russia and the United States. We've got to make this about a conflict between the Russian kleptocracy and oligarchy and the Russian people.

There is no country in the world that, in fact, is comfortable with wholesale corruption—wholesale corruption, not based on any ideological rationale why the concentration of wealth has occurred the way it has. And the fact of the matter is that I think that there's a lot of things we can do and should be doing to make it clear that Russia has violated these norms, and still be willing on strategic matters to talk to them and cooperate with them.

HAASS: Would one of them be, for example, publishing what we think is Putin's net worth?

BIDEN: Yes. We had an argument inside the outfit I used to work with about that. (Laughter.) I'm all for publishing, especially when I had no money. (Laughter.) I had—you know, I—when I did my financial disclosure as vice president, the

headline in the paper was it's probable no man has ever assumed the office of vice president with fewer assets than Joe Biden. (Laughter.) I assume they weren't speaking intellectual assets. (Laughter.)

But, look, all kidding aside, I think to expose the truth. And we should be the friends of what is left of and the underground portion of civil society in Russia. We should not be silent. And part of that is laying out in stark relief what Russia is doing, how they have turned corruption into a foreign-policy tool and a weapon. It's being used extremely well in Western Europe and other parts of the world. And I think we—it's a matter of us speaking up and speaking the truth. We don't have to make any of this up.

HAASS: In the article, I'll quote—

BIDEN: If you disagree, jump in, man.

CARPENTER: No—100 percent.

HAASS: That'll be the last time, though, you'll do that. (Laughter.)

BIDEN: Former vice presidents have no power.

CARPENTER: I know where I get my salary.

HAASS: In the article—I'm going to quote from the article: "Washington needs to spell out clear consequences for interfering in the U.S. democratic process or tampering with critical U.S. infrastructure," closed quote.

So, given that, what exactly then should we be doing, not in terms of simply protecting our infrastructure and the like, our voting machines, but what should we be doing vis-à-vis Russia? Like, what should be the—should there be, and, if so, what should it look like in terms of a retaliatory dimension to U.S. policy? And what if it were to happen again?

BIDEN: We had long talks about this.

Go ahead.

CARPENTER: Yeah. So, I mean, my sense is that we need to look at this more broadly than just within the narrow scope of election meddling. And so this gets to a broader strategy of strengthening our alliances, helping our partners in Europe, by investing in energy security, reducing vulnerabilities at home. I think this is key, which you alluded to, looking at both, not just in terms of election infrastructure, but in terms of financial transactions, money laundering, real-estate deals, campaign finance, all of this. We need to make ourselves a harder target for Russia.

We need to impose costs when we have evidence, as we do now, of their interference in our election. They need to be able to look back on what they're doing now, say, in five or 10 years, and realize that the costs have outweighed the benefits, because otherwise they won't stop.

HAASS: In terms of—

CARPENTER: They will stop if they see that that cost-benefit ratio is different.

HAASS: Should we—moving forward, what's wrong with the notion essentially of telling them what the cost will be? If we pick up evidence that they're going to do this in the U.S. or in Europe, here's the price, at least for deterrence.

CARPENTER: One of the things we say in the article is that we need to expand also our communication. So we need to have a more robust dialogue, not just on strategic stability, which is about strategic weapons, but also about what we consider to be unacceptable from our perspective in terms of an attack on our democracy and our institutions, and telegraph very clearly—actually, as the last

administration did during the campaign—that this is unacceptable and there will be consequences. And that dialogue needs to be—right now it's very thin, as you alluded to at the very start, and it needs to be expanded.

BIDEN: We should be very clear about it, but just not compare buttons in public, you know. (Laughter.) This is about—I'm serious. This is about communicating specifically, specific actions we're willing to take relative to their interests if, in fact, they continue to behave the way they have. That's not something you're going to—the president should walk out and call a press conference and say what's going to happen. It should be made very clear to Russia and Russian authorities what it means.

