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NATO DEEP Dive
Vol. 2

Edited by:

Piotr Gawliczek (Editor in chief)
Magdalena Stabla
Jakub Niewelt
Jerzy Tomasik

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All transcripts have been edited for clarity.

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Foreword

Dear Readers,

It is my pleasure to present to you the book NATO DEEP Dive Vol.2, which explores a wide range of subjects covering international security and defence, counterterrorism, and current geopolitical events. The primary purpose of this series is to inform and enhance understanding of the global challenges addressed within the NATO Defence Education Enhancement Programme (DEEP).

The content of this book is derived from transcripts of DEEP Dive podcasts led by Dr. Sajjan Gohel and his research team, Marcus Andreopoulos and Victoria Jones. The transcripts are from DEEP Dive episodes released between July 2022 and June 2023. All the podcasts are available on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and Google Podcasts. I am convinced that NATO DEEP Dive Vol. 2 will be of great interest to professionals, academics, and students of defence and international relations. It is also an important resource for those who wish to understand the significance of counterterrorism matters within the broader security environment. I would like to express my gratitude to the editors and all those involved in the development of this book for their invaluable support.

I would like to mention that DEEP Dive seeks to engage and draw on the experiences of academics, journalists, and policy practitioners. The goal is also to learn more about the interviewees to provide a unique perspective on what has shaped their careers, as well as to discuss their current and future research.

Mariusz Solis

NATO DEEP Coordinator

October 2024

Sajjan Gohel - Global Threats Advisory Group

Prof. Sajjan M. Gohel has a multi-disciplinary background in global security issues and professional military education (PME). His research looks at the ideology that leads to international terrorism, the tactics and strategies of trans-national political violence, border security, the role of new media and the agendas of hostile state actors. Sajjan has conducted on-the ground primary research in over 25 countries.

As International Security Director for the London-based Asia-Pacific Foundation, Sajjan monitors emerging geopolitical threats, whilst acting in a consultancy role for law enforcement agencies, foreign and defence ministries, multilateral organizations, and the global media.

Sajjan is a Visiting Teacher at the London School of Economics & Political Science (LSE). He is also the Editor for NATO's Counter-Terrorism Reference Curriculum (CTRC) combining the expertise of academia, law enforcement, and defence practitioners. As an instructor and trainer for NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme (DEEP), Sajjan serves as the Chairman for NATO DEEP's Global Threats Advisory Group (GTAG) and is the host of the NATO podcast series, DEEP Dive. Sajjan is also an advisor to the Metropolitan Police's Counter-Terrorism Advisory Network (CTAN).

Sajjan's research is case-study driven and he has fieldwork experience in 23 countries. Sajjan has provided expert witness testimony to political standing committees on the evolving challenges in Ukraine, Afghanistan-Pakistan, Central Asia, Middle East and North Africa. Sajjan is the author of the upcoming book, "Doctor, Teacher, Terrorist: The Life and Legacy of Al-Qaeda Leader Ayman al-Zawahiri" which was published by Oxford University Press in the Fall of 2023.

Episode 20 - Asanga Abeyagoonasekera and Sri Lanka's Collapse, July 2022

Key Reflections

- **Structural changes were made to the Sri Lankan constitution by the Rajapaksas, a sibling regime. Nepotism removed the checks and balances and independent institutions were politicised including the judiciary, police, and military.**
- **The Rajapaksas accumulated significant debt through large borrowings mainly from China, as well as investments on strategic projects that did not bring any tangible returns and exacerbated already existing problems.**
- **Sri Lanka needs to immediately recalibrate its foreign policy and once again pursue a rules-based international order. Sri Lanka is an island sitting at the geostrategic location of the Indian Ocean region.**
- **Sri Lanka needs to re-engage with multilateral security mechanisms like the Quad, which can also provide support in curbing the terrorist threat in South Asia and enhancing international security.**
- **The political vacuum and economic instability in Sri Lanka could enable organised crime to flourish. The island nation may also be used as a hub for narcotics coming from Afghanistan and Pakistan by sea. International cooperation and greater intelligence sharing are more essential than ever before.**
- **The largest tourism markets for Sri Lanka were from Russia and Ukraine. Putin's invasion of Ukraine amplified the economic problems of Sri Lanka post-pandemic, and the resulting rise in global oil prices compounded Sri Lanka's economic crisis.**

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

AA: Asanga Abeyagoonasekera

SG: Hello, and welcome to *DEEP Dive*, brought to you by NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel. Each episode, we speak to experts and practitioners in international security and defence, counter-terrorism, and geopolitical current events to gain insight into the most pressing matters of global affairs.

In this episode we speak to Asanga Abeyagoonasekera, who is the Strategic Advisor on Geopolitics and International Security at The Millennium Project in Washington D.C. Asanga is the author of several books including Sri Lanka at Crossroads: Geopolitical challenges and National Interests as well as Conundrum of an Island.

Asanga Abeyagoonasekera, thank you for joining us on NATO DEEP Dive

AA: Thank you for having me.

SG: Let me paint the scene, if I may. Sri Lanka is a beautiful island nation, off the coast of India.

It's been very welcoming to tourists. When Hollywood needs a forest, it films there, iconic movies like *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, I believe one of *The Jungle Book* movies also was filmed there. Sri Lanka is not often in the news for bad things in the past. Although there had been that long battle against the Tamil Tigers in the civil war, there was also the devastating 2004 tsunami. Yet with the Tamil Tiger insurgency defeated, Sri Lanka began to look like a success story by the standards of the region.

Just a few years ago, it had been elevated from a lower middle class income country to an upper middle class income country by the World Bank. Its GDP per capita was about the same as countries in Eastern Europe such as Ukraine and Moldova, and only just slightly behind Brazil. It was a thriving tourist destination and was the success story of South Asia. Yet now we're looking at a country with runaway foreign debt, skyrocketing costs of foreign imports, a collapsing currency, falling exports, shortages of food, fuel, and medicines. Where did this go wrong? Did this country sleepwalk into disaster?

AA: Well, I think to answer your question, yes Sri Lanka was seen as a trading hub from ancient history. The word serendipity comes from Sri Lanka, because the island was called Serendib one time. So, it's a geostrategic hotspot in the Indian Ocean, sitting in the sea lines of communication—the east west sea lines of communication.

The problem emerged due to multiple factors; Gotabaya Rajapaksa's regime's inward policy prescription—irrational prescription—was the main cause for the problem. I would say there were other factors also, which he inherited from the previous regimes, which is the debt, the large amount of borrowings I would say. Those borrowings mainly from China, as well as sovereign bonds, as well as many other countries also. But the Chinese percentage of borrowings as well as the investment that was made on strategic projects did not have any return—minimum return.

So, I've studied the Chinese BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) projects in Sri Lanka, as well as, the larger footprint, the Rajapaksas welcoming the Chinese footprint. The growing footprint in Sri Lanka became a concern to the foreign policy, Sri Lanka had a very balanced foreign policy from its past, non-aligned, and we call it balanced. Now, Mahinda Rajapaksa, who was Gotabaya Rajapaksa's brother who was the president from 2005 to '15, ended a war, as you mentioned, a three-decade civil war in 2009. There were many issues, structural changes that were made to the Sri Lankan Constitution by the Rajapaksas, bringing power to the executive presidency. First initially by his brother, and then followed by Gotabaya Rajapaksa from an amendment, which he made soon after he became president, moving power from the legislature to the executive, removing checks and balances, the independent institutions, such as the Bribery [and Corruption] Commission (CIABOC), such as the Police Commission, were taken under him. He altered the model, I would say much more than his brother did, Mahinda, by inviting 27 military officers into civil positions, including the foreign secretary of Sri Lanka. That I think created one of the biggest concerns because for the first time the civilian military balance we had, was disturbed. And, for example, the archaeology department, again, a military appointment was there in the archaeological [department] and poverty alleviation, [and] on agriculture, to grow vegetables.

So, it was something very new for the Sri Lankans. And also, the regime was very unique because it was a sibling regime. President, as well as the prime minister, who was his brother, which was Mahinda Rajapaksa, the former president, followed by many others. He expanded his family, the finance minister was his brother, another brother, another was in charge of the telecommunica-

tions used, Mahinda's son was involved in that. And then not only the brothers, but also their children also. So, it was a family rule, controlling all the main key ministries, which had internal issues where the senior ministers started questioning the autocracy that Gotabaya built and resigning one after the other. And the corruption issues, the charges that were made by the attorney general, for example, there were charges on a floating armoury issue, with more than 1000 indictment charges raised by the Attorney General [and] was dropped by Gotabaya.

So, the interference with the judiciary was another area, which I saw in 2021, when I wrote *The Coming Anarchy in Sri Lanka*, because the judiciary managed to keep at least some sort of democracy moving forward, some sort of sensibility, with rational judgments given. But when the executive started interfering with the judiciary, such as my writing in June 2021, *The Coming Anarchy* I highlighted the president pardoning a political criminal, who was sentenced by the judiciary and he gave a presidential pardon to him. So, what I mentioned was, [if you] keep on interfering with the judiciary like this, you will lose the credibility and integrity of the whole of the institutions and bureaucracies especially. And you're moving the country toward an anarchic situation, which happened exactly within a year, [on] July ninth was when the people came out and protested.

So, not only the economic issues, economic issues were considerable, but then political issues were also a serious concern because all the protesters are saying, 'we want a change in the political culture, we want to end nepotism, we want to end corruption.' So, it is a political culture change that the protesters are requesting. Apart from the hardship that they're going through, for days in standing for fuel; the highest inflation rate in the world after Zimbabwe, the second highest is in Sri Lanka; the daily wages, there are many Sri Lankans, the larger percentage of Sri Lankans [are] daily wage earners, so they've been affected. As well as their income being affected, the schools have been closed, the government sector is completely dysfunctional. So, it's a complete dysfunctionality, I would say.

SG: Well, you, in much detail, unpacked a lot of the problems that the Rajapaksa dynasty had created and mentioned very rightly that it was not just the economic, but it was the military, it was the judiciary, there was a strong dynamic of nepotism. And we've seen that dynastic Rajapaksa rule come to an end. Gotabaya Rajapaksa has resigned. Whilst abroad, fleeing to the Maldives initially. And he was the eighth president of Sri Lanka and his brother Mahinda Rajapaksa who you were also talking about was the sixth president. It's not that dynastic politics is specifically only for Sri Lanka, it's quite common across South Asia and many other parts of the world, but could we say that this pivotal moment now in Sri Lanka signifies the end of dynastic politics or are there other potential ruling families in the past that may see an opportunity to take advantage of the situation?

AA: I can't call it an end, because of the South Asian context. When you look at it culturally, as well as when you look at how South Asia—South Asia is a very unique region, I captured in my book *Conundrum of an Island,* where security sensitivity is a serious issue. I found that, there was an article which I wrote called *Bombs and Elections*, in which I found that South Asia is very unique to any other region in the world, where, within a week or two, you have bombs, or within a month, you have a bomb, then the whole political [sphere], the campaign's, redirect towards an authoritarian ruler or a family ruler, who wants to establish [themselves].

So, what happened in Sri Lanka was exactly the same because 6.9 million votes which Gotabaya got, they got two thirds of the parliament majority. So, in 2019, it was following the Easter Sunday bomb attack, which killed 250 People in Sri Lanka. So, his campaign was launched one week af-

ter the Easter Sunday bomb attack. So, basically, the campaign was to guarantee security, that when he comes there won't be any mistakes like this, and highlighting the issues that the previous government had on the security concern, because he was the former Defence Secretary, the ideal candidate for the situation. And then he managed to win the Sinhalese Buddhist majority, which is a larger percentage now who's protesting as well as who got rid of him, together with the minority community.

So, South Asia has that uniqueness on the fragile security situation and fragile states can be used to breed terrorism, as well as certain clusters of terrorism, the Easter Sunday [terrorists] if you trace back there were clusters in India. So, we found many security lapses. And then intelligent sharing was a serious issue, the intelligence that was shared by India to Sri Lanka, [which were] multiple warnings prior to the attack, were not shared with the United States.

So, a mechanism like the Quad and security sharing mechanisms from the Quad that have materialised, are positive trends towards curbing the terrorist threat in South Asia. So, I think the multi-pronged approach is what is required. Regionalism is lacking in South Asia, although we have 'minilaterals' like Maldives, Sri Lanka, and India on intelligence sharing, which was signed after 10 years of negotiations, those are achievements, but then you need a wider regional approach on these security concerns.

But Gotabaya Rajapaksa did a lot of policy blunders as well as disturbing countries. If you look at—I can give a good example—the Easter Sunday report, on the presidential report, basically the report mentions that the Indian intelligence that was shared was just information only, it was not intelligence. That is absolutely wrong because it was intelligence. And they managed to even mention the day of the attack. So, they were accurate in intelligence. So, there was a kind of distrust between nations like India. The Rajapaksa's usually have a tendency of tilting towards China, which happened in the Gotabaya Rajapaksa regime. And our foreign policy was even tilted so much that the foreign secretary spoke of the human rights violations of another country, which is China, on Xinjiang, saying that there is no human rights violation in Xinjiang. Sri Lanka has never taken such positions in the past. So, the reasoning of that is because reciprocally, they expect China to defend Sri Lanka's human rights concerns in Geneva.

So, I think the loss of the foreign policy tilt, as well as, the loss of many projects, such as the US Millennium Challenge Corporation Fund, a grant of 480 million, Gotabaya then had a commission for that, to evaluate the MCC grants. So, the report came out saying that there is a national security threat from the grant. These are all illogical, irrational decisions that he took. So, I think right now, you would have all these issues that he [made], the policy blunders were part of his. I would say he lost his position because of all of this.

SG: Interestingly, you've spoken about the Quad, which is this alliance with the United States, Japan, India, and Australia. Sri Lanka, as you mentioned, is a very important country geo-strategically, and it seems to have moved from various different positions when it comes to its relationship with, say Quad nations and then its relationship with China. Where do you see Sri Lanka pivoting itself in the future, now that the Rajapaksa regime is over? Will it try and keep a neutral position? Or do you think its future is perhaps aligned with one particular group or nation?

AA: Sri Lanka needs to immediately recalibrate its foreign policy towards the balanced foreign pol-

icy we had. And that should be number one of the interim regime now, after the president leaves the country basically, and he leaves his position now, the acting president, basically, as well as the Prime Minister, now, you should understand this is the fourth cabinet will be having in three months, so the dysfunctionality is very clear. And this is the first time a Sri Lankan president has escaped from military flight and given resignation to the Sri Lankan embassy in another country. So the situation is that the recalibration is really important, because we have lost trust with a lot of our friendly countries by coming up with this, what I mentioned earlier, the policy decisions that they took. Again, to give you an example on Japan. Japan's LRT projects, as well as Japan's East Container Terminal (ECT) project, Japan and India, the tripartite agreement, so Rajapaksa cancelled both of them. So ECT, again, they saw it as…all of these decisions, he tried to weaponize it to his own political gain, which is the ultranationalist sentiment which he was propagating. So he tried to sort of weaponize it, but then the foreign policy tilt was also an immediate recalibration of foreign policy, so a balanced foreign policy was required.

Some of the agreements we have signed, I would say were pretty much harmful for the country. I mean, the 99-year lease agreement, I have seen this agreement, because I had access to it as the Director General, I have seen multiple agreements in Sri Lanka, which has serious, I would say, long-term implications, because I call it, more than a debt trap in Sri Lanka, a strategic trap. There are three reasons I call it a strategic trap from China. First is the Chinese Communist Party's (CPC) involvement with the Rajapaksa political party, [Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, SLPP], the CPC as well as the SLPP. Now, about that particular point and the funding to the political party, so I have elaborated in one of my papers which will be published very soon on that particular area, which I have studied. The second is basically on the interference on the human rights issue, the reciprocal arrangements and the human rights concern, which I discussed, between China and Sri Lanka, again moving the country towards a dangerous tilt. The third is the military-to-military agreements, which is very concerning. One of the issues is, for example, the telecommunications network, 80% or more is owned by China, is run by, operated by China. So the surveillance for law enforcement as well as intelligence, so there is a concern, with military-to-military basically agreements, because Sri Lanka is an island sitting at the geostrategic hotspots, the Indian Ocean, the Indian Ocean security, which we have played earlier for a rules-based order, we have always contributed as a nation to a rules-based international order. Law of the sea, for example, Sri Lanka's immense contribution in the 1970s.