HAASS: In private, though—

BIDEN: And I think it should be initially in private. And then, in fact, if it continues to occur, then pull the trigger. I mean, look—look at what the Republican-controlled Congress did. They overwhelmingly supported giving the president this very broad authority to censure and to take action against Russia for their behavior. We haven't said a thing.

And, I mean, look, we haven't even put—can you imagine if any—I'm not being facetious—if any of you were heading up the State Department or the CIA or president or vice president—you had a major position in this administration—can you imagine not having called together all the major agencies that have something to do with our interests vis-à-vis Russia and begin to put together a game plan?

To the best of my knowledge—I may be mistaken. The staff I have at Penn includes my national-security adviser and the president's, Colin Kahl and Tony Blinken and Bill and a number of very serious folks who played major roles, and had Hillary won would be playing major roles in this administration.

And the—when I'm told—I keep asking, well, you must have picked up—they must be having some conversations. There must be a discussion going on as to how you could better coordinate law enforcement and intelligence efforts to deal with some of these things. There must be some discussion. To the best of my knowledge, unless you all know—and you may very well; you're extremely well connected—I don't know of any systemwide analysis being—going on within this administration.

So what the hell are we doing? It's like, well, yeah, they're doing something out there, but let's keep moving. I don't—I really don't get it.

HAASS: Picking up on that, and looking with hindsight, should the Obama administration have done more? Once it was learned that the Russians were put to no good and interfering in our politics, either before the election or during the transition, should the Obama—if the Obama administration had a mulligan, should it have done more?

BIDEN: Well, the answer to that question is I'm not sure. I think we made the right decision. Let me explain what I mean. This was a moving target. What we were originally told at, I guess, around August, September, we knew they were up to, engaging in trying to delegitimize their electoral process. But the hard data we had was not very detailed, and it did not—and then we—we had—the next point, we went to the—it's the only engagement with the House and Senate that I wasn't asked to lead, and because—anyway. I always was being sent to the Hill to try to settle things. But the gang of 12 were called together. And we laid out to them, and the intelligence community laid out to them exactly what we saw was happening. We didn't know the extent of it then either.

And we asked, so that we wouldn't be in position—the president and I would sit there, literally, after the PDB, and everybody's walk out of the room, and say: What the hell are we going to do? Now, Mr. President, you go out and you unilaterally say this is what's happening, you're going to be accused of—in this

environment—of trying to tip the election. And unless you can give harder data than we have now, you're going to be in a terrible position and it's going to play into the delegitimizing of our electoral process, which was initially what the intelligence community—correct me if I'm wrong here—the intelligence community thought was what this was all about.

And then as we got further—and so we went up. And Mitch McConnell—who I get on with well and who's a smart guy—Mitch McConnell wanted no part of having a bipartisan commitment that we would say essentially Russia's doing this, stop—bipartisan, so it couldn't be used as a weapon against the democratic nominee of a president trying to use the intelligence community, which—now, at the time, people would say no. When we were internally having these discussions say, no one would do that. Well, look what the hell they've done. (Laughter.) The constant attack is on the intelligence community as a political organization run by, you know, Barack Obama for—to take on his political enemies.

Now, you know, as a friend of mine in Scranton would say, who would have thunk it? But it was done. And so there was this constant tightrope that was being walked here as to what would we do. So the second big play was we went and said, OK, look, here's all the data. And Brennan and company came up and said: Here's what we know. Why don't we put out a bipartisan warning to Russia—hands off, man, or there's going to be a problem? Democrat, Republican. Well, they would have no party—they would have no part of it. That, to me, hanging around that body up there for longer than any of you were around doing it, meant to me that this—the die had been cast here. This was all about the political play.

And so the moment the president at that time would come out and say: By the way, the Russians are doing this and hacking the DNC and so on, would have been turned into the president's trying to make this play. Then we learned more. And we learned more immediately after the election was over. But we did have a conclusion—I'll stop—there was a consensus in the intelligence community that

when the president gave a face-to-face warning to Putin overseas at a conference, that we saw no evidence—which really worried me in particular, but I think everybody—of actually going into the voting roles, going into the voting itself, impacting on using cyber to go into and strip the roles of Democrats or Republicans. We had no evidence of that.

And it seemed when that demarche was made that there was no more—it didn't move any further. But I'm sure I'm leaving stuff out. So the bottom line was it was tricky as hell. It's easy now to say, well, maybe we should have said more. But I'll ask you a rhetorical question: Could you imagine if the president of the United States called a press conference in October with this fellow, and Bannon and company, and said: Tell you what. The Russians are trying to interfere in our elections and we have to do something about it. What do you think would have happened? I imagine—I mean, I—I have a view, but I genuinely mean it. Ask yourselves, what do you think would have happened? Would things have gotten better, or would it further look like we were attempting to delegitimize the electoral process because of our opponent?

That was the constant battle. Had we known what we knew three weeks later, we may have done something more, but we—

CARPENTER: I would just say one other thing in addition to that, which is that, especially in the fall of '16, the focus in the administration was really on the cyberattack. We knew that they had—were—had intruded into 21 states' election infrastructure, and we were very focused, precisely as the vice president said, on not allowing the Russians to be able to go in and physically change votes or flip people's, for example, addresses to suppress voter registration. That was the preoccupation.

We are only learning now—in fact, the last 12 months we've learned so much in terms of the propaganda campaign, the disinformation, the stuff on Twitter and Facebook. You know, I think we both feel that, you know, that warrants an additional response and that CAATSA—the Countering America's Adversaries Act—provides the right authorities now to be able to amp up the costs even further.

HAASS: That's really, I think, helpful in getting that on the record.

OK, I will show uncharacteristic restraint and—time for our members to ask questions. Wait for the microphone, introduce yourself, please keep it short. And I know you are all dying to hear about the latest challenges facing Amtrak—

BIDEN: You're going—(laughter)—

HAASS: But our goal here is—to the best we can is to keep the focus on the issue du jour and the article on Russia and U.S.-Russia relations.

Margaret Warner, I see you with the microphone.

Q: Thank you.

Hello, Mr. Vice President.

BIDEN: Hey, Margaret, good to see you.

Q: How are you?

My question is should we actually be going on offense in the information war, in the cyber war in terms of delegitimizing—not just exposing the corruption, but really playing offense the way they are playing offense.

BIDEN: The answer is yes, but not necessarily in the cyber space where we go in, and most of what happens in the cyber space is altering information or preventing information from being able to come forward. I think we should be on the offensive in making it clear exactly what we know Russia and/or Putin, in particular, is doing, and I think we should be working much more closely with our European and allies around the world and exposing and getting them to stand up and acknowledge with us that this is what's happening here—that message gets through.

I mean, to go back, when I got here, the last vestige of that Cold War was Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty and all—it was an attempt to broadcast truth into Russia. And I think somehow we have to have, as a—as the democracies of the world have to be better coordinated in—at every level and every place doing just that: broadcasting to the Russian people what is happening and making clear this is all designed to protect vast amounts of wealth and vast amounts of corruption.

HAASS: I saw a hand this way—I'm all the way in the back.

Just to remind everybody, by the way, this meeting continues to be on the record, so you've just been read your Miranda rights.

Yes, ma'am. (Laughter.)

Next to last row I saw—either way. You two can slug it out.

Q: Hi, thank you.

Rachel Oswald, Congressional Quarterly.

Vice President Biden, there—to be a little bit more specific, there is bipartisan legislation in the Senate right now from Senators Rubio and Van Hollen that would put in place sanctions that would snap in place on Russia if in the future any determination is made that foreign election interference has happened, and you may be familiar with the legislation.

BIDEN: I am.