And so you see contribution towards democratic values and the alteration of the democratic model was happening during Gotabaya Rajapaksa's regime, with the military as well as with the external interference. So, you need immediate recalibration of the foreign policy and to support a rules-based order in the Indian Ocean, as well as to support the neighbouring country, India's neighbourhood first as well as the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), the programme of Prime Minister Modi, which all the other nations are supporting. So, here's a nation kind of sandwiched between the BRI and the Indo-Pacific. But if you look at the, it's important…okay, BRI, we are part of it, but then we need to have a sort of toolkit to have the BRI projects more transparent as well as, I mean, those agreements should be made available to the general public. The protesters are asking for them; they said, we don't even know what's going on in this country, because the group of elites are controlling the signing. We sign an agreement on a Sunday, on a weekend. We don't sign agreements on a 99-year. So we did that also. So you could see that all these malpractices and all that happened, a constitutional…I mean, we did a change to our constitution again without any consultation of the general public. So the public and the protests are asking for consultation, accountability. Now, the president has run away again, they're asking for accountability.

I think the democratic nations should support Sri Lanka at this moment. There is a huge role for the international community to play. I mean, I know that the US is giving technical assistance for institutions, but then what the British parliamentarian raised,

Ed Davey, he's the leader of the Liberal Democrat party, very interesting, he said Sri Lanka requires two packages: one is the economic package, which is from the IMF and all that, but then the political package, what I want to highlight is what he mentioned on the political package was accountability. So people are asking for the looted money, the corruption charges, all that. So Ed Davey mentioned that why don't we even discuss, talk about an international arrest warrant? I mean, obviously that's what the democratic leaders should be talking about right now. And, if they have looted the money, there's the corruption charges they should investigate. So the democracies and even President Biden did not invite Sri Lanka for the democratic summit because of the serious concerns of what's going on to the democratic fabric, as well as how Rajapaksa was interfering and creating this autocratic model. So, I think the Quad in the Pacific, all these mechanisms should have specific roles for these countries, because you need to tag them, especially we are in a volatile time because of post-COVID, as well as the war in Ukraine, a situation where countries can tilt towards autocratic, you know, bring in autocratic sentiments, as well as move away from the democratic norms and values. So, there is a huge role for the international community.

SG: Absolutely. One other aspect is that when there is a political vacuum and economic instability, organised crime tends to flourish. Now even prior to the fall of the Rajapaksa regime, Sri Lanka was having to deal with the challenges of narcotics coming from Afghanistan and Pakistan by sea, especially heroin and now increasingly methamphetamines. NATO DEEP recently produced a very detailed report entitled *Narco-Insecurity, Inc.*, in which it showed that, in many ways, Sri Lanka is one of the primary victims and targets of what is going to emanate from Afghanistan and Pakistan. Do you think that in this vacuum that now exists inside Sri Lanka that there could be further challenges that could be coming from both Afghanistan, Pakistan, not just in terms of terrorism, but in terms of narcotics as well?

AA: Definitely. Sri Lanka, that's why I mentioned that they could use Sri Lanka as a hub for transnational security concerns. I mean, it has been reported so much about the drug trafficking, on people smuggling, so, various other concerns…I mean, if you look at the Indian Ocean security, there is a role that Sri Lanka should play as sitting in the geostrategic hotspot in the Indian Ocean. So, the role is that, on the maritime security, they should be sort of, I mean, you know, the government of Sri Lanka should have a plan with India as well as neighbouring countries. How to sort of tackle these issues, one particular incident was, I mentioned about the Easter Sunday terror attack, the intelligence sharing is one very important area, but then when it comes for maritime security projects, such as in the European Union, the EU has about what's happening in Madagascar as well as in the western Indian Ocean can come into Sri Lanka also. So this is on maritime, you know, illegal fisheries as well as maritime on arms smuggling and various others, so it's very important that these measures as well as technical assistance come in to Sri Lanka. And it's a time that, while the political system has been reset and all that, while the people are asking for better political culture, more transparent, so it's very important to have this mechanism.

Also, the concern is law and order, yes, crimes. These obviously will be affected because of what's happening. I mean, Sri Lanka is almost a failed state, because if you look at the fourth cabinet appointed, so there's not functioning properly, the government is not functioning. So it moved from a fragile state, I would say, to a crisis state, and now I could call it almost a failed state. So we need to sort of bring back that sort of normalcy to the institutions as quickly as possible. So that it will not move towards a failed state where law and order is completely dysfunctional, and that's really

important. So, there is a danger here also, because what had happened was Rajapaksa appointed a prime minister, during his last few months, he appointed a new prime minister after his brother had to leave because of the protests. So the prime minister has only one seat in the parliament, and that's also a bonus seat, which was given. It's the first time again we are having a prime minister with one seat in the parliament. But then the credibility of the political model has to be re-established. The prime minister and the president should be people who are appointed by the people, elected by the people, not who come from bonus seats. And also those are really important, because if you make a sort of alteration to the credibility of the model, you will have a space for the military to walk in. This is the danger that I'm trying to highlight. I've been sort of mentioning in my…because there is a trend that it won't become like Myanmar, but a model similar to Myanmar can emerge from Sri Lanka—a civilian-military sort of rule, because what I hear for the last few days is like, okay, the protesters walked into the president's house, they counted the money, gave it to the police, so it's not a mob, if they were mob, they would steal the money. There were incidents like two guns were stolen from the military, so that sort of thing. So I mean, there is a danger in those, because what they're saying is like, okay, the prime minister's made a statement saying rebels have to be sort of identified from the protesters. And then instead, an emergency was declared and then the curfew, followed by curfew. So the next, I think, couple of weeks are going to be very crucial for Sri Lanka.

SG: Very crucial indeed. And in a connected point about how things are impacting on Sri Lanka, if we can pivot to the sort of the final question of our discussion, the final topic even, the Russian invasion of Ukraine meant that the world's biggest grain exporters were effectively taken out of the market, as well as Russian exports of fertiliser, which Sri Lanka's farmers were recipients of. Coming out of the pandemic, Sri Lanka was counting on the return of tourism, which is a vital industry to the island. One problem was that the first and third largest tourism markets for Sri Lanka were Russians and Ukrainians. Russia is also a major buyer of Sri Lankan tea. The realities of the war and the sanctions on Russia have somewhat upended a lot of these arrangements. Did Putin's invasion of Ukraine compound the economic problems of Sri Lanka?

AA: I would say to a certain percentage, yes. I mean, it did have an impact on the consumer prices because of the rise of the field prices. It did have an impact for the tourism industry. We had a large Eastern European tourist industry. That got affected from the war. Sri Lanka is one of the main tourist hotspots, and then we earn a lot from tourism, but the pandemic and then the Ukraine war had serious impact. So, the consumer prices, yes, there was an effect because of the oil prices, the rise of the oil prices. So yes, I would say the war in Ukraine did have an impact on the daily lives because of the consumer prices and the tourism industry. So those are the two things that were affected. On the fertiliser, well this has to be clearly understood, although the organic fertiliser switch was done by Gotabaya [Rajapaksa], there was Chinese shipments coming into the port. So a lot of people have not read that. They think that organic fertiliser, although he changed the immediate switch from chemical fertiliser to organic fertiliser was the main trigger point for the economic crisis, no, it was not the main trigger point. He made it a political, basically, a campaign to go on organic and you know, e-cars, or electric cars, etc. But then, while the Chinese shipment which came to the port, authorities found that was contaminated, and it's a very interesting read to understand. And then 24 hours before it came to Colombo, we [Sri Lanka] had to pay for that shipment, which I have analysed that. So it's not that he wanted to bring in organic fertiliser. Although it was a political choice he made overnight, switching did impact the entire agriculture industry. But with Russia, I would say only these two points were the main concerns, we do bring in fertiliser also. But the biggest impact was for the tourism industry.

SG: Interesting, and it's been very important to have this discussion with you on a very important

country that perhaps won't necessarily get always the headline attention. But it just shows you what happens in Sri Lanka can have much wider ramifications. And I think it's very germane to point out that Sri Lanka is not a dictatorship, like in the case of say, Libya, when the despot Colonel Muammar Gaddafi was violently removed from power back in 2011. Sri Lanka is a democratic nation with a thriving civil society movement that has very peacefully demonstrated its desire for change. And it's been very important what you've been saying, because it helps us to glean from the Sri Lanka case study about democracies and what could go wrong when there is economic turmoil, as well as when there is political interference in terms of the military institutions and the judiciary. So I have to thank you for providing all this insight. Asanga Abeyagoonasekera, thank you so much again for joining us on *NATO DEEP Dive*.

AA: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

SG: It's been our pleasure.

Asanga Abeyagoonasekera bio

Asanga Abeyagoonasekera is a Senior Fellow and the Executive Director of the South Asia Foresight Network (SAFN) at the Millennium Project in Washington DC and a Technical Advisor to the International Monetary Fund(IMF) in Washington DC, where he contributed to Sri Lanka's IMF Governance Diagnostic Report 2023.He is the author of several books including Sri Lanka At Crossroads: Geopolitical Challenges and National Interests, as well as Conundrum of an Island.

Episode 21 - Minna Ålander and NATO's Nordic Frontline, August 2022

Key Reflections

- **Russia's invasion of Ukraine contributed significantly to the Swedish and Finnish decisions to join NATO. Although both countries have worked very closely with NATO since the 1990s, they had remained outside of the alliance.**
- **Sweden and Finland have been cooperating with NATO for decades with the purpose of increasing military interoperability at the highest possible level, so that in case it became necessary to join, it could be attained without much delay.**
- **The Kremlin failed to anticipate that Sweden and Finland would choose to join NATO and demonstrated a huge misunderstanding of bilateral relations with both Nordic countries. Despite initial threats, Moscow has been powerless to halt Finland's and Sweden's NATO accession.**
- **The aftermath of World War II resulted in Finland losing territory to the Soviet Union but avoiding occupation on the condition of neutrality. The period of Finlandization resulted in Soviet interests negatively impacting on Finland's foreign and domestic policy.**
- **Finland has been prepared for potential Russian hostility for many years and has developed strong intelligence in this realm. Finland is aware of all the different clandestine tools the Kremlin adopts.**
- **There is a harmonisation between the Nordic and Baltic Sea security architecture. Finland and Sweden joining NATO is a game-changer for regional security.**

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

MA: Minna Ålander

SG: Hello, and welcome to *DEEP Dive*, brought to you by NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel. Each episode, we speak to experts and practitioners in international security and defence, counter-terrorism, and geopolitical current events to gain insight into the most pressing matters of global affairs.

In this episode we speak to Minna Ålander, who has served as a Researcher with the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) and also the Finnish Institute for International Affairs (FIIA). Mina's research is focused on Nordic security and defence related issues. Her writings can be found in multiple international magazines and periodicals.

Minna Ålander, many thanks for joining us on NATO DEEP Dive

MA: Thanks a lot for having me.

SG: It's our pleasure. Both Sweden and Finland are joining NATO. It's a seismic shift for these two

nations with a long history of wartime neutrality and staying out of military alliances. How much did Russia's invasion of Ukraine contribute to Sweden and Finland deciding to join NATO?

MA: Well, that was obviously the trigger, there is no other explanation for, why it happened now, why it happened so fast. Obviously, both countries have been working very closely with NATO already since the '90s. So, in that sense, it didn't come quite as out of the blue as many observers feel that it did. But of course, the trigger, why this decision was made now and not last year, or next year, is Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

SG: Are we surprised as to how quickly that development of Sweden and Finland wanting to be part of NATO happened? Because if we had looked at this, say, at the start of 2022, and someone said that 'well, NATO may have new members, and they could be Finland, and Sweden,' I would have been shocked, I would have laughed, I would have thought that that person may have had a concussion. So, is this really something monumental?

MA: Well, I think it depends a bit on whether you look at Finland or at Sweden, because the cases are the same but different. So, for Finland, I have to say that as a Finn, this didn't surprise me, really, because Finland has had this long-standing policy called the 'NATO option.' It was quite a curious part of the Finnish security and defence policy. Basically, what the 'NATO option' was about was to keep the option open of joining NATO, if the security environment changes in Finland's vicinity. And of course, this was mainly in view of Russia. So, we have had this threat tradition from the Russian side towards Finland and Sweden, and Russia has been issuing these warnings towards two countries against joining NATO since at least 2016. And in a way this 'NATO option' played an important role as an answer to that. So, Russia had these threats it issued regularly and Finland could always play this NATO card and remind Russia, 'well, okay, if you go too far, we may just join.' and although the public support was very low in Finland for Finnish NATO membership, nevertheless, there was always this idea that it was conditional on the security environment staying stable. And it was very obvious already since 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea, that something was brewing. And basically, you could almost say that already back then it became clear that this is what will happen if Russia escalates.

So, in that sense, in the Finnish case, actually, there has been also on the Swedish side, if you look at the operational side, also in Sweden, Sweden has also been cooperating very closely with NATO, already since the '90s as I mentioned. Both countries have been NATO partners in this Partnership for Peace since the '90s, 1994 actually, to be exact. And since 2014, both have also been Enhanced Opportunity Partners. So, there has been this obvious and very deliberate aim of increasing the interoperability to the highest possible level with NATO, so that in case that it becomes necessary to join, it can go fast, that the countries don't have to go through this membership action process anymore at that point, and so on. So, in the Swedish case, it was maybe a bit more surprising, not on this kind of operational or military side, but in the sense that for Sweden it was more of an identity crisis, let's say. And in the Finnish case, it was a very pragmatic decision, the security environment changed, so then Finland reconsidered the options and what is the best way to maximise Finnish security, vis-a-vis Russia.

And in the Swedish case, it's more linked to the foreign policy identity of Sweden, going back 200 years there's this narrative of neutrality. Actually, to be exact Sweden hasn't been neutral since it joined the EU in 1995 and even during the Cold War, Sweden wasn't as neutral as it looked like because Sweden had secret security guarantees from the U.S. So, I always like to emphasise that

even in the Swedish case, it was more a narrative than a reality. But nevertheless, that narrative was very important. And that's why in Sweden, the public debate wasn't so instantly clear that this is the way we will go, when Russia started the invasion in Ukraine, and this process was very much driven by Finland. So, Finland kind of dragged Sweden along to NATO, you could say that.

SG: Okay, so that's very interesting. There's a lot of important aspects to unpack in what you've been explaining. Russia, as you were talking about, strongly opposed the two states of Finland and Sweden joining NATO. Do you think that the Kremlin could have ever anticipated that Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine would result in both Finland and Sweden choosing to become part of NATO? Do you feel that the Russian threats that had often existed in the past were enough to deter it? Are they actually genuinely surprised as to what has transpired?

MA: Well, I mean, nobody can really see inside the Kremlin, I can just say that if they didn't see this coming, that has been incredibly short sighted and a huge misunderstanding of the bilateral relations with these two countries and the whole security situation. Because as I said, for example, Finland has been quite clear about this 'NATO option.' It has always been this reminder, on the Finnish side, 'we have our red lines too and if you cross them, then we will go for this option, we will kind of cash it in and that it's real.'

And that's why I do have, a little bit, the impression, especially when you look at the threats that have been issued all the time since 2016, at least as I said, very often, it was said from the Kremlin that, 'if Finland joined NATO, then we definitely put some troops on the border.' And what has actually happened is that troops have been withdrawn from the Finnish border, because they are needed elsewhere. So, actually, the opposite has happened so far, which actually shows two things. First of all, I think that even for the Kremlin and the Russian leadership, it was clear that there's nothing they can do about this. There's nothing they can do to stop Finland and Sweden joining. Because right after they submitted their applications, the rhetoric was totally toned down. Suddenly it was, like Lavrov said, 'well, in fact this is not really a problem, because these countries were working so closely with NATO anyways, that they were already like part of NATO's planning, and it doesn't really change much,' and this kind of thing. And Putin even said some time ago that Russia never threatened these countries, but this is anyways, just a domestic issue.

So, I think that there is this understanding that, especially in this situation, there's nothing that Russia can really, reasonably do to stop this from happening. And I think it also pretty much debunks this smokescreen that the NATO expansion has been for the invasion of Ukraine as well.

SG: Absolutely. And as you mentioned, about the 'NATO option' that Finland had always kept in mind. And it's worth pointing out that both Sweden and Finland, they actually effectively became partners of NATO in '94 and have since become major contributors to the alliance in various different capacities. They've taken part in NATO missions since the end of the Cold War. Despite all of this, the Russian foreign ministry had warned of consequences of Sweden and Finland wanting to join NATO. And you mentioned that they seem to be blowing hot and cold in a lot of different narratives that they issue. Is this bluster, then? Should we be concerned? Could we perhaps potentially expect a raft of say cyber-attacks or disinformation campaigns? Airspace violations that Russia is notorious for? And, for example, how they've tried to threaten Baltic States could Finland and Sweden expect perhaps something of similar nature down the road?