Q: These are sweeping sanctions, including on the financial sector. Do you think this is an appropriate step and that the potential unintended consequences have been adequately thought through?

BIDEN: I think it is an appropriate step. I'm sure there are consequences that could flow that are ones we did not anticipate, but I cannot—I do not believe the failure—doing that equals the failure to take these steps in terms of our interests. And so I would—were I in the Senate, I'd be supporting that legislation.

HAASS: OK, Barbara Slavin, right here on the front row. I'll try to get as many as I can.

Q: Thanks.

BIDEN: I'll try to be as short as I can.

Q: Thanks, Richard.

Vice President Biden—is this on? Yeah. Pleasure to see you.

BIDEN: Good to see you again.

Q: I would argue that Russia's attitude toward the United States changed not because of NATO expansion, but because of the Iraq invasion. And I wonder if you agree.

And the Middle East is the one area where Russia seems to be doing quite well. It has excellent relations with all the parties in the region, unlike the United States. So I'd like your advice on how we deal with Russia in the Middle East, particularly Syria.

HAASS: But on the historical part, let me just tack onto that because you had the 2003 Iraq war under the previous administration, under 43, but under your administration you also had Libya, which from Russia was bitterly resented as what they quite honestly thought was something of a bait-and-switch as the war reins. They thought they were signing onto something more limited, a humanitarian intervention, and obviously it grew beyond that. So looking back there, those two cases, Iraq and Libya, and then if you want to get into the question of how do we deal with Russia in the Middle East now.

BIDEN: Well, I'll try to be brief. That's an essay question, two of them.

HAASS: Yeah, sorry.

BIDEN: No, no, it's totally legitimate. There will be a lot written about Libya and why some—one of us thought it was a tragic mistake, a policy we undertook. No, I'm serious. It's not public, but it was—I think it—I think—I don't think that's the total cause, but it added to the perception on the part of Moscow as to what our intentions were. Number one.

Number two, I do think that our—I do think Russia concluded two things: one, that there was a danger in them not engaging and an opportunity if they did, but very limited. If you take a look, I predict to you you're going to see Moscow reducing its presence in the region, not expanding its presence. They have found themselves—they have—they have got a tiger by the tail, and if they want to own that issue then have it. They're going to be in enormous difficulty in a very short amount of time.

Initially, their notion was to get back some physical control of the Eastern Mediterranean with the ports and airports, et cetera. That made sense from their perspective. What doesn't make sense from their perspective is somehow, how do they rebuild a country that is so fundamentally fractured? How do—how does that happen? Where do they get the help to do that? I think—I think they've got—I think they've got a real problem.

But we have a problem as well, because I don't think we're paying—the one thing that I look at, and we talk about this a lot, my team at Penn, is that the one place the administration essentially maintained the policy we had begun with the same people that we had doing it was the anti-ISIS campaign. And that has been successful. But there is not the day-to-day handholding and badgering that is required on a daily basis. I mean, I literally—not a joke—I would spend—there wasn't a week that went by I wasn't on the phone with Barzani or Abadi or any—I mean, literally, both cajoling, threatening, negotiating among them and between them, et cetera. And it is really, really, really, really a difficult circumstance to think about being able to establish a stable Iraq in the absence of al-Qaida, the absence of ISIS.

It's still incredibly—we're talking about multibillion-dollar investments that are going to be needed to rebuild these cities, et cetera. And one of the things that we're not doing much about, we're not—we've lost, and there's some real experts in this room, we've lost the notion among our European friends that we know what we're doing, that we have a plan. No, I'm not—that sounds like I'm just deliberately trying to be critical. I'm not. But there was—we were building an overarching consensus—whether they would have ponied up is a different question—that unless you want ISIS 3, you better damn well move and figure out how you in fact stabilize in Syria, Raqqa and you stabilize Mosul. I mean, there's ways you've got—and it requires significant investment.

And I think we took the lid off with our Saudi friends when we basically said, OK, anything you want, man, we're with you, and our Israeli friends. And so there's not much of a coherent plan right now. But the idea that this is of some great benefit to—I think the biggest beneficiary short term is not Russia, but Iran. And that's another story. But I—I wish I could say it more succinctly.

But you want anything of that?

CARPENTER: I think that's—I agree completely.

HAASS: Sir—in the middle here.

Q: Hi. Thank you. Scott Moore from the World Bank.

HAASS: Kill the microphone closer. We're not picking it up very well.

Q: Sorry. Scott Moore from the World Bank.

You mentioned that you believe that Russia's interests kind of eventually lie more in terms of engagement with the West. But I'd just be curious in your relationship—or, I'm sorry, your assessment of the relationship between Russia and China and the direction that that might head.

BIDEN: I don't think it goes anywhere good for Russia or for China. I've spent a lot of time—apparently, I was told by the folks at State—I've spent more time in private meetings with Xi Jinping than any world leader. I have 25 hours of private dinners with him, just he and I, and one interpreter. And I don't think Xi Jinping, in my view, looks to Russia as anything other than an occasional foil. The idea that there's some modus vivendi that fundamentally benefits, other than access to the West, China, I don't see where that—I don't see where that goes.

So I'm not worried. It kind of reminds me of when I got here as a kid. I was 29 years old, running for the Senate, and at the time there was this great thing of this—you know, this connection from—running from Moscow to Beijing that was going to overtake the world. And looking back on it, I remember saying I don't get that. It's one of the most guarded borders in the world. It's not—I don't see—I don't understand where the mutual interest lies. I don't see it here either.

Now, I do see there's places where each will use the other for their benefit relative to us. And I can see that happening. But the idea of there being a long-term partnership, alliance, between Moscow and Beijing in the near term, I don't—I don't think it's in the stars at all.

HAASS: Al.

Q: Allan Gerson, AG International Law.

Mr. Vice President, I wonder if you might expand on the earlier question about Syria. Russia is certainly touting this as a great foreign-policy success. And the inverse of that is that it's a great foreign-policy failure for the United States. But looking forward, especially with the delicate balance between all the players, and especially Iran in the region, is there a way forward for U.S.-Russian cooperation? And how does that play vis-à-vis Iran? Can Russia be looked at as an agent that can curb their ambitions, or is it the reverse?

BIDEN: Look, I—let me organize my thoughts here. I do think that the idea—I used to always—as Mike Froman would be in these meetings sometimes—I'd say to the president, I'd say, you know, when our kids are writing their doctoral thesis and they're asked the question, what'd they do about the Arab Spring, the kid who starts off saying what made them think they could do anything about the Arab Spring will win the book and the course. And I'm being a little facetious, but not very.

And what you have in Syria is a classic example of the biggest conundrum that we have to deal with. Now, the nonstarter is, for Russia, the idea that Assad stays in power and continues to control means there's a guarantee that there will never be peace or security in that country, because so many—so many, you know, bottles have been broken here, man. I mean, there's no way he can put that together.

And there seems to be no willingness on the part of the Russians at this moment to work out—and we've tried 15 different ways—a modus vivendi to figure out how we have a transition of power and so on.

So I think—but there are ways in which we could, in fact, work with Russia to essentially take parts of the country—that's going to be a divided country a long time. You think you had a problem—we have a problem in Iraq. There is no uniting principle in Syria, in my view. There is none. And so I could see where you could work out a place where there was essentially safe harbor for certain parts of that country, and you could drastically reduce the number of people being displaced and killed. We tried that as well, and they didn't play fair there.