MA: Exactly this kind of stuff was expected in Finland at least. We had been preparing for everything, for this whole Russian repertoire, let's say, as you just mentioned. Finland was prepared for at least airspace violations and cyber-attacks. For example, when Zelensky addressed the Finnish Parliament, there was an airspace violation and denial of service attack on the website of the Finnish ministry of defence and foreign affairs. So, stuff like that was expected. Other things that Finland was preparing for were, maybe this kind of like deliberate accidents that could happen somewhere up north in Lapland, like Russian playing somehow an emergency landing in Finnish territory, or maybe some kind of boat or ship accident at the Åland Islands or something like that.

Because we are very well aware of all these different methods that Russia has, we have a lot of good experience and history with these kinds of Russian provocations. But so far, nothing has happened. There have been absolutely no incidents. The only time was when the U.S. Navy was in Stockholm and there was one Russian plane that came to check it out, but that was it. So, we have been, this is a joke, but the Finns were almost disappointed, we have been preparing for everything and then just nothing happened. But of course, this is the exact idea of preparedness and foresight, that when you're prepared beforehand, you neutralise the threats before they can be issued and made, because you're prepared. And I think Russia knows that.

SG: So, as you say, Finland has a long experience of Russian statecraft and the agendas that they play, and even going back to the period of the Soviet Union. What I thought was interesting was that the decision for Sweden and Finland to join NATO looked like there was a lot of positive coordination between the two Prime Ministers of the respective countries, Magdalena Andersson of Sweden and Finland's Sanna Marin. Let's glean into the history for a moment, because that's another thing that you had touched upon, which I thought was so important. I'm a student of history, so I always found the period of World War Two and the Cold War very important because it drew lines when it came to where countries stood. The Soviets had invaded Finland in late 1939, during World War Two, and for several months, the Finnish Army put up fierce resistance despite being heavily outnumbered. They avoided occupation, post-World War Two on the condition of neutrality, but as a result, also ended up losing 10% of their territory. It came about as a condition of peace imposed by the Soviet Union in 1948, I believe, in what was termed as a friendship agreement. It was seen at the time as a pragmatic way for Finland to survive and maintain its independence. That was generations ago, but does that history still resonate with the Finnish people today?

MA: Very much. First of all, two things here that you mentioned are very crucial for understanding Finnish attitude and approach towards Russia. First of all, it's the spirit of the Winter War [First Soviet-Finnish War, 1939-1940]. It is quite an important part of Finnish identity this success in the sense that we managed to avoid our Baltic neighbours' fate and we were able to retain independence. Of course, we also paid a price for it, as you mentioned, we lost territories in the East and we also went through this period of Finlandization as it's called, which meant that Finland had to quite excessively consider the Soviet interest in its, especially foreign, policy. It also had some negative impacts on domestic policy, in the sense that there was some self-censorship, and it was a very mixed period of time, the general consensus, maybe that it was of two bad options, it was the lesser one and that it was a pragmatic way of dealing with this absolutely huge and aggressive neighbour. It was a necessary way of securing independence and in a sense, it worked because Finland was able to develop domestically to the point it is today, like the Nordic welfare state and everything like that wouldn't have been possible if we didn't avoid the fate of becoming a satellite state of the Soviet Union.

So, it had its justification, but it's still not like a period very fondly remembered in Finland. And that's why it was absolutely amazing to many Finns that Finlandization was fluctuated as an idea for Ukraine before the invasion, and also occasionally now again, because that is definitely not something that the Finns would wish for anyone. And also, because it just wouldn't work in Ukraine's case. Basically, why Finlandization worked for Finland was because Finland managed to avoid full occupation and through that, in a way, earn some form of minimum respect in the Soviet Union's eyes. And I don't think that Ukraine ever had any kind of that minimum amount of respect for its nation and statehood, in the current Russian regime's perception for that kind of solution to ever work.

SG: I still remember growing up as a young boy towards the end of the Cold War and remembering that there would often be important meetings held in Helsinki between U.S. and Soviet leaders, because it was seen as that neutral place where they could actually converge. Now that Finland will be part of NATO, it's going to result in the whole border that Finland shares with Russia as part of effectively a NATO border. And just to put that into numbers, I believe that is 1,340 kilometres or 830 miles. This has now effectively tripled NATO's border with Russia, which was perhaps the very opposite of what Putin had ever wanted, and in many ways, somewhat resulted in his Ukraine adventure backfiring quite substantially when it comes to trying to undermine NATO itself. You were mentioning earlier that in many ways, Finns were prepared for some sort of Russian activity, nefarious role that they could play. And they were surprised that it didn't happen. But is Finland going to have to be on this constant state of preparation now that their border is a NATO border? And very likely there will be military exercises with NATO allies on the border? So, does this change the psyche in Finland? And is it something that everyone is prepared for?

MA: Well, actually, it doesn't change much in the sense that, of course, we have always been very painfully and acutely aware of this border. And basically, the whole Finnish defence policy and planning is geared to protecting that border. Because if Finland only had Norway, Sweden, and Estonia as neighbours, we wouldn't really need defence forces. So, it has always been very clear that the threat is in the East, or potentially coming from the East. So that is the basis of Finnish defence planning. And in that sense, it doesn't change the Finnish level of preparedness and preparation, because we already have a very high level. Actually, it's been quite interesting that now—so in the beginning of 2000, there was this strategic analysis made of the likely challenges, security challenges and threats to Finland. And based on that analysis, most of the defence planning and procurement has been made in the past 20 years. And what it has resulted in is, for example, one of the strongest artilleries in Europe. And if you look at Ukraine, what they are currently struggling most with is the very strong Russian artillery fire at the front that is more than 1000 kilometres long. Then you look at Finland, we have more than 1000 kilometres border with Russia, and we have one of the strongest artillery. So, then you know why, where that comes from. So, in a sense, Finland has been always very prepared. And foresight is a very important part of Finnish defence policy. So, in that sense, it doesn't change the overall approach to national defence that we now join NATO. It's also very important for Finland that we don't outsource our defence to NATO; that's also not necessary, we have very capable defence forces ourselves.

What the NATO membership is about from the Finnish perspective is basically kind of like an insurance policy…that you want to make the threshold of any military action against Finland as high as possible. Like if you see that someone set your neighbour's house on fire, then you want to have a higher insurance policy for your own house, in a way. But of course, that doesn't mean that Finland is not ready to contribute or anything. Not at all. There are actually already a lot of exercises going on this year; we already had quite many planned. And I think they added something like eight more exercises with NATO partners only this year. So, there are almost constantly NATO

troops in joint exercises in Finland right now.

So, because of this whole 'NATO option' policy and the deliberate kind of aim of reaching the highest possible interoperability with NATO forces, it would be very easy for Finland to just jump on board kind of, and the cooperation can start immediately. There will be an almost instant operational readiness on the Finnish side with NATO forces. And all these exercises contribute to that even more now during this period of time between applying and becoming a full member. So, I wouldn't say that it changes much. And the Finns are very well-aware also what it means to have this border. And this is, I think…one of the things that Finland also brings to the table in NATO: we know how to deal with this border, we have a lot of experience with Russia, we have a lot of really good intel insights into also Russian defence capacities in the vicinity of our border, just looking at the Kola Peninsula or some other bases right next to Finland. So, in that sense, I think that there is a very good basis for a very well-functioning cooperation with NATO regarding this border and the whole Nordic, Baltic security.

SG: And that's going to be absolutely critical in the years to come.

MA: Totally.

SG: If we pivot to Sweden—Sweden doesn't share a land border with Russia, but it has very much felt concerned in recent years about its security with several airspace violations by Russian military aircraft. In 2014, a Russian submarine was travelling in the waters of the Stockholm archipelago. My impression in speaking with you is that Finland's neutrality was a question of existence of the Finlandization that you were mentioning. Sweden's neutrality, as you were also talking about, is different. It's a mixture of identity, of ideology. Something to expand on in our discussion: is Sweden impacted by history, like Finland? Or are those factors varied, based on Sweden's own unique experiences?

MA: Yes, I think it has quite a lot to do with Sweden's own, basically, war history as well, that they had this period of like 200 years where Sweden wasn't—since 1814—Sweden wasn't a direct warring party in a war, in a conflict. Also, during the Cold War, this Social Democratic prime minister of Parliament [Tage Erlander, 1946-69] was a very notable figure in Europe, but also especially in Sweden—this idea of peace promotion, disarmament, and that was like the Swedish focus. And it was, in a way, the role that Sweden had in the Cold War constellation. But as I mentioned earlier, it was more narrative than reality, because Sweden did actually have security guarantees from the U.S., so they weren't entirely neutral in fact. And I think what is very important in the Swedish case here and what explains why, although the Swedes may be like…the whole NATO debate this spring was more like a domestic political debate. It had a lot to do with party politics as well. For example, in Finland…it was entirely based on security policies and the security debate, it was about maximising Finland's security, and everyone was very clear about the priorities. And in the Swedish case, I think that maybe without Finland going about it so quickly in this very fast pace… Swedes would have maybe needed some more time to debate more internally and so on.

But actually, the reason why also the Swedes nevertheless recognise the need for joining NATO now in this moment can be found maybe a bit further in Swedish history because the kingdom of Sweden—of which Finland used to be part for several hundreds of years, several centuries—was constantly in war, at war with Russia. So, Sweden also has a very long history of fighting the Rus-

sian Empire, or different Russian state formations at least once every century, up until the 19th century. So, this goes all the way back, let's say, it's a very deep kind of thing. And there is a long history as well for Sweden as well, like Finland was part of those wars against Russia as part of Sweden. So that also kind of explains why they went together about this and why the process was so closely coordinated. Finland and Sweden continue to be each other's most important and closest partners internationally. And the security and defence cooperation has been significantly deepened, especially since 2014. And that's also like one reason why they went together and applied together, because this security cooperation and defence cooperation is very important for both countries.

SG: This security and defence cooperation that you mentioned just demonstrates the close partnership, of course, between Finland and Sweden, and it's also very fascinating hearing your own insight into the history of both countries. So, to conclude in a final part of our discussion, we know that already, Iceland, Norway, Denmark have been part of the NATO alliance. The Baltic states of Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia are also there. And now we have Sweden and Finland joining NATO as well. Are we looking at the end of Nordic neutrality?

MA: Definitely, for the time being, if there ever was any kind of neutrality really in the past, let's say, in the post-Cold War period, at least. I think in Finland and Sweden, especially in Finland, there's quite often irritation about this word "neutral," because we weren't really neutral since we joined the EU in 1995 and also because we have been cooperating so closely with NATO…non-aligned at best, or maybe non-allied, even. But yes, and that's actually a major game-changer for Baltic Sea security, for Nordic security. There is kind of this Nordic dimension. And the Baltic Sea security dimension is actually a huge part and often overlooked part of the decision to join NATO for Finland and Sweden. And that was actually, I think, the argument that kind of prevailed in the Swedish debate, that Sweden can't stay as the only Nordic country outside of NATO, if Finland is going kind of, because since 2009, there has been this Nordic Defence Cooperation called NORDEFCO. And it has been intensified massively since 2014. But there were some structural hurdles and limitations to it because of the different Euro-Atlantic integration decision. Some members of the EU, some of NATO, some like Denmark, being more involved, but having opt-outs in EU security and defence policy, and so on. So now what we observe is this kind of harmonisation of the Nordic and Baltic Sea security architecture, which will make a lot of things possible now, that were kind of difficult in the past because of these states. So, this is an absolute game-changer for the regional security. And the Baltics are also of course quite excited to welcome these two new members because they are in such a strategic position and will also make the defence of the Baltics way easier for NATO.

SG: Well, yes. And I would say that I think the whole NATO alliance is extremely happy to have Finland and Sweden as full members. I guess the last question I have for you, Minna, is what do you think we can expect down the road in 2022? We're already at the halfway point of 2022. But what could we perhaps expect in terms of the security architecture that you mentioned, the challenges that Sweden and Finland may have to deal with, and what perhaps could that lead to as we go into 2023?

MA: Currently, it looks like this kind of feared period, this grey area and what it was called between the application and full membership, like before getting under the protection of the Article 5, there were quite some concerns about how difficult that period could turn out to be. But honestly, currently, it looks like…the situation isn't as dire as expected. And it looks unlikely that Russia has simply the capacity to do much right now. It also looks like the ratification process is proceeding

extremely fast. We have had ratifications every day, every working day, since the signing of the accession protocols one week ago on Tuesday. 11 members, NATO members, have already ratified, which is an unprecedented pace of ratification. So that's a very good sign. So, this could be a very quick process. Turkey remains a question mark, but even there, I'm quite confident that it won't take years. And so actually, it looks better than expected right now. And also, the fact that so many exercises have been planned in the region. I already mentioned so many extra exercises have been added with NATO members, for example, with the Finnish Defence Forces and so on. So, this is of course a way of showing on the non-NATO side that they already back this…the new members or prospective members, they already take their security seriously.

So, I am fairly confident right now that the Nordic region won't be any kind of focus for Russia. I think it also shows…the fact that Russia has drawn away troops from the Finnish border, it just shows that Finland isn't the priority. NATO membership perspective notwithstanding. So, I expect nothing major to happen until both countries become members of NATO, because Russia is simply too tied up in Ukraine. There's just not much capacity left to intimidate these two. So, it looks good.

SG: It looks good. And that's a very positive way to conclude. It's been absolutely fascinating to get your perspectives on such an important issue and a key development in NATO, especially one of the biggest moments in the alliance's history in the last 15 years. Minna Ålander, thank you so much for joining us on NATO *DEEP Dive*.

MA: Thanks a lot.

Minna Ålander bio

Minna Ålander is a research fellow at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA) in Helsinki. Previously, she worked at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) in Berlin. Her writings can be found in multiple international magazines and periodicals.

Episode 22 - Asfandyar Mir and AfPak, One Year Since the Taliban Return, August 2022

Key Reflections

- **One year since the West pulled out of Afghanistan, the country has encountered numerous economic, social, and political challenges as the Taliban's model of governance lurches the nation towards state failure.**
- **The Taliban show no signs of allowing women to play a meaningful role in Afghan society. They will likely go further with more draconian misogynistic policies.**
- **Hardliners in the Taliban including Sirajuddin Haqqani, the Interior Minister, and Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada, the Supreme Leader, wield significant influence and control, as does the Defence Minister, Mullah Yaqoob.**
- **Al-Qaeda will grow as a threat in the coming years as it builds its 'safe bases.' The group's anti-Western platform remains intact, and there has not been any fragmentation with its affiliates in South Asia, the Middle East, North Africa and the Horn of Africa.**
- **Pakistan enabled the Taliban to seize control of Afghanistan, but problems have emerged in the Afghanistan-Pakistan (AfPak) relationship. The Taliban object to Pakistan erecting a border fence and continue to harbour the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), who have increased attacks inside Pakistan.**
- **Pakistan is experiencing political and economic turmoil in large part due to the policies of its former prime minister, Imran Khan, who is also pushing anti-Western conspiracy theories that are increasing his popularity within certain segments of Pakistani society.**

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

AM: Dr. Asfandyar Mir

SG: Hello, and welcome to *DEEP Dive*, brought to you by NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel. Each episode, we speak to experts and practitioners in international security and defence, counter-terrorism, and geopolitical current events to gain insight into the most pressing matters of global affairs.

In this episode we speak to Dr. Asfandyar Mir, a senior expert in the Asia Center at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP). Dr. Mir has held various fellowships including at the Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISC) at Stanford University. His research interests include the international relations of South Asia, U.S. counter-terrorism policy and political violence — with a regional focus on Afghanistan and Pakistan. Dr. Mir's research has appeared in multiple peer-reviewed journals. He is also a prolific Op-Ed writer for newspapers and magazines.

Dr. Asfandyar Mir, a very warm welcome to NATO DEEP Dive

AM: Thank you for having me, Sajjan.

SG: It's now been a year since the West pulled out of Afghanistan, and the Taliban have regained control of the entire country. There have been many deeply concerning developments in Afghanistan during this past year, what in particular worries you?

AM: So, first of all, I think the rise of the Taliban was a surprise to many on the outside, in the international community. I think the U.S. government didn't anticipate that the Taliban would return to power even before the U.S. military withdrawal. But others who also now appear to have been surprised include the Taliban themselves, I think they didn't think that they would be running a country as early as they had to. And so, there's been a real struggle, I think they very quickly transitioned from a mode of triumphant victory to a lot of concern about how to how to run a country. And it appears that in the last eight to ten months, that concern has only grown, it has deepened, and many in the Taliban feel that they are really struggling; the people are not happy with them, their internal politics are also under a lot of stress.

And so, in that sense, I think there's a real concern I have, and I think others do as well, that they can be a state failure. In Afghanistan, we were able to avoid the worst-case scenario for a multi-party civil war, which I think was for the better, because that would have led to a lot of violence. But in some ways, we are back to that concern that maybe this regime is pushing Afghanistan in a direction where it's very weak state structure and apparatus is going to ultimately collapse.

So, that's concern number one, I think the Taliban relationship with several terrorist groups endured. I think that's not a surprise, but still, it's interesting and worrying to see how they are going about managing those relationships. So, they have a relationship with a transnational group like al-Qaeda, to this day, and we can talk about how they're navigating that relationship later on. But then they have relationships with all these regional jihadis, from the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) to various Central Asian jihadi groups, relationships that they're very committed to. And they're dealing with all of these groups politically and by continuing to support these groups, they are increasing the threat that these groups pose to the region.

And then the final concern is, of course, the [human] rights situation. I don't think anyone, including people who were advocating for the Taliban, thought that the Taliban were going to democratise. They haven't done that, no surprise there. But the treatment of women, I think it is a particular concern. The fact that they're not letting young girls return to school is a big worry. And this is despite the fact that there are some real voices within the Taliban who seem to be supportive. I don't think this is just a case of good cop, bad cop. I think there's a real division within the movement on this issue. And the fact that the more regressive of the Taliban leadership is prevailing on this issue and they're able to keep the schools closed I think that that's a big concern. And it's ominous, about the kinds of policies they might enact in the future.

SG: So, you've touched upon several key themes that are each worrying in their own standing, issues of governance, the role and ties to terrorist groups, and the mistreatment of women and the state sanction of misogyny, which I'd like to break each one of those down as we continue our discussion. But when we use the term Taliban, it's in many ways a generic term, because there are so many different Taliban factions and not all of them get on well together. Who are the real decision makers in Afghanistan right now amongst the Taliban entities?

AM: So, even among the close watchers, there remains considerable debate on who matters in the Taliban. I think there's been a view for a while that perhaps the Haqqani Network in Sirajuddin Haqqani are the most, well he himself and his family, are the most important people in the movement and they're going to really shape the agenda of the movement. Then we started hearing about the southerners led by people in the networks of the founder of the movement, Mullah Omar, his son. And then we have heard a little bit more about the clerics, the ulama. Perhaps they have more of a say in the day-to-day decision making.

I think what we are learning now is that, especially in the last few months, that the leader of the Taliban, Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada, is extremely central to all the major decisions that the group makes. He was generally seen as a figurehead of sorts, someone who stayed in the background and who was just signing off on decisions that others in the movement were coming up with. But we've heard from him directly, he recently spoke at a conclave of 3,000 or so ulama clerics, senior tribal elders from across Afghanistan, in which he laid out his vision for the country, which is a pretty hard-line one, he essentially argued that there's a clash of civilization underway and the Taliban, and the movement, and the jihadist ideology, is on the one side and the West, is on the other day, and that the Taliban should not be feeling the heat and pressure of the international community, and there are always going to be costs of sticking to their particular doctrine and belief system and they need to just stick it out through the tough times.

So, Hibatullah seems to be very powerful. I think in and around Kabul on the state machinery, Sirajuddin Haqqani is certainly very influential and appears to call the shots on all issues related to internal security. And then I think there's a role, an important role, being played by Mullah Yaqoob, who is the son of Mullah Omar, I think he's really come into his own. He has a large following, he's very young, but he's able to bring his perspectives and preferences on issues related to foreign policy, and domestic politics as well.

SG: So, this is important how you've extracted these key individuals. And as you mentioned, the supreme leader of the Taliban spoke at that Conclave, in which I think some 3,000 clerics were present, all men, and they were making decisions about the lives of Afghans, including women. And this brings in one of the points that you had addressed earlier. When it comes to women's rights, girls' education, we've seen the Taliban effectively ban women and girls from public life, misogyny seems to be part of their agenda, not necessarily surprising as that is who they wore in the 1990s. They have reneged on promises that they would allow girls back to school, claiming that they don't have the resources to be able to do it. Where are we heading when it comes to the rights of women in Afghanistan? Is this the Taliban basically, constantly, playing games with the West because they know that the West is keen on rights of women to be restored, and the Taliban perhaps hope that if they keep delaying it that perhaps the West will just lose interest and they can continue to spread this state sanctioned misogyny?

AM: So, I think parts of the Taliban which engage with the international community have been, if I put it politely, they've been over promising to the west. I think there was a consensus view within the internationals, who were interacting with the Taliban back in March, that schools were going to be reopened and that didn't happen. On March 23, we got the edict from the supreme leader that school can't be reopened, and they offered a justification for it. And ever since, I don't think there's anything any of the Taliban leaders who engage with the international community have been able to say, which is convincing on this count, it appears that we are on a trajectory, in which the current ban will stay in place and perhaps harsher social policies will be enacted.

And again, I will point you to some of the recent speeches of the supreme leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada, and this last one was on the eve of Eid, in which, again, he pointed to the fact that they are going to have to implement, what he refers to as hudud, and these are judicial policies, the more extreme interpretation of the Sharia. He's saying that they will have to ultimately implement those policies. And so, I think more restrictions are in order. And the Taliban realise that they cannot rule out a lot of these restrictions in one go, that they have to prepare the population. So, in the minds of the supreme leader and some of the clerics around him, they are shaping the population to accept some of the stricter, harsher social policies in the in the coming months and years.

SG: My heart sinks, hearing what you're saying, because effectively, you're saying that the Taliban haven't even gone as far as they want, that we're looking at more draconian policies that they want to implement on women, including, as you talked about the hudud punishments, which would be very, very disturbing to see enacted. Especially now with today's age of social media, you could actually see very disturbing imagery, appearing on social media channels of women being abused and violently attacked under the guise of piousness and security.

If we look at another entity that you had also spoken about, the Haqqani Network. They are an internationally designated terrorist group, and its leader Sirajuddin Haqqani, is also a proscribed terrorist. Yet we are seeing interesting and equally disturbing developments take place with this group of individuals. Sirajuddin Haqqani, during the War on Terror kept a very low profile, his appearance was hidden, his face was obscured often in photographs, probably because he didn't want to be identified in fear of a counterterrorism operation. Yet now we see him everywhere. He is on Taliban propaganda media, he's at recruitment rallies, he's even attending meetings with some Western officials, and even being interviewed by the international media. So, are we witnessing the mainstreaming of the Haqqani Network, the mainstreaming of Sirajuddin Haqqani? Are they becoming an accepted face now of Afghanistan? And I'll just add, again, for those who aren't necessarily aware about Afghanistan, that this is a proscribed terrorist group and proscribed terrorists, as part of that entity.

AM: Right, I'm here in the U.S., Sirajuddin Haqqani, the group that he leads, is designated as a foreign terrorist organisation by the State Department. So, yes, the last decade and more we learned that Sirajuddin Haqqani was leading one of the main outfits, or sub-groups, within the Taliban, responsible for some of the worst carnage, violence, targeting of civilians in the country and now it is surreal to see him as the de facto ruler of Kabul, and not only that, he's also become the main interlocutor with the international community.

And in that sense, he has become more normal. I wouldn't attribute intentionality to the role and status he has come to attain. I'm not convinced that there was a real effort at play to place him where he's at now. But he is certainly more normal. I think diplomats meet him, diplomats of various countries and not just Pakistani officials. Sirajuddin Haqqani and Pakistan have a—or the Haqqanis have a—long standing relationship, but others, I think UN officials see him as their main interlocutor, partly because he controls security in and around Kabul. I think other officials—the Chinese foreign minister made a trip to Kabul, where he met with Sirajuddin Haqqani. My sense is that even from the Chinese perspective, that was the number one important meeting the Chinese foreign minister had in Kabul. More recently, the Indians have been meeting with Sirajuddin Haqqani. And if you know anything about Indians and the Haqqanis, that is quite a turnaround. The Haqqani Network blew up the Indian Embassy back in 2008, but now it appears that Indians

have a line of communication with him as well. So, all of this is to say that Sirajuddin Haqqani has become a fixture. He is a central interlocutor of the international community, with the Taliban. And when people on the outside want something done, they don't go to the political office in Doha, or the remnants of it, or even the foreign minister, I think their instinct is to go to Sirajuddin Haqqani who has become somewhat accessible.

Now, why is that? Why is he seen as accessible? I think part of it is that he is showing himself to be a politician. He is open to engaging and meeting with people from the outside, he certainly carries a lot of authority and in the promises and pledges he makes people think that he's able to deliver on them. But even he faces limits. We have learned, for example, that he's one of the people that has been promising, to various diplomats, that the schools for girls will eventually be opened. And that hasn't happened. And one interpretation is that he's been lying, and this is the Taliban playing good cop/bad cop.

But on the other hand, I think there are some reports to suggest that his power is also limited within the Taliban's very complicated, internal political calculation and distribution. I think he really struggles because he's from the east and the southerners are just so much stronger. And while the supreme leader refers to him on all things security, when it comes to more doctrinal issues the supreme leader and his close circle of clerics kind of have their way.

SG: This is a dynamic that I don't think will go away anytime soon, where we will continue to see the Haqqanis play a very prominent position in how the Taliban directs policy inside of Afghanistan. And we see it in odd ways too, for example, Sirajuddin Haqqani hiring out the five-star Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul and honouring suicide bombers' family members who had served him in the past. Ironically, some of them had been used to target that same hotel, several years before.

Now, the Haqqanis, of course, retain very close ties to al-Qaeda. And we've seen, not just al-Qaeda, but we've also seen their affiliate al-Qaeda in the Indian subcontinent and its cadres come to Afghanistan. Arguably, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the head of al Qaeda, he's producing more content in the last year since the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan than al-Qaeda had been producing in the previous decade. Amin al-Haq, Osama bin Laden's bodyguard in the 1990s, who helped bin Laden escape to Pakistan post-Operation Enduring Freedom, has returned to Afghanistan from Pakistan with a Taliban guard of honour. How do we evaluate the Haqqani-al-Qaeda relationship?

AM: My read is that the Haqqani-al-Qaeda relationship is strong. The Haqqanis are committed to protecting and shielding al-Qaeda. Christiane Amanpour recently interviewed Sirajuddin Haqqani and of course she asked a question about al-Qaeda and Afghanistan becoming a base of terrorism and Sirajuddin Haqqani's response was instructive. He was careful in saying that we will not allow anyone to use Afghan territory, but he really tiptoed around the topic of al-Qaeda, he didn't take any names or didn't even use the word al-Qaeda.

So, the Haqqanis in that sense, seem to have converged on this policy of, 'well we're going to protect our friends, shield them, make Afghanistan comfortable for them, but for now, we have to keep a lid on their external activity.' And that's partly a function of perhaps their continued diplomatic isolation, the fact that they need funds, resources, from the outside world to run the country, that could be a motive. But by and large, they are very committed to protecting their friends in al-Qaeda.

What has surprised me, though, is that there is another constituency, which is very supportive of al-Qaeda, and its cadres, and that is, again, the supreme leader and some of the clerics around him. Again, I'd refer you to his speech on the eve of Eid. It's one of the speeches that I'd expect from an al-Qaeda leader rather than a Taliban leader. The Taliban leaders, at least in their public communications, tend to be more inward, they have a nationalistic sort of strand, they talk about the occupation, but tend to really limit themselves in their articulation of beliefs about jihad, in a way, which is somewhat limited and confined to the region. But the way the supreme leader spoke, he evoked this unending war with the West, a clash with no real bounds. I felt he was really channelling his Ayman al-Zawahiri or Osama bin Laden. And I think that is also informative on how he thinks about some of these legacy relationships with groups like al-Qaeda. With the senior leadership of al-Qaeda, I think he's very committed to protecting and shielding some of those people.

So, that's another key core constituency within the Taliban, which I think continues to be friendly to [al-Qaeda]. And to be sure, there are others who don't want anything to do with al-Qaeda and my understanding is that some people have advocated that 'we should get rid of them, they are nothing but a lot of trouble, and they're the reason we lost our government back in 2001, and so, it will be hard for us to watch them, control them, and they will entangle us in their fights.' I think this is a real perspective and view held by important Taliban leaders, but they are overruled by some of these other figures, including the supreme leader of the moment.

SG: You've, in fact, written a lot about al-Qaeda as future and it's interesting also that you penned joint articles with Professor Daniel Byman, of how al-Qaeda is faring. They were excellent joint articles, as all of your writings are, in which, in this, you spelt out where you agree, and where you disagree with Professor Byman on al-Qaeda's importance. And it was very refreshing to see a spirited discussion, but with also a strong mutual respect, and I don't think I'm giving any spoilers away, if people haven't read it, but why do you think al-Qaeda is still relevant? And why should we still be worried?

AM: So, I identify a number of factors [as to why] I think al-Qaeda is still a major threat and will be a threat in the coming years. But the two that I will highlight here are their level of resolve and commitment in their anti-American platform. I think there is a real concern for me, the fact that al-Qaeda, despite being the most hunted organisation in the world, has not shifted in its political goal and objectives, the fact that it is willing to take on all these costs, and still maintain the fight against the United States. I think that should tell us that al-Qaeda leadership means it when it says it wants to keep up the fight. So, that's fact number one.

The other is, over the last five to seven years, al-Qaeda has not seen any meaningful fragmentation, if anything we've seen al-Qaeda consolidate. So, no major affiliate of al-Qaeda has broken away from its orbit, from the AQAP in Yemen, to AQIM in North Africa, to JNIM out in the wild in Mali, al-Shabaab in Somalia, AQIS in South Asia. All major affiliates of al-Qaeda remain within the fold of al-Qaeda core, led by Ayman al-Zawahiri, despite the fact that he's not a charismatic leader at all. And so, that's striking. And if you look at the trajectories of some of the individual franchises, again, you do not see a pattern of fragmentation, splintering, weakening. Al-Qaeda seems to be holding out in each of the critical theatres. So, the sum of the parts, as I see it, is a very formidable one, and this group has weathered a lot at a time when U.S. counter-terrorism interest is waning. I think resources are being pulled; there's a shift in priorities from South Asia, from key parts of the Middle East, and Africa. I think al-Qaeda has a real opportunity, and some of the factors that have

constrained it over the last two decades are not going to be in play, which will offer this movement more room to pursue its political objectives.

SG: Yes, I couldn't agree with you more. I think that al-Qaeda is enduring, and it is seeking that opportunity to rebuild and re-consolidate its ranks. And something that Ayman al-Zawahiri—as you rightly say, he's not very charismatic—but one thing he says consistently is about building safe bases. And in order to do that they need to have those allies on the ground, like in Afghanistan with the Taliban.

We're looking at a very crowded field here of various different jihadist groups. So, to throw another one now into the mix is IS-KP, or ISIS-K, depending on which acronym we use. They seem to be almost a different type of ISIS affiliate, because in many ways, they comprise of Pakistanis and Afghans, some are former Taliban individuals. There are some schools of thought that believe that they still have ties with Taliban factions, including the Haqqanis. And they also continue to operate separately too, and sometimes, at a low level, will cooperate with different Taliban factions. Where are we at with ISKP? Are they also a threat internationally or are they mostly confined to the AfPak region?

AM: So, the US government really sees IS-KP as a more imminent threat in the short to medium term. IS-KP is perceived to be the group which is likely to attempt a major attack outside of South Asia, perhaps in some part of Europe, they may attempt to attack, say, a U.S. homeland territory, that is the assessment. And this assessment comes on the back of IS-KP's resilience. And this group was weakened quite a bit back in 2018/2019, even early parts of 2020, and since then, it's been regenerating in Afghanistan, and in a specific part of Afghanistan, parts of the east in areas around Kabul.

And the strategy that this group pursues is, I call it an 'out-bidding strategy.' The idea is that it's a crowded military landscape, with lots of different groups. So, 'how do you stand out?' is the question that some ISIS strategists seem to have asked themselves. And looking at the cousins in Iraq and Syria, they've concluded that spectacular attacks, attacks that go against the most vulnerable in the country, and then perhaps some type of regional activity, regional operations, can help them distinguish their brand, and drive the point home that they are more committed jihadists, then say the Taliban and al-Qaeda. And in the fact that with this kind of violence, they can attract Taliban rejectionist elements in the region generally, but in Afghanistan in particular. So, that's their overall brand and political trajectory.

But on the ground, there's been a real debate that perhaps ISIS-K, or parts of it, at least, are a front of the Haqqanis. And, you know, I've been looking at this question for a few years now. And the best assessment I'm able to come up with is that there were elements of the Haqqanis that joined ISIS-KP. So, for example, the current leader of ISIS-KP is a former member of the Haqqani Network. He's from Kabul, he seems to have worked for the Haqqanis back in the day. But beyond that, there is limited strong evidence to suggest that the Haqqanis, or any other part of the Taliban, have actually directed ISKP. Instead, what I find is that the confrontation between the two is absolutely real. The Haqqanis are genuinely scared of ISIS-KP because ISIS is able to attract some of their fighters, they are drawn towards ISIS, I have no doubt about that. There's also the reality that some of the allies of the Haqqanis, like the TTP, look towards ISIS in case the Taliban abandon them, say, due to Pakistani pressure.