Now, with regard to whether or not they're going to be able—they can influence Iran or Iran influences them, I think that Iran, if you notice, got a little upset recently with some of the actions that Russia was taking in Syria. Made it pretty clear they were. And Russia sort of went, OK, well, I'm not so sure where we're going to be. I just don't know enough now—I'll conclude it this way. People ask me: What was the hardest part of leaving the vice presidency? There were two things. Losing Air Force Two. (Laughter.) And not getting up every morning and having a detailed national security brief on what was happening around the world. It was—it was—and so I am behind the curve in what may or may not be some of the opportunities that exist internally.

But in light of what Turkey just did in their northwestern province and what they're attempting to do, light of the distance that is being even further—distance being created between the United States and Turkey relative to the Kurds and people of the YPG we've supported—I don't have enough granular data to be able to give you a better answer than I have now, which is I don't think Russia can in fact dictate to Iran what happens in Syria. And I don't think Russia has the capacity—the capacity to do the things almost everyone would agree, even if it is—the continued leadership stays in place, to make the kind of multibillion-dollar investment needed to stabilize that country.

HAASS: So I can't help you with the airplane, but CFR.org. (Laughter.)

BIDEN: No, I get it.

HAASS: Go to—

BIDEN: But I don't want to acknowledge you guys are spying on the intelligence agencies. (Laughter.)

HAASS: Before I call—I just want to put one other issue on the floor before I get another question or two, which is Ukraine. This administration, unlike the administration you worked in, decided to provide limited defense articles to Ukraine. Do you think that was a wise decision? And more broadly, do you see any scope for any sort of a deal on eastern Ukraine?

BIDEN: The answer is yes, I think it was a wise decision. But then again, I was pushing that for two years before we left, so. And the reason is I think the more you up the ante, the cost to Russia for their aggression—I mean, as you all know, and you know this better than anybody, you know, the one big lie going on about Ukraine back in—and the rest of Russia is that no Russian soldiers are engaged.

They're not dying. No body bags are coming home, et cetera. Because there's overwhelming opposition on the part of the body politic in Russia for engagement in Ukraine in a military sense.

Do I think they're—I think the Donbas has potential to be able to be solved, but it takes two things. One of those things is missing now. And that is I'm desperately concerned about the backsliding on the part of Kiev in terms of corruption. They made—I mean, I'll give you one concrete example. I was—not I, but it just happened to be that was the assignment I got. I got all the good ones. And so I got Ukraine. And I remember going over, convincing our team, our leaders to—convincing that we should be providing for loan guarantees. And I went over, I guess, the 12th, 13th time to Kiev. And I was supposed to announce that there was another billion-dollar loan guarantee. And I had gotten a commitment from Poroshenko and from Yatsenyuk that they would take action against the state prosecutor. And they didn't.

So they said they had—they were walking out to a press conference. I said, nah, I'm not going to—or, we're not going to give you the billion dollars. They said, you have no authority. You're not the president. The president said—I said, call him. (Laughter.) I said, I'm telling you, you're not getting the billion dollars. I said, you're not getting the billion. I'm going to be leaving here in, I think it was about six hours. I looked at them and said: I'm leaving in six hours. If the prosecutor is not fired, you're not getting the money. Well, son of a bitch. (Laughter.) He got fired. And they put in place someone who was solid at the time.

Well, there's still—so they made some genuine substantial changes institutionally and with people. But one of the three institutions, there's now some backsliding.

HAASS: The courts.

BIDEN: They're—and the—yes. And they had made that commitment that they

wouldn't do that.

And so, when we left, the first thing I spent a lot of time—as did Mike because this was his territory as well, and people like Charlie Kupchan and Victoria, and anyway there were a lot of good people we had working on this—we spent a lot of time with Vice President Pence because I was worried that they would make a mistake as a—it would be a sin of omission rather than commission, failing to do certain things or say certain things. And that was at a time when there was an alleged or there was a grave concern among the foreign policy elite that maybe a deal was made to lift sanctions. Whether that was true or not, but that was the atmosphere right after the election.

And so what happened was they did some good things. And they've now—what's his name, the guy they have over there—

HAASS: Kurt Volker.