So, for all of these reasons, the Haqqanis and the Taliban at large really see ISIS to be a problem. But the way they're dealing with the problem is not reducing the problem. They're making it worse. Their counter-insurgency/counter-terrorism, whatever you want to call it, their approach to countering ISIS is making the problem worse. They have gone for collective punishment-type tactics against the Salafi population in the east of the country, and that's alienating a lot of people, people are very insecure as well. They fear violence by the Taliban, and that's pushing people closer to ISIS. I think more people want to join ISIS as a result of that. So, the Taliban are not making things easy, either for themselves or for the region, when it comes to the threat posed by ISIS.

SG: Tied to all of this is US President Joe Biden's over-the-horizon counterterrorism strategy in terms of targeting potential threats and big groups that pose a concern to global security, plotting and planning attacks. Yet, although there have been operations against, say, ISIS fighters in Iraq and Syria over the last year, there hasn't been a single over-the-horizon strike in Afghanistan since the Taliban returned to power. So, is this an issue that it's just not viable to conduct an air strike, especially as Afghanistan is surrounded by nations who are at best, say, agnostic towards the West? Or is this what you were mentioning about the fact that perhaps there is less focus on what's happening in Afghanistan because of, say, other distractions like Russia's invasion of Ukraine?

AM: There's a real capacity problem. The US and allies' visibility to what's actually going on in Afghanistan is limited. And given how the withdrawal played out, the threshold of risk in terms of targeting going wrong is pretty high. So, with the lack of intelligence and information as to what is actually happening in the country, I think that it's possible that the CT machine doesn't have many targets lined up, and it doesn't know who to interdict or who to disrupt. So, I think that's plausible. The other problem is, what you were getting at towards the end of your question, this political one, that do we want to be doing a sort of military operation or activity in Afghanistan? I think there's some ambivalence of that. There is a determination that any kind of external attack or transnational attack capability needs to be countered that might develop in Afghanistan. But at what point should it be countered? When it's sort of in a more nascent and early stage, or when it's more late stage? I don't think we have a good answer on that. And the administration in general doesn't want anything to do with the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. I think they've really moved on.

And they have many other fires to put out. Their hands are full in terms of the domestic political agenda and issues. And, of course on foreign policy, the president was in the Middle East recently, it's a very complicated situation there with the Iran nuclear deal and tense relations with the Saudis. And then of course, the war in Ukraine is going to go on for a while, and things are also getting fairly complicated with China. So that means that the administration just doesn't have the bandwidth right now to think about Afghanistan, because even the question of one strike is a pretty complicated one. I think it's not the same as taking out a target in, say, north-western Syria. The dynamics in Afghanistan, given the history of US involvement, given the regional configuration, is a tricky one. And I don't think the decision to take a shot is going to be taken lightly; it is going to be a major political decision. And I don't see the administration as having arrived at that stage, where it is ready to even consider such a major decision.

SG: Absolutely. You mentioned about the lack of bandwidth that the Biden administration has to both Afghanistan and also Pakistan. Let's look at the role of Pakistan because it's very significant. You can't talk about the Taliban and Afghanistan without discussing Pakistan, and many

Afghans but also practitioners in the West have blamed Pakistan for enabling the Taliban to return to power. Pakistan itself saw the benefit, in their minds, that an Afghan Taliban seizing control in Afghanistan would prevent both Pashtun nationalist forces from re-emerging in the situation, but also stem the tide of other entities that operate from Afghan soil and have caused problems within Pakistan's own security apparatus such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, the Pakistan Taliban, the TTP, who've carried out attacks on not just the Pakistani military, but also on Chinese workers who have been part of the Belt and Road Initiative in Pakistan's specific China project, which is known as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, CPEC. Has Pakistan's calculus on the Afghan Taliban backfired. Are the Afghan Taliban showing that they have their own agenda and will not bend to the orders of the Pakistani military? Or ultimately will the dictates of the Pakistani generals prevail over the Afghan Taliban?

AM: You know, that's a really important question, interesting question. And I've been looking at this issue for the last year now, and my read is that the Pakistanis certainly wanted the Taliban to return to power, and they did everything they could to make that happen. But ever since the Taliban have taken power, they have been disappointed. I think their initial disappointment started with the fact that the Taliban were not able to convince much of the world to recognise them. I think the Pakistanis wanted the Taliban to put a strong foot forward, or at least convince the Russians and the Chinese. They advocated for them. But the Taliban were not able to convince them. And I think that was the first source of disappointment for them. They saw it partly as their own failing in some ways, but I think they also felt that the Taliban were not compelling enough and were not able to make the case.

The second problem that Taliban have posed for them is their challenge to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, what is called the Durand Line. I think the Pakistani military expectation was that the Taliban would be so beholden to them that of course they would accept the border as sort of fait accompli. And then this contested border, which no government in Afghanistan has recognised for the last 70 years, it would be a done deal, and that Taliban would just accept the territorial markings as the international border. Instead, what the Taliban did was that they started challenging the border in certain places. Pakistan has erected a fence, they took down the fence in key parts of the border, and that led to some escalation along parts of the border, some exchanges as well. And that was very disappointing to Pakistani strategists.

And then the third thing, I would say, sort of the biggest problem in the relationship that has emerged since the Taliban's takeover. And that is the Taliban's support for the anti-Pakistan Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan. Now, if you follow Pakistan, you would know that over the last many years, the Pakistanis had portrayed the TTP as getting the help and support of the former Afghan government in cahoots with the Indian government. And there was a pretty elaborate story that was being fed to the Pakistani public that Pakistan's TTP problem is in effect an India problem, that the Indians are backing these anti-Pakistan insurgents who then go on to fight the Pakistani state. But after August 15, it emerged—I mean, I think close watchers had known this all along—but the Pakistanis started seeing more clearly than ever that the Taliban were extremely committed to the TTP, that they were supportive of this group, and since then, they have given the TTP de facto political asylum.

In Afghanistan, the leadership of the TTP is treated like royalty, and the chief of the TTP moves around in Afghanistan like a senior minister of the Taliban's movement. The TTP has a sprawling infrastructure across the east of the country, which has expanded. The TTP is able to recruit people, it is able to train them, and then the worst part from the Pakistani perspective is that they

are able to push people across the border, who then attack the Pakistanis. And so, the Pakistanis didn't expect that at all. They were, again, operating under the assumption that the Taliban would take care of the TTP problem, either really limit the TTP, or ideally carry out a crackdown and expel this group from Afghanistan. That didn't happen.

So, for all of these reasons, I think the Pakistanis are disappointed. And I think they've cooled off on the Taliban substantially, compared to where they were at back in August, in September. The sentiment that was echoed by the then-prime minister of the country, Imran Khan, that the Taliban have broken the shackles of slavery, I don't think many senior Pakistani officials hold that view anymore. But at the same time, I don't think they're ready to turn against the Taliban. And this could be because they feel stuck with the Taliban, the fact that there's no real alternative. I think that's plausible. But I think what's more plausible, is that they still see Afghanistan or the future of politics in Afghanistan in terms of the India-Pakistan rivalry and potentially Indian influence in Afghanistan. I think they calculate that if the Taliban were to somehow lose power or weaken in the country, then the Indians are going to gain. What their definition of gain is, it's really in the abstract, but it's just this fear and paranoia they have, and that outcome is just unacceptable to them.

So, whatever costs the Taliban are inflicting on them by either contesting the border or supporting the TTP, those costs still are relatively more acceptable to them than the prospect of a regime in Kabul which is more aligned with India. And this is one reason why I think India's decision to reopen its embassy in Kabul is an important one. I think it really complicates the Pakistani calculus, it's a variable dimension of their overall posture and policy towards the Taliban that they have not considered until now.

SG: If we stick with the TTP for just a little bit longer, they have engaged in talks with the Pakistani military on behalf of the Pakistani state. Now, both sides have intractable positions; the TTP are not going to give up their agenda, their weapons, their infrastructure, and at the same time, the Pakistani state will not give in to the demands of what the TTP wants, which is the removal of military troops from the tribal areas, the reinstitution of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), and issues like that. So, peace between these two entities, we've seen it fall apart in the past, and it was somewhat challenging to assume that it could be successful this time. Now, if talks fail between the TTP and the Pakistani military, we're potentially looking at a bigger problem for Pakistan than they could have ever imagined. And as you very rightly said, the narrative that the Pakistani state used to put out, especially under the Imran Khan government, that the TTP were controlled by the former Afghan government or by Indian entities, that's proved to be completely untrue, because we've seen more attacks by the TTP in the last year than previously. Is Pakistan's own internal security going to come under real threat if the talks fail between the TTP and the Pakistani military?

AM: So, since the Taliban's takeover, the internal security situation in Pakistan has deteriorated, and it's driven partly by the growing violence of Baloch insurgents, ethnonationalist insurgents and separatists, but also the TTP, the TTP's violence increased substantially over the last year and then in the first several months of this year. And Pakistan's initial response was to carry out raids and try to beef up the border. And then when their patience really started wearing thin, they responded with cross-border airstrikes in the month of April…coordinated airstrikes in different parts of eastern Afghanistan, where they thought, suspected that the TTP was based. And that was, in my view, meant to shake the Taliban, to get them to put a leash on the TTP. And what the Taliban came back with was, "Well, we can try to broker a dialogue between you and the TTP. And we can help you find a settlement of sorts."

And since then, the Pakistanis and the TTP have been talking, there's a ceasefire in effect right now. And as you note, the TTP is making some very steep demands, and they are very firm in those demands…if I was to really boil it down, what their demands amount to is FATA being handed over to them. And they are not moving an inch from those demands. The Pakistani response was initially muted. They weren't really talking about it. But finally, the government has come up with a position and admitted that they're talking to the TTP, they're negotiating with them in Afghanistan with the help of the Taliban, but they insist that they are going to not agree to a deal that contravenes the Pakistani constitution or that leads to changes in in the Pakistani constitution. They insist that they are not going to reverse the merger of the FATA region into mainland Pakistan. But it is difficult for me to see the TTP moving from some of the positions that it has laid out. And so, there's a real deadlock. And this deadlock is likely to lead to a collapse in the talks, at some point, is my sense. And once that happens, I think violence will go up, the TTP has a lot of capacity in Afghanistan. It has used this recent ceasefire to infiltrate more of its fighters inside Pakistan. So, it also has more capability and capacity for violence inside Pakistan. And for that reason, I think Pakistan's internal security, which is already not in a good place, I think it can get worse.

SG: Adding to the problems within Pakistan is the political tensions that have emerged with Imran Khan, the former prime minister, who was ousted from office in a vote of no confidence in Pakistan's National Assembly several months ago. And he's been in the headlines ever since, consistently repeating this conspiracy narrative that he was removed due to U.S. interference, despite the fact that there is no evidence to support that. There's no grounding in it whatsoever. Yet Imran Khan keeps repeating this narrative, and it's gaining ground within Pakistan, amongst segments of society, including within elements of the military as well. And we've only seen just last month, the PTI, his political party, doing very well in regional by-elections in Punjab province, which in many ways is the heart of Pakistan itself. Now, ironically, when Khan came to power in 2018, that was thanks, allegedly, to military interference in the political process. Does he have a chance to actually win the next elections legitimately in 2023? And what does that mean when it comes to Pakistan's relations with the West, especially as Imran Khan has been so critical of the U.S. in the last many months?

AM: Right. So, Imran Khan has managed to rebound. He was extremely unpopular. Well, I think we can go back to 2018. He came to power with substantial support, but he was pushed across the line by the military and the intelligence services, who wanted to see him in power. And after that, he was not able to govern the country well. The country went through a series of economic problems. Negotiations with the IMF kept getting stalled. And, of course, the pandemic hit, which provided a breather of sorts, but ultimately, he was not able to govern well, and that took a real toll on the economy, made him unpopular. And that unpopularity combined with his falling out with the military, and specifically the army chief, Qamar Bajwa, for several different reasons, I think, enabled the opposition to mount this vote of no confidence back in March and April, which led to his ouster. Now, a lot of us thought that that was it, that Imran Khan had been really unpopular.

And as you note, he had other ideas; he came up with this conspiracy theory that his ouster was, in fact, engineered by the Biden administration. And strangely has blamed a senior, but still not super senior bureaucrat of the U.S. government, Assistant Secretary Don Lu, as somehow being the point man in coordinating this conspiracy against him. And this conspiracy of his has resonated with a lot of Pakistanis. So recent polling suggests that up to, I think it's a poll from the month of June, close to 50% of the Pakistani public actually believe his conspiracy theory. And that's up

from a percentage of, I think, 35% immediately after his ouster. So, his message, which is based on a lie, appeals to a lot of Pakistanis, and that's helped him regroup himself politically. He has been holding massive rallies across the country. And most recently, he was able to win 20-odd seats in the province of Punjab, which puts him on track to return to power whenever the elections are held—they can take place later in the year, they can take place some point next year. But he's looking very strong, and the incumbent alliance coalition government led by the PML-N, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, including the Pakistan People's Party, among other smaller parties, is looking very weak. So, Imran Khan is all set to make a comeback, and he could well be the next prime minister of the country. And I think that…if he returns to power, that will pose problems for Pakistan's relationship with much of the Western world. I think the U.S. government will not know how to engage with him. I think even people will think a few times even before trying to meet with him, because they will be concerned that they will say a thing that he [Imran Khan] might go public with them and he will put a spin on them. So, it will be very difficult for the U.S. to engage with him. I think other Western capitals would also struggle.

And then I think the bigger problem will be how he manages Pakistan's flailing economy. Pakistan's economy is in a freefall of sorts, Pakistan's currency has been crashing for a while. It is out of foreign exchange reserves. Pakistani ministers, senior ministers, the finance minister, even the prime minister at times, have to run to either Beijing or some Middle Eastern capital to ask for more funds. So, Pakistan really is looking at the prospect of a default. And Imran Khan has contributed to this really precarious economic situation in an immediate way with his populist decisions, and there are no signs that he's learned his lesson, that he thinks that he's made any major mistakes. And therefore, it is likely that if he comes back to power, he will make some of the same mistakes again,

SG: It's quite remarkable that for a man who is clearly limited in his ability to govern, and make decisions that are effective for the economy, for the nation, in terms of providing stability, even handling the pandemic, he ultimately banked on sound bites, and seemed to get away with a lot of the hard questions that others are not necessarily afforded.

We've been having this discussion, and there doesn't seem to be any real positive news that's come out of either Afghanistan and Pakistan over the last year. And to conclude, one final question, what should we be watching out for in the months to come for both Afghanistan and Pakistan? What do you think is going to continue to be a problem? What worries you as we go down to the end of 2022?

AM: I'm very concerned about the economic situation in both of these countries. I think the Taliban's economic management leaves a lot to be desired. There's a real liquidity problem. The U.S. government has been keen on helping the de facto authorities revive the central bank. And my understanding is that even that conversation remains very challenging. So overall, Afghanistan's economic situation, the humanitarian crisis there sadly will worsen. And I'm going to be watching that. And there will be downstream consequences of that, on how the Taliban rule the country, the kinds of social ballot policies they enact, the kinds of relationships they end up leaning on, including relationships with some of their jihadist allies. So that's a major concern for me. And when it comes to Pakistan, again, the economic situation is really bad. And I am not seeing a clear path by which Pakistan makes a recovery. And so, I think the coming months are going to be very turbulent. And if the ceasefire between Pakistan and the TTP lapses, I think violence in Pakistan can go up once again. Already there's a lot of violence by some of the Baloch insurgents and separatists in the country. But if you add the TTP's violence in that mix, I think the security situation in Pakistan can

deteriorate. So yeah, you're right, there's no real silver lining in the region at this point. And the overall outlook is very grim.

SG: Very grim, indeed. And it's important that you identified those economic and security concerns. It's only looking at the example of Sri Lanka, who had to deal with both combining and what was once a thriving state actually collapsing. And the recent podcast we did for NATO *DEEP Dive* demonstrates the intricacies of that. And when you look at Afghanistan and Pakistan, the problems are far more bare for everyone to see.

It's been a huge pleasure, Asfandyar, to have you on the podcast. I'm so grateful that you could spend the time, I'm a big fan of your writings, I read them in great detail. You are, as far as I'm concerned, the leading expert on Afghanistan-Pakistan, and I'm most glad, Dr. Asfandyar Mir, that you were able to join us on NATO *DEEP Dive*.

AM: Thanks so much for having me. And I'm a fan as well, so it was great to chat with you.

SG: It's been our pleasure and hope to have you on the show again.

AM: Thanks.

Asfandyar Mir and AfPak, One Year Since the Taliban Return

Asfandyar Mir is a senior expert in the South Asia program at United States Institute of Peace. Previously, he taught in the political science department and held various fellowships at the Center for International Security and Cooperation of Stanford University. He has written extensively on the international relations of South Asia and U.S. counterterrorism policy and has been published by major media outlets and research institutions, such as the CTC Sentinel, Foreign Affairs, New York Times, Middle East Institute, War on the Rocks, Washington Post among others.

Episode 23 - Rebecca Weiner and the NYPD Intelligence Bureau, September 2022

Key Reflections

- **The NYPD's primary role is to protect New York City, but also support other cities and nations through sharing intelligence, resources, and capabilities.**
- **Largely due to the pandemic, there is a growing problem involving young individuals who use terrorist tactics whilst conflating conspiracy theories and personal grievances, mixed with mis—and dis—information online. They are ideologically agnostic.**
- **A fundamental distrust of institutions is often at the root of radicalisation and violence. This is a common facet many different groups share, which transcends ideology.**
- **Information today is easily weaponized for nefarious purposes by state and non-state actors. It is crucial that the public is aware of this dynamic so that they can better navigate the information landscape.**
- **Russia's war in Ukraine is forcing law enforcement agencies to monitor asymmetrical and paramilitary groups that are being sourced by individuals who seek military training and then return to their home countries.**
- **Women are increasingly taking on important positions in the national security arena, but more can be done with focused recruitment and dispel the myth that these are career paths inimical to women. It is important to get more women into fields focused on dealing with the repercussions and implications of misogyny in terrorist groups.**

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

RW: Rebecca Weiner

SG: Hello, and welcome to *DEEP Dive*, brought to you by NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel. Each episode, we speak to experts and practitioners in international security and defence, counter-terrorism, and geopolitical current events to gain insight into the most pressing matters of global affairs.

In this episode we speak to Rebecca Ulam Weiner, the Assistant Commissioner for Intelligence Analysis at the New York City Police Department (NYPD). Rebecca manages counter-terrorism and cyber intelligence analysis and production for the NYPD's Intelligence Bureau. She is one of the principal advisors to the NYPD Deputy Commissioner of Intelligence and Counterterrorism, and she shares responsibility for policy development and programme management. Rebecca also coordinates and integrates intelligence analysis and operations for one of the world's largest law enforcement agencies.

Assistant Commissioner Rebecca Weiner, it is great to have you on NATO DEEP Dive.

RW: Thanks so much, Sajjan, I'm happy to be here.

SG: The New York Police Department (NYPD) is arguably one of the most well-known law en-

forcement agencies in the world, in large part because of all the TV shows that often depict the work that the police force does. But it would be great to get the perspective from a practitioner such as yourself. Could you explain and expand on the role of what the NYPD does when it comes to counter-terrorism and international security?

RW: Absolutely. So, while everybody knows what the NYPD is, the giant municipal law enforcement agency that has brought broad brand recognition from around the world, what people probably don't know, is that we also have some 2,000 men and women who do counter-terrorism work as part or all of their day job. We have devoted tremendous resources towards the counter-terrorism missions since 9/11. We had resources that were focused on this area prior to 9/11, as well.

Our primary role is to protect the great city that we call home. But also, very importantly, we view our role as protecting other cities and towns across the country and around the world, by sharing our intelligence, and resources, and capabilities, with our partners. Because of the breadth and the depth of our programmes here, and because New York City has been a priority target for terrorism, across ideologies—and that's an important part of it—we have unique insight into the terrorism threat. More importantly, we have a unique capability of mitigating it. So, we've had over 50 plots against this city in the last 20 years, some half of them in the last five. Unfortunately, we've also had our fair share of attacks. So, we've developed expertise through experience and that expertise is translatable beyond the NYPD.

SG: You're the head of the Intelligence Bureau at the NYPD and that's a very important role. And in many ways, it also, then, explains, to a degree, the challenges that you're having to try and counter, that you've just outlined. But could you provide an overview of what you and your team does in terms of helping counter terrorism, and then also, as you mentioned, working with international partners as well?

RW: Sure, so, I in my role as assistant commissioner of intelligence analysis, oversee our analytic cadre, and I will give you a sense of what that means and what that is in a minute. But if we think back to this some 2000 people, across two bureaus, who are doing counter-terrorism work, of sorts, for the department, we have two primary bureaus who handle that work. Our Counter-Terrorism Bureau, which was established in the aftermath of 9/11, broadly speaking, performs protective deterrence and emergency response mission, as well as overseeing the Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF). So, think about heavy weapons trained and armed personnel deployed around the city as needed, the bomb squad, chemical, biological, radioactive, nuclear explosives mitigation, [these are] specialised personnel who are deployed into precincts with special training, who can respond to incidents, things that are overt, that focus on deterrence, as well as defence in the case of an incident, and the JTTF, as I mentioned.

The Intel Bureau, which is where I work, has many roles, counter-terrorism is one of them. We also combat and investigate traditional crime, do extensive dignitary protection, which was the bulk of the mission prior to 9/11, as well as significant international engagement with law enforcement counterparts abroad. The primary mission for us is detection and disruption. So, at the most basic level, we do this by collecting information, turning that information into intelligence through analysis, and, to the extent that we can, sharing it. We collect information from the public, from our partners at the local level, the federal, and international levels, also, from the private sector, and from our own personnel. We have teams of analysts who as I mentioned, I oversee, who are married up with seasoned investigators and the job of these teams, of analysts and investigators, is to gener-

ate both tactical and strategic intelligence. So, some of it may advance a particular investigation, or suite of investigations, some of it may advance our understanding of a threat stream.

And we have a number of established networks and partnerships to share through. So, in our international liaison programme, we have 14 officers who are posted around the world, whose job it is to share best practices and resources and help understand the threat in the areas that they are focused. As well as our network of several hundred law enforcement agencies across the country, which we call sentry. And we've got another network of over 20,000 private sector partners that we call shield. So, we clearly take the sharing mission very seriously, though the investigative piece is always our bread and butter.

SG: That's very interesting, how you unpack all the different dynamics of what the NYPD does and how important those different strands are, because ultimately, they're all providing that information that fuses together. It makes me ask this question, because I'm curious about it—I know, we've discussed this before, and it's a great story—but I'd love you to tell this story to the listeners of the podcast. How did you get involved in this field in the first place?

RW: Well, it was quite random. I think it was probably—as is the case with many things in life—equal parts happenstance and destiny. I've been working in the national security arena, but more at the academic policy level, focusing primarily on WMD related issues at the outset of my career as a young person at the Council on Foreign Relations, and then at the OECD in France, and then at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at the Kennedy School. And I knew that I wanted to focus from the writing policy thinking side into ground truth work, I knew that I wanted it to be in the national security arena, and post 9/11 had become very interested in the counter-terrorism problems.

Then I came upon a great *New Yorker* article by William Finnegan that described the Intelligence Bureau, which at the time was in its fairly nascent stages of development. And then shortly thereafter, the police commissioner, Ray Kelly, came up to the Kennedy School to speak at a conference and describe the programme further and I thought, 'well, this sounds like a fascinating place to spend a year or two.' And I encourage anyone who's listening to this, who is a young person, to heed this advice, I just said, 'well, I'm going to go up and talk to him afterwards and ask him, whether it would make sense for somebody who's new in their career to apply for a job there.' And I did and a couple months later, I was hired. And I figured I would do it for two years, then move on, but I've loved it, and it's been almost 16 years.

SG: So, that's a great story, because it shows that you have to take the opportunity as in when it comes. So, you asked Commissioner Kelly about how you can get a job and that got the whole process started?

RW: It did. And it just always goes to show that, no matter what preconceived notions you might have about the evolution of your career, sometimes the best opportunities come just from keeping an open mind and following your interests.

SG: And that's a very important life lesson. Seize the initiative, seize the moment. We're living in very interesting and dangerous times in the post-pandemic era, or what is the new normal now.

Could you provide an assessment of what you think the current threats are by terrorist groups, now? How have they started to look at the world in this period of the pandemic ending or us having to adjust to it?

RW: Well, Sajjan, you and I have talked about this a bunch, through your own work. And I think there's almost a bit of nostalgia for the earlier years of our career when the threat was simpler, in many ways. So, when I started on board, looking at this issue, most of the focus was external, threats external to New York City, emanating from al-Qaeda and other foreign terrorist organisations. This started to shift around 2010 When we saw the emergence of homegrown violent extremism, enabled by the advent of social media platforms and the proliferation of English-speaking propagandists online, so that was our first major inflection point here. And then this all got hyper-charged in 2014, with the rise of ISIS and numbers of individuals who are seeking to travel overseas.

In 2017, added to this chorus, was the rise of the accelerationist neo-Nazi, what we call a racially and ethnically motivated, violent extremist threat. And then a couple of years ago, we started to see corollary anti-government extremists, from the opposite side of the political spectrum here. Now, most recently, and quite troubling to us here, is the introduction of individuals who use tactics that previously had been mostly the bread and butter of terrorists, who seem animated by conflicting conspiracy theories, and personal grievances mixed with mis—and dis—information online, to carry out acts of mass violence. And we saw this recently here in New York with the subway shooting earlier in the spring. We've seen it in a number of other cases across the country.

And this is important to view as a discordant symphony of threats. It's not like one threat fades away, and a new one takes its spot. All of them are aggregated together. So, we're now having to deal with al-Qaeda, ISIS, REMVE (racially and ethnically, motivated violent extremists) actors, anti-government actors, conspiracy theory motivated individuals, at the same time. And many of the tools that we've developed to deal with these issues are ideologically agnostic, you can apply it to one as well as the other. But it forces a degree of agility and an amount of resources that's really difficult to maintain.

SG: So, you use the term ideologically agnostic as some of the challenges that are now being presented to us. How much has the pandemic played a role in that? In the sense of how its impacted-on people's mental health, creating those conspiracies that you were also touching upon, and then perhaps this dynamic of the threat of using guns in attacks that are maybe ideologically motivated, but then also, perhaps, as you said, agnostic in terms of their ideological beliefs?

RW: It's played a huge role. It's interesting, though, because at first, we thought to ourselves, well, from a tourism perspective, the pandemic is going to reduce the availability of targets, because you didn't have crowds of people gathered, you had a less hospitable environment for an actual attack. However, what we're dealing with now, and I am fairly convinced that we're going to be dealing with this for years to come, are the follow-on consequences of the pandemic, as you've just described. So, the mental health impact that spending so much time in lockdown has had, especially on younger individuals. And that's a trend that we've noticed a lot recently, is youth actors. And these are youth actors who do tend to be somewhat more fluid in calling themselves a jihadist one day and a neo-Nazi the next, and not seeing anything inconsistent about that. So, mental health is a huge part of this.

Social media is a huge part of it. And again, if people are staying home, they're spending a lot of time online. They're consuming information from sources which are ranging from nearly unverified to malign interference by foreign nation states who are adversarial. So, there are plenty of opportunities for people to be radicalised to violence in a way that we just didn't see a decade ago. And that, as they said, creates long lasting instability. There are all the economic factors of joblessness and this and that, that also compound these issues, but I think people were at home, in their basements or in their living rooms, feeling very vulnerable and fearful. And as such were presented as useful fools for terrorist organisations, or other adversarial actors, to feed information that is damaging too.

SG: Do you think that there has been an increase in the ability of lone actors or those that have been motivated by what they have seen, heard and watched online, in terms of their ability to carry out, not necessarily sophisticated attacks, but the attacks using IEDs that, in the past, were not always that possible? And what I mean by that is that pre-pandemic if someone was, say, motivated by ISIS, but they didn't go to Iraq or Syria, and they tried to carry out an IED attack in the country that they were in, it tended to fail. They were missing a component; they didn't quite know how to assemble the device. Whereas now, perhaps, has that gap in ability being resolved? Or is it that the tactics have just evolved based on opportunity?

RW: That's a really interesting question. I think, as you know, concrete and reiterated guidance, coming out of both al-Qaeda and ISIS for the last decade plus, to use whatever you can, whenever you can, to carry out an attack. So, focusing on vehicle ramming, or edge weapon assaults, or gun violence, or fire as a weapon, the availability of the tactic becomes more important than the sophistication of it.

I don't know whether the pandemic changes the equation from a tactical perspective, per se. It certainly has afforded people a lot of time on their hands to be learning about tactics that they may not have considered elsewhere. I do know that in New York, interestingly, when we did a look back last year, when it was the 20th anniversary of 9/11, plotting against the city and tactics, and targets, and ideologies. We found that, compared to other homegrown violent extremist cases across the country, our cases here tended to involve individuals who were looking to construct an IED. So that's been a persistent interest, for whatever reason, in New York. Recently, we've had a number of acts of violence involving mass shootings.

So, I think it runs the gamut. And the firearms issue in this country is such an important one, the availability of firearms means that you will continue to see mass shootings that might be ideologically driven, or in many cases are not ideologically driven, as a tactic of choice.

SG: And in terms of the locations of an attack that could take place, we've seen terrible incidents on train stations and in supermarkets. How does one deal with that, in terms of having security but without it actually being an obstacle to people going about their daily lives? I guess it's a very challenging dilemma that one has to face.

RW: Absolutely. I think it's an issue that we are trying to sort through, literally as we speak. Our state legislature is currently in the process of drafting new laws that will constrain the ability of indi-

viduals to carry firearms in certain public places. Buffalo, the New York subway shooting, Uvalde, all within a fairly short time frame. [These were] incidents that—one clearly—we would describe as terrorism: the buffalo shooting. One we would more potentially describe as of the conspiracy theory minded violence, which was the Brooklyn subway. The tragic school shooting in Uvalde [is] in a different bucket altogether.

What they all do have in common is the modus operandi of a firearm. In a supermarket, a school, and a subway, those would be the three primary categories of places you would want to restrict firearms from being carried into. How do you protect a subway that 6 million people depend upon, to get on and off in New York City every day? You can't actually have people going through magnetometers. So, here, I think technology and some political will are going to have to come together to help pardon targets that have been, by their nature, quite soft across the country, in a way that doesn't make Americans and others feel that we are living in some kind of military state. We don't want the security that protects us undermining our freedoms and our own sense of security as we walk around the street.

SG: Absolutely. If we pivot to state actors, what concerns you the most about what some countries are doing in the world to destabilise international security? And does that have ramifications also for New York City, with it being such a major international, global hub, economically, politically, and of course, socially, as well?

RW: Sure, and again, going back to the years post-9/11, a municipal law enforcement agency, the NYPD, creates this counter-terrorism mission, and our focus really is on foreign terrorist organisations, local level implications of this, and the local level implications of this became very clear, as we saw the rise of homegrown extremists and domestic extremists. So, why would the NYPD as a local law enforcement entity have to think really seriously about nation state adversaries, typically the domain of our federal counterparts? And here, I think we are in territory that we haven't been in several decades. We've got a land war going on currently in Europe, and what will be the implications of that conflict to all of us going forward?

And so, at the outset, concern about other modalities of threat vectors, cyber being a huge one here. We were very focused on the issue of asymmetrical or paramilitary groups being sourced by individuals from our area here. So, in this case, in the case of the Russia war, individuals who might be in the neo-Nazi mindset who are going over to support both sides of the conflict was a concern. What happens when those people go seek, obtain military training and then come home? Are we going to be dealing with a situation like in Afghanistan several years from now where you do have all these people who've gotten fighting experience; after the hot phase of the war dies down, who's going to be left training and fighting? And what will be their interest in focusing on the US and elsewhere across the West? So, there's one that is a huge preoccupation.

But also, an entity like Russia, who has demonstrated an ability to meddle with elections, disseminate disinformation, churn up civil unrest within our country. We are experiencing some of the dividends of that activity right now as we speak. And that's one, but there are others. And we think about Iran and its activities and the threat that it posed. So, in addition to all of the threats that we talked about earlier, this one is gaining in prominence, even for an agency like the NYPD, charged with protecting New York City as a world global capital of finance and everything else than New York City is.

SG: I find that increasingly when I speak to people in federal and municipal law enforcement agencies, they often talk about this balance that exists between dealing with threats such as terrorism, and then also threats from state actors. And they all seem to be saying that increasingly, it's the state actor dynamic that is becoming bigger and not necessarily the only priority, but it is becoming more of the discussion and the challenge. Is that something that New York is also having to deal with?

RW: Well, yes, and we deal with it in an interesting way, which is that our concern here is that the nation state threat vector does not devote too many resources away from counter-terrorism. We have extensive capabilities and resources here in New York, and we have an international footprint, and we intersect with international law enforcement constantly. But we have our limitations as a local law enforcement agency, and if other partners become too focused on nation state actors and threats to the preclusion of CT,

we're concerned about that. And we're now faced with a situation around the world where you've got simultaneous theatres of conflict—Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, obviously, Africa—ungoverned spaces in a moment where people are shifting resources away from those conflicts and those threats to deal with the nation state issue. And will that leave us blind and vulnerable to a CT threat that emerges from what we considered to be conflicts that are over, and some have moved on from. We are quite concerned about that.