BIDEN: —Kurt Volker, solid, solid guy—but Kurt, to the best of my knowledge, does not have the authority or the ability to go in and say you don't straighten this up you're out of here. Because look, it all gets down to a simple proposition. We spent so much time—as you know, because I came, Mike, to you for advice—we spent so much time on the phone making sure that everyone from, at the time, Hollande to Renzi wouldn't walk away. They wanted no part of these sanctions on Russia. It had an impact on them. It was basically you've got to do this. And thank God Merkel was strong enough at the time to reluctantly—she didn't like it either—to stand with us, but always worked in Kyiv. I said, look, it's a simple proposition. If, in fact, you do not continue to show progress in terms of corruption, we are not going to be able to hold the rest of Europe on these sanctions, and Russia is not going to roll across the inner line here and take over

the rest of the country with their tanks. What they're going to do is they're going to take your economy down, you're going to be absolutely buried, and you're going to be done. And that's when it all goes to hell.

But to the best of my knowledge, even—and I have—it's a very difficult spot to be in now when foreign leaders call me, and they do, because I never, ever, ever would say anything negative to a foreign leader, and I mean it sincerely, about a sitting president, no matter how fundamentally I disagree with him. And it is not my role—not my role—to make foreign policy. But the questions across the board range from, what the hell is going on, Joe, to, what advice do you have for me? And my advice always is—I give them names of individuals in the administration who I think to be knowledgeable and committed. And I say you should talk to so-and-so.

You should—and what I do at every one of those times, I first call the vice president and tell him I received the call. Tell him—ask him whether he has any objection to my returning the call, and then what is the administration's position, if any, they want me to communicate to that country. But the point is there is no pressure that I'm aware of—correct me if I'm wrong—no pressure I'm aware of on the present leadership in Ukraine to hold them together to be able to continue what looked like was a real possibility of turning Minsk into something that was doable by being much tougher than Germany wanted us to be. But we were moving in that direction. But now it looks like the pressure's off. And this requires this day to day to day.

CARPENTER: Can I jump in? This may be my only chance. (Laughter.) But just on—

HAASS: Actually, you're going to get something you didn't expect. You're going to get the last word.

CARPENTER: OK. Well, just on—so on the Donbas—and I completely agree with everything the vice president said because I think that's actually the major issue right now, is helping Ukraine succeed. And if they don't succeed internally in terms of fighting corruption and establishing rule of law, then it's a lost cause.

But on Donbas, I truly believe Putin's play here is to turn the—he would be happy with a negotiated resolution to the Donbas, but as long as the Donbas is turned into something akin to Republika Srpska in Bosnia. If he doesn't get that, we're going to see the low boil, we're going to see the fighting continue, and we're going to see, more importantly, dirty money flowing into Kyiv to affect their politics. And they've got elections coming up in 2019.

HAASS: Yeah, I was just, as you know, in Russia. And one of the things that constantly came up was a refrain very much along those lines, that in order for Russia to leave the one thing Putin could never countenance would be on Russian TV reprisals against ethnic Russians on the Ukrainian side. That would politically put him in an extremely difficult situation. This is not to defend Russian policy, but to explain it.

Michael—

BIDEN: By the way, I think there's a way that we could have insisted that that not happen, with serious sanctions on our part against Ukraine if that occurred. I think that's—I don't think that's real.

HAASS: I want to thank—do you—

BIDEN: Take the last word, will you? (Laughter.)

CARPENTER: That was the last word. I'm done. I'm done.

BIDEN: I'm not going to live this down. (Laughs.)

HAASS: Well, I want to thank you, Michael Carpenter.

I want to thank the vice president for three things. I want to thank him for doing this article in Foreign Affairs. I want to thank him for being with us today. And I want to thank him for, what, four-and-a-half decades of extraordinary service to this country of ours. (Applause.)

(END)