SG: This is another dynamic, of course, why intelligence and information is so critical and to be able to act in real time. So let me ask you a question that a very wise person asked me recently, as in you, I'm going to turn it around. Are there benefits or disadvantages in the declassification of intelligence, such as what was done to show Russia's intentions towards Ukraine before the war began? Because we saw that the U.S. and the U.K. took an unprecedented step to declassify intelligence, specifically showing what Russia's intentions were. And there was often this debate about whether that was the right thing to do. In many ways, it proved to be true, because Russia was exposed. But then there were also those that spoke about the concern that it could actually impact on future intelligence gathering operations. But where would you stand on this?

RW: I think as a bystander, right, who is far from the insight into the decision-making process that led to this strategy, I think it was a fascinating strategy. And I applaud it and hope that it allayed some of the concerns that often keep information that the American public should know that would inform the way they think about the world hidden, due to concerns about how the information was obtained, etc. And it is obviously of paramount importance to protect sources and methods of information in order to preserve your ability to collect future information. However, taking that leap and saying some of this stuff really needs to get out there was an incredibly potent, I think, counter to the information warfare that Russia was trying to conduct. And this is a strategy that I hope we can see replicated in a safe and appropriate way and in other conflicts. And I think the public is smart and sophisticated enough to be able to take onboard this information. And it also helps, I think, importantly, gain their trust at a moment in time. And going back to what the threat landscape looks like now, and how it's different from how it was 15, 20 years ago, at the root of a lot of these ideologies, and at the root of a lot of the violence that we've seen in recent years is a fundamental distrust that people have in institutions—whether it's the government, whether it's science, whether it's the medical establishment, whether it's law enforcement, people don't trust institutions, and in some cases, they don't trust institutions enough that they're willing to carry out acts of violence. And so, institutions can help strengthen the trust that Americans and others have, our public has, in them by being slightly more transparent with what they're seeing and why they're making the

decisions that they're making.

SG: Very important answer that you've given. Certainly, you answered it far better than I was able to! And I think it just shows actually how important what you're saying is in terms of trying to address that trust deficit that is often there, when some people look at how governments respond to information or react. And I think it was important also for the purposes of transparency. From an academic perspective, I would say that declassifying the intelligence is also useful for many of us to do our research and also help to verify what actually exists within the open-source world as well. So, it was an important step. And it would be interesting to see how that unfolds and develops when it comes to ongoing problems with Russia and also perhaps other potential theatres of conflict and challenge that may emerge. Do you feel that this is something that we will potentially see more in the future, when it comes to declassifying intelligence?

RW: I don't know, I eagerly await the answer to your question as a consumer of information that's both in the public domain and the non-public domain. But I think we are just increasingly seeing how important information is, which sounds like a fairly naive thing to say, but the ease with which information can be manipulated, weaponized, turned against the public, dividing the public. It's something that I don't think the average member of the public appreciated until several years ago, or a few years ago, I should say, if they do today. And so having the ability to parse your sources, understand where things come from, is important, whether that's due to the federal government declassifying intelligence and disseminating it, or law enforcement explaining clearly what happened when, and we see this play out in the realm of policing, with conversations surrounding the release of body camera footage of police-involved shootings and other incidents, right, there's now this almost expectation of transparency from the government when it comes to a really important or complicated set of issues. So, on the one hand, you've got that stream of, really we do have, as a member of the public, we deserve to know what happened, and what's informing decision-making. And on the other hand, there's a growing awareness of the perils of disseminating information that is inaccurate and what that can do, from a physical perspective, not just in the online world.

SG: Well, once again, you raise very important points. And in many ways, this does help to challenge the disinformation and the propaganda and the half-truths that some state entities want to keep churning out, which often also don't get answered or counted. And then those perceptions will then feed into those conspiracy theories that we were talking about earlier. So, I think we're at a very important juncture as to what is now happening in terms of how governments in our respective countries react to the challenges and try to almost stay ahead of the information dynamic and keep people involved and aware as to what's unfolding.

One final part of the discussion is to look at the role of women in law enforcement. And we've seen that women have been absolutely essential when it comes to counter-terrorism, to international security. You are a very clear illustration of that. You have incredible analysts that work under you, I've seen that when you very kindly hosted me in New York in the past. Then there's also this belief that we still haven't reached that stage within, say, the Five Eyes and within the wider European Union, where there is enough female representation in these types of positions when it comes to intelligence, security, and counter-terrorism. In your opinion, where are we at when it comes to having more women in this field? And also, what more can be done to encourage women to be involved?

RW: Well, thank you, first of all, for all of that; it's a really important issue. And we've certainly seen a lot of change, even over the last two decades that I've been in this field. In this country, we now have a female vice president, we in New York have a female police commissioner for the first time, we've had female directors of the CIA, female director of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC). A number of women take on incredibly important positions in the national security arena and in the physical security arena. So, things, I think, are improving. But it is an industry that has consistently been male-dominated, and we could do more. Part of that comes from focused recruitment. And I think it's important for women who are in these positions to tell the young woman that was me 16 years ago, that is somebody today, this is an incredibly rewarding career path for you, and it's an area where your contributions will be felt immediately, having that sense of mission every day, never a boring day, and incredibly supportive workplace. And I think that is probably the most misunderstood of all of the reasons that women wouldn't necessarily enter into this field, in the sense that, "Oh, I wouldn't be welcome here," and that, luckily, has not been my experience. And, you know, other women have faced many challenges in their own workplaces, but I think it can be an incredibly supportive environment that you're dealing with important issues every day in a way that you can experience the impact you make directly. So, feeling like I can go to work every day and help contribute to the safety of this city has motivated me for the last 16 years. And that's true of men and of women. But I think it's important to start really concertedly dispelling the myth that this is a career path that is inimical to women.

And you have focused on the issue of misogyny in terrorism in a way that I found really eye-opening when we first had our discussions about this topic. And even more important to get more women into a field that is focused on dealing with the various repercussions and implications of misogyny in terrorist groups. And it's a subtle but incredibly important insight that what unites a lot of terrorist groups across ideologies is a subordination of and projection of violence against women. So how best to counter that from a counter-terrorism mission-set perspective is to bring more women onboard to make sure that that we do.

SG: That's essential, and it's going to be even more important, I would say, in the environment that we are at, that we have more women in the field. And it's worth remembering as to the fact that women have actually been essential to some of the most important counter-terrorism operations. It was many women within the CIA that ultimately found Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan. I don't think it necessarily gets the attention that it should. And of course, there are so many incredible women, as you mentioned, in the NYPD, that have been very important in terms of providing security, and also countering the threats that have existed inside not just New York, but I think wider when it comes to having to cooperate with allies and international agencies.

You spoke about that aspect about misogyny and its connection to terrorism. And yes, it's certainly something that I'm looking at a lot. Are you concerned about what's going on, say, in Afghanistan right now, when we are seeing the fact that the rights of women are completely being eroded and taken away, the Taliban have reneged on promises of women being educated, they are being stopped from working? Do you think that that could potentially act as a beacon for the recruitment of or the arrival of foreign fighters, as we've seen in the past, whether it was Afghanistan in the '90s, or Iraq and Syria post-Arab Spring? Do you have fears that this could be another wave of young men that are motivated by misogyny and potentially the ideological component to that, that could be drawn to Afghanistan?

RW: Absolutely. I'm incredibly concerned about all of that. And you're taking generations of women, subjugating them to a feat that is extraordinarily dire, unfair, unjust. And these are also the

mothers of future victims of terrorism or terrorists themselves, the brothers and sisters and wives, so it is impossible to take 50% of your population and subordinate it, deprive it of rights, of equality, of justice, and not expect generational problems to come. And I think when we think about the future, and the conflicts and the threats that we're all going to be dealing with, increasingly you see, not just episodic violence that demands a particular set of policy outcomes to quell, right, or, "Oh, if only it was a question of counter-messaging," or, you know, "If only it was a question of our response to a particular area of the world." But now, I think these deep-rooted conflicts that will play out over generations, Afghanistan is one, I would certainly describe what's happening in Ukraine and the war with Russia as another. A third would be the interaction of technology and the disinformation/misinformation/information warfare that we were talking about earlier. So how will all of that be enabled by artificial intelligence and other technological developments? And climate change, right, and the civil unrest and resource scarcity and mass migration flows. All of these threats are not near-term, or even medium-term, but long-term, and they all compound one another. So, we are going to be dealing with the intersection of these threats for many years to come. And it's going to require us to be incredibly deliberate and thoughtful about how we approach any one of them.

SG: Yes, and how we approach them may also, I suppose, potentially require interconnectivity as well, as they do potentially correspond with each other, depending on the location and the time, that they, I suppose, become more significant over the passage of time. I'm probably not being very articulate to what I'm trying to say!

So Rebecca, one final thing, is there any last thought that you'd want to give when it comes to where you see international security, any issues that you want to provide a reminder to people about, not to be complacent about, or what to watch, where we should be paying attention to that perhaps doesn't get enough attention outside the bubble of law enforcement and those that work directly in the field?

RW: Following on to all of that, these kind of big threats—Afghanistan, Russia war, climate change and the national security implications that that will create around the world, technology and its intersection with the information war, all of that—I think a really important thing that we cannot overlook is how young the individuals are who increasingly frequently come across our transom. And that's not just in the terrorism world. We see it in the terrorism world, we see it among neo-Nazis, among anti-government extremists, we see it among jihadists. We also see it in the traditional crime context. The individuals who are carrying out acts of violence are getting younger and younger. And for all of us, this should give us pause. And yes, part of that is the hangover from the pandemic and the implications of mental health crisis that it inflicted on people. But today's violent offender is not tomorrow's productive citizen. And this creates cycles. And also, equally importantly, from our perspective as law enforcement and intelligence, dealing with youth is a much more complicated scenario than dealing with an older violent offender. And one has to be incredibly adroit in what tools and what resources you bring to bear. So, our young people are really telling us something through some of this violence. It is an appeal for help, it's an appeal for institutions that they trust, that can be helpful, that can right some of these courses that I see going awry. So, the issue of youth offenders and of mental health is incredibly important for all of us to pay attention to.

SG: Absolutely, I think that is one thing that we definitely need to focus on and look at in greater detail and definitely gives us, as you mentioned, pause for thought. Well, Assistant Commissioner Rebecca Weiner, thank you so much, once again, for being part of this NATO *DEEP Dive* podcast.

We're very grateful that you could spend the time with us.

RW: I'm delighted, thank you so much for having me, and I look forward to continuing the conversation.

SG: Absolutely. We look forward to having you back.

Rebecca Weiner bio

Rebecca Weiner is an Assistant Commissioner at the New York Police Department (NYPD), in charge of its Intelligence & Counterterrorism Bureau. She oversees investigative, analytical, operational, and engagement efforts across the domains of counterterrorism, counterintelligence, criminal intelligence, violence mitigation, infrastructure and event protection, and geopolitical risk. She develops policy and strategic priorities for the Intelligence & Counterterrorism Bureau and publicly represents the NYPD in matters involving counterterrorism and intelligence.

Episode 24 - Sarah Adams and Decoding Terrorism, September 2022

Key Reflections

- **The 2012 Benghazi attack was a coordinated al-Qaeda operation against United States government facilities in Libya. Many of the culprits remain at large ten years later.**
- **Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri was directly involved in the Benghazi plot. Contrary to some perceptions, al-Zawahiri was more than the figurehead of the terrorist group, but in fact, the operations chief.**
- **Libya has suffered conflicts, attacks, and assassinations since the overthrow of its dictator Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. Libya's insecurity has knock-on effects for the Maghreb but also Sub-Saharan Africa and the Mediterranean.**
- **Ayman al-Zawahiri's discovery in a Haqqani Network safe house and subsequent death by a U.S. drone strike in Kabul demonstrates that the Taliban retains very close ties to al-Qaeda. It is likely that many other al-Qaeda figures are receiving sanctuary from Taliban factions.**
- **As conditions are conducive for radicalisation in Afghanistan, there remains a potential for foreign fighters to travel to the country for terrorist training before returning to their respective nations to plot and plan attacks.**
- **Russian private military companies (PMCs) are state-sponsored actors that have committed egregious human rights abuses and terror in Syria, Mali, and Ukraine. They are supported by Russian oligarchs close to the Kremlin.**

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

SA: Sarah Adams

SG: In this episode we speak to Sarah Adams who has held various positions within the U.S. governmental machinery including the Department of Defense, as well as private, and non-profit sectors. She also worked overseas on behalf of the U.S. Government's intelligence missions in Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia.

Sarah previously served as a Senior Advisor for the U.S. House of Representatives' Select Committee on Libya after being recruited as an executive appointment from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Prior to that, Sarah was a Targeting Analyst at the CIA.

Sarah Adams, thank you for joining us on NATO DEEP Dive.

SA: Thank you. Thanks for having me.

SG: It's our pleasure.

I've known you for a little while and I know what you've done in your career, which is very extensive. But I think it'll be interesting for our listeners to get a clearer understanding of your career. So, perhaps it would be helpful if you actually gave some of your background?

SA: Sure, I'll just give a quick overview. So, my career started at the Central Intelligence Agency where I was a targeter. And then from there, I was recruited out to our U.S. House of Representatives, so that's in Congress, and there I worked on a committee that looked into the Benghazi attacks. After that, I went into the private sector, and I worked in the aviation industry. And then I went back into the government, and I worked for our [U.S.] Department of Defense, and in the Department of Defense, I do research and development. So, I help build tools to look at big data problems. And then I spent a lot of time volunteering and right now, I'm a chief operations officer with a Ukrainian NGO.

SG: Well, it just shows you how varied and interesting your career has been covering so many different facets of security, and also humanitarian support as well.

Let's touch on one of the things that you mentioned, which is the Benghazi attack that happened on September 11, 2012. That's now some 10 years later, people still talk about it, why does it carry so much importance and relevance?

SA: Sure, I think it gets talked about a lot because it became so political, and a lot of conspiracy theories surrounded it. What's important about it, though, is, as an American, we lost a U.S. ambassador, and that's like losing your president that is sitting in another country. So, to us, it's very heartfelt to lose someone at that level. He was a very beloved ambassador, as most people know, he went in on his own and helped fight during the revolution.

So, it matters now because, like you said, we're 10 years out, and really the attackers haven't been brought to justice. And the concern is, those attackers aren't just a threat to Americans, they are a threat to pretty much anyone in North Africa; they're a threat to Europeans, because they've gone to places like Turkey. So, it's just important to highlight who actually was involved in these attacks.

SG: So, this is very significant what you're saying and the ambassador, U.S. ambassador Christopher Stevens, was, as you said, a very respected diplomat. And it's also worth pointing out that several other American nationals who provided security to him were also killed in that attack itself. Who was responsible for the Benghazi attack?

SA: Yeah, so that was an al-Qaeda directed attack on our U.S. consulate. There were actually several attacks that night, so, the ones that occurred on the US Consulate were core al-Qaeda, so they were directed by the now deceased Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri. Then there was a series of attacks on the CIA annex. So, that was a completely separate building about a mile away. And that actually was carried out by a local militia in Benghazi.

SG: And is that local militia tied to al-Qaeda? Did they receive instructions from al-Qaeda?

SA: So, they have since had relationships with al-Qaeda, they have some historic relations. I mean, if you think about it, these militias came together to fight in the revolution, but a lot of them had history. So, they fought with al-Qaeda, or they fought with the Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), they fought with a bunch of different groups in Algeria, Afghanistan, Iraq, name your war. So, they did have long historic relationships. After the attacks occurred, they became very close to al-Qaeda, and the person who directed the attack basically was then an al-Qaeda member, and pretty much the most renowned al-Qaeda member in Benghazi.

SG: All of this is extremely important. And you got my attention a while back when we spoke about this because of Ayman al-Zawahiri and, as you know, and as hopefully most people are beginning to know, I've been writing my book about him, which is due in 2023. This was, of course, written well, before al-Zawahiri was killed in Kabul. So, this implies that Ayman al-Zawahiri was very hands-on and that he was helping to coordinate major al-Qaeda plots beyond just Afghanistan/Pakistan?

SA: Yeah, and the really interesting thing is, and you probably saw this, you're way more of an expert on this than me, but this attack was so important to him that he went back in time and basically taped very long historic relations he had, back to the EIJ. So, he made sure the best of who he knew was involved in it, they were involved in the planning, they sent the right terrorists. So, he was really in the details. And I think that would surprise a lot of people. They think of him as more of a spiritual advisor, but this is an operations chief. He plans the attacks; he gets in the weeds of it. And I think that's something that's forgotten about him.

SG: Very much so. What do you say to the argument that some have that al-Zawahiri was too much of a micromanager, that he didn't have bin Laden's charisma, that he didn't have the ability to organise and plot and plan attacks? Because I've heard that argument, but I've also heard what others have said, including yourself, which is that he was actually much more hands-on than perhaps some had perceived him to be.

SA: The way I look at that actually is I feel a lot of that messaging came out from ISIS and they were trying to almost do covert influence against al-Qaeda. You didn't hear a lot of al-Qaeda members saying this, it was actually ISIS, but it was nuanced. So, if people weren't paying attention, like, 'hey, that's actually an ISIS body saying this,' they just thought, 'oh, a lot of terrorists are complaining about al-Qaeda,' when really it was just ISIS trying to push people away from al-Qaeda so they could get them to join their ranks, they could take al-Qaeda's funding, and they did a really good job of pushing that narrative.

SG: Very much so, ISIS really did target Ayman al-Zawahiri and try to take control of the jihadist narrative, as you were mentioning. That's a very important point that perhaps gets overlooked because, you're right, when we often talk about other jihadists criticising Zawahiri, it tends to be ISIS and their own agenda was, of course, very apparent. You mentioned that many people in the Benghazi operation are still at large. So, where are they and what are they doing?

SA: Yeah, so the majority of them are basically, if they're not detained, or deceased, as you not-

ed, they're in the Tripoli area, because a lot of them were pushed out of East Libya, where they're from, so they were pushed out of the cities of Benghazi and Darna and so they're mostly around Tripoli. And then the ones who actually fled Libya altogether are based in Turkey.

SG: This is quite concerning, because if you've got terrorists that have been responsible for devastating terrorist plots and they're still active, that means that they may just be waiting for other opportunities to plot and plan, perhaps they're lying low, because they don't necessarily want to be detected. But it is very disconcerting that a lot of people still seem to be at large.

SA: Yes, it is. And the other thing that a lot of people don't realise is that they're not at large and not doing anything, even just two years after the Benghazi attacks, the same attackers kidnapped the Jordanian ambassador in Tripoli, Libya, to get some of their friends in jail released. That's kind of what they want to do with Ambassador Stevens as well, 'we're going to kidnap him and ask for their [friends'] release.' Most of the focus was on detainees that were al-Qaeda in Iraq, so most of the detainees were in Iraq. This detainee, for example, was actually in Jordanian custody, but his group was al-Qaeda in Iraq.

SG: So, the plot evolved to the extent that, originally it was supposed to be about capturing Ambassador Stevens, and then it resulted in his death. Did al-Zawahiri and al-Qaeda give a lot of licence to these groups on the ground in terms of how the plot was supposed to unfold?

SA: No, I think what happened was, the death wasn't supposed to occur. It was the fact that they couldn't get inside of his villa. So, they set a fire and then him and then Sean Smith, the other American in the Consulate, both died in the smoke inhalation of the fire. So, that wasn't part of the planning, even initially, when al-Qaeda ended the attack at the consulate and didn't know it was over, they actually complained, they said 'our attack was a failure, the kidnapping didn't happen.' So, until they heard Americans had died, they called it a failed attack. And then after the fact, they were like, 'well, we, we had some success, but it wasn't what we wanted.' Because like I said, there were people that were really important to them to get out of prison and one person that they wanted to get out of prison, they never got out of prison, he actually ended up being executed in 2016. So, to them, it was a failure.

SG: This is very important insight and perspective that you're providing, also very disturbing, because of the fact that these people, many of them, are still at large. What needs to be done by the international community to deal with these people that have been involved in some of the most horrific acts of terrorism in the Maghreb?

SA: Yes, I think it's not just a problem in the U.S., unfortunately, we took our eye off the terrorists, and we didn't focus on them. Another issue that happens is that these terrorists do get arrested in other places, be it Libya, be it Europe, and they don't get held very long, it's almost like a capture and release. And that's why they were on the streets anyway. A lot of these terrorists should have been in, and they were in, prison for life. They got out during the Arab Spring, they took advantage of that situation, and went back to their old terrorist ways.

So, I do think we need to be a little tougher in like how we prosecute terrorists, so they stay in prison longer. We have a couple of the Benghazi attackers that were detained in Europe, one in Italy

and one in France, and they were given long enough prison sentences to where they would have been in prison for the attacks, but then their prison sentences got lessened, and they were out and were able to commit the Benghazi attack. So, all those things have repercussions, unfortunately.

SG: Massive repercussions. In terms of your research that you're doing for your book, is there anything else that you want to highlight about Benghazi that you think is important that people perhaps don't pay attention to or may not even be aware of?

SA: I just think it's the fact that—unfortunately it's become a U.S. attack, and everyone focuses on this as a US problem. We fought these terrorists for one night, for the next eight years, the citizens of Benghazi had to suffer through attacks and assassinations from these terrorists; in 2014, a war started against these terrorists. They lost thousands of people in that city just because of this grouping of terrorists essentially. So, it's just that fact that there's a ripple effect when you let people get away with this, and you enable this, and you make them more powerful, they will keep going at you or other people are going to be impacted by them.

SG: Absolutely. And it's important to remember that what's happening in Libya cannot be seen in isolation, because it has knock-on effects for, not just the rest of the Maghreb, but also Sub-Saharan Africa, and also the Mediterranean as well, because many of them are involved not just in terrorism, but they're involved in human trafficking and criminal enterprise as well. So, you're absolutely right to point out the wider ramifications of what these individuals are potentially capable of doing and are actually doing as we speak.

The interesting thing I noticed about the Benghazi attack was that it wasn't necessarily in isolation, because there were other incidents aimed at U.S. embassies in North Africa, in Cairo, as well as in Tunis, as well by jihadist entities, some of whom were also tied to al-Qaeda as well. So, were they all synchronised by al-Qaeda, or was this just opportunistic by groups on the ground that may have received some instructions by al-Qaeda?

SA: Sure, it wasn't synchronised, but the people in Egypt, a lot of them that were involved in the protests, they knew the Benghazi attacks were going to occur that day. The Egypt protests were actually planned for the end of August, but they got shifted. The Benghazi attack started to be planned in June, it was predicated on the fact of when the ambassador was going to arrive in Benghazi. We think they probably found out about September 6, so they had about five days to plan and say, 'here's the day it's going to be.' Tunis, as you know, was actually September 14. So, they took advantage of obviously all these other issues, be it Benghazi, Cairo—Karachi had an issue. So, they then just took advantage. But the same people in Tunis, in Cairo, in Benghazi, do have links and associations, but they did not synchronise the three things to cause an issue for each other.

SG: What's interesting in hearing how you're unpacking this is the level of planning and intelligence that was involved in this, they were looking at it for a period of time, they were actually tracking the movements of U.S. officials and looking at the symbolic timeline as well in terms of plotting their attacks. So, I guess it shows that these are not a ragtag bunch of individuals, that there is a methodological approach to the strategy of terrorism.

SA: Yeah, and I think the best example for what you just said is—a lot of people don't know this—but after the Benghazi attacks, a lot of the attackers fled to Syria. They fled to Syria on Libyan passports they had made prior to the attack. So, they had all their travel documentation to leave the country of Libya, on false names, with real passports, and to get out safely. So, they prepared for an aftermath that they thought would come from the U.S. and they fled. So, it just shows the pre-planning to even have planned your exit strategy.

SG: Wow. So, they were definitely well ahead of what they potentially could anticipate would be repercussions for them. And are many of them still in Syria?

SA: No. So, a lot of them went to Syria in 2012, some went to Syria in 2013. But when that war started in Benghazi, which was called the Battle of Benghazi or it was also called, the Libyan National Army called it, Operation Dignity, they all came back from Syria to obviously fight in Benghazi to keep their terrorist stronghold in Libya.

SG: So, they returned probably even more battle-hardened with more experience from the Syria campaign and then inflicted that menace onto the Libyan people further, providing greater devastation to the country.

If we look more at al-Qaeda itself, Ayman al-Zawahiri is now dead. He's finally been found in Kabul, of all places, which seems to be a safe house of the Haqqani Network, unsurprisingly, because of the fact that he had such close ties with them. But I'm curious to get your perspective, what sticks out in terms of where he ended up and how it ended for him?

SA: Yeah, like you said, we've probably always assumed the Haqqanis were the ones protecting al-Zawahiri, just because they did such a good job. And that is the level you get from the Haqqanis. I think what is really surprising is that he actually thought within the year of the U.S. being gone that Kabul was already safe enough to move to, and it was safe enough for al-Qaeda. And that's actually concerning, right? Because that means he's not the only one. That means he went in well, after others went in and felt safe and started basically setting up training camps and doing al-Qaeda things again. So, he felt safe enough to go there and be with his family and put his family at risk. That's really concerning, because for someone with his intelligence to decide this is now a safe haven for me, we should be concerned.

SG: Yes, as you mentioned, that he [al-Zawahiri], of all people, prioritised on his safety for the last 20 years, during the war on terrorism, he made sure that he would stay in wherever isolated place possible in order to evade detection. The fact that he was willing to come out to Kabul and stay in quite a well-known residential part of the city meant that he must have been given a strong degree of assurance about his safety, especially by the Haqqanis, who are ultimately the main power now not just in Kabul, but in Afghanistan, as well. So, here's perhaps a very obvious question, I guess, does that mean we can't trust the Taliban and the Haqqanis?

SA: Yeah, obviously, we never could trust the Haqqanis. I think there was a little bit of hope, during negotiations with the Taliban, that maybe the moderate end would lean in, that mullah Baradar angle of the Taliban. But obviously, once they started putting it together, it was pretty clear Haqqani

strong-armed him, he didn't really have a say, they got their places in the government. And that was what was going to happen, right? The most powerful faction in the Taliban was obviously going to have the biggest say at the table. So of course, we can't trust the Taliban, we never could. They were patient, they knew this day would come, and they waited for it. And they knew they would take the government back, and they were successful at it.

SG: I should point out that, of course, a lot of credit, in terms of the elimination of al-Zawahiri has to go to the U.S. intelligence and defence communities, because the fact that they could pull this operation off without having any resources directly on the ground, just shows you the capability of counter-terrorism operations. Do you think that this is now the way of the future? In terms of how the U.S. may operate in terms of targeting potential activities of terrorism in Afghanistan, well-known members of al-Qaeda, and perhaps put everyone on edge on the terrorist front that, well, they can be tracked and found, even if they were thinking that the U.S. leaving meant that they were somewhat safer in Afghanistan.

SA: Yeah, I think we're going to see more of this. What I worry is that we lean in too much to this. So, if we even look at the Benghazi attackers, obviously, we know the U.S. really didn't focus on them. But let's, let's just look at numbers. So, there was a general in Libya, his name is, General Haftar, and he led a counter-terrorism operation against the terrorists. So, he's on the ground, he's targeting them, he is there, he's collecting intelligence and he's taking the bad guys off the battlefield. Now, the U.S. is doing the same thing, like you said, in Afghanistan. They're doing airstrikes, targeted airstrikes, maybe the Libyan government's given them a location and they're targeting it. And in those strikes, that killed about seven Benghazi attackers over the years. Haftar, killed, I don't know, 40 to 50.

So, there's still going to always be the guys in the country, and you need to enable them to do the counter-terrorism, because you're never going to get it good enough without the HUMINT (Human Intelligence). Also, you don't want civilian casualties. You've got to get that piece right. So, I do think we'll see more of it. I don't know how successful it'll be. I don't know if we'll take as many people off the battlefield, as we saw happen, in Waziristan, Pakistan. I think that was the heyday of 'yes, we have the intelligence, we have the sources, we're here locally, like this is how you do it correctly.' We're not going to get there again if we stay 10 feet away and up in the air.

SG: Yes, I think that remains the challenge and also the concern. Where do you see al-Qaeda developing now that Ayman al-Zawahiri is no more? In some ways he managed to hold the group together, the affiliates stayed loyal to him over the last 10 years, there were no divisions or breakaways within al-Qaeda on a major scale. But now, you're looking at a kind of new era, effectively, where Zawahiri is no more, bin Laden, of course, died 10 years prior. And now you've got a new challenge for al-Qaeda in terms of what its agenda is going to be. Where do you see the terrorist group going?

SA: Yeah, I mean, you make a really interesting point, because it's just not at his level, right? Even the head of al-Qaeda 's North Africa branch or the head of the Yemen branch, you know, those leaders who they fought with in Afghanistan, or whatever they had those past relationships with, they're all gone. So, we're kind of at like a second generation. So, they're probably going to still maybe take a first-generation leader. A lot of people say it's Saif al-Adel; who knows? But he still then has to reach out to that second generation. And we don't know yet if the second generation has relationships, the first generation had. The first generation had those historic "we fought in

Afghanistan, we fought in Algeria" …the second generation will probably have "we fought in Iraq, maybe "we fought in Syria." Will those relationships be as strong? Will they be as loyal? I think that remains to be seen. There was a lot of loyalty around Zawahiri, because of the 30-40 years he was involved in everything. But will someone else have that background for people to grab onto? I think that's going to be really interesting to see.

SG: Yes. And perhaps we will see that unfold in the next few months, especially as we move into this pandemic era, which is now seen as the new normal where people just are expected to live with it and travel resumes. And in relation to that, do you see the potential of foreign fighters moving to Afghanistan, like they did with Iraq and Syria post-Arab Spring, that they could want to use that as the base, their safe haven in some way like how they did with Iraq in the past? Or is this different in Afghanistan right now?

SA: You know, it's really interesting, because at the end of the Libyan revolution, everyone was like, 'Well, foreign fighters aren't going to really come here. There's no war for them to fight.' But they actually travelled there to train. I think that's what we should focus on. I think it will become a training base and foreign fighters will travel there to train. But that's concerning then, right? They're not going to stay in Afghanistan and fight. So, I do think we're going to see a movement back to Afghanistan. How much, it depends on where they're going to bring them to. So, like if they're going to Afghanistan, and there's actually a real pipeline to another war zone, like let's say there's a pipeline into Syria, it's funded, their travel's all set up, then it will work, right? But if someone hasn't set up the actual pipeline to do it, it might buy us time and less will go there to train.

SG: Yes, that training dimension is something that is getting flagged by a lot of practitioners now, including yourself, and that is something that definitely needs the spotlight to remain. What do you say to the argument that some have concluded that basically the terrorist threat is no longer as concerning as it once was, that transnational terrorism is more in the rear window, and that the bigger threat remains now state actors, and therefore their priority and resources has to go on state actors, and that terrorism will just play a bit part role in that it won't really be to the same scale as it had been in the past?

SA: Yeah, the way I look at that is I think governments hope that's what happens, right? They're just tired of CT, they've been doing it for 20 years, they're like "Let's focus on Russia. Let's focus on China." The thing is, a country like Russia is using terrorists, you know, Iran uses terrorists as a proxy. Even if you want to just say we're going to only focus on the nation state actors, they're smart enough to use with a hidden hand terrorist. I think we don't get to choose who our enemy is and when they're our enemy. So, I think terrorism is going to continue to be a problem. We didn't take enough guys off the battlefield. During the Arab Spring, a lot of terrorists got out. Obviously, last year in Afghanistan, Bagram [air base] got emptied, Pul-e-Charkhi [prison] got emptied. Syria, ISIS attacking prisons there just to get the detainees out. So, we have extreme numbers of detained terrorists released who were like the worst of the worst. So, they're not going to now just be like, "Okay, I'm going to go back to a normal life, raise a family." If anything, they're raising their family and their sons to continue this lifestyle. This is a generational thing.

SG: Most definitely. I think it would be very premature and very naive for anyone to assume that the terrorist threat has gone away, and that mistake was actually made post-Arab Spring, as well, which enabled the rise of ISIS and its growth, and we all suffered terribly as a result of that. So, I hope that those that are in the decision-making places around the world don't repeat the errors of

the past, especially when it comes to terrorists once again finding opportunities to grow and use that opportunity of complacency to basically reassert and reconstitute their ranks.

There was something you said that caught my attention that Russia is involved in terrorism. That is something that we often hear a lot increasingly because of what Russia is doing, not just in Ukraine, but in other parts of the world. But what do you interpret Russia's activities with terrorism to entail?

SA: Sure. I mean, I think it's [Russia's] misuse of Private Military Companies (PMC). I know we call the Russian one's private military companies—they're not, right? They're state-sponsored actors. They're almost like Hezbollah. So basically, Russia uses them, yes, to make economic gains, but they do use them for terrorists, right? I mean, they have some major [incidents of] genocide in Mali, obviously, Syria, now we're seeing it in Ukraine. So, Russia gets to use them and be like, "Oh, no, that's like a PMC, I'm a step removed from that, I can't handle what a company does." No, they're your company, they're at your direction. And I think the more we let them get away with it and not designate them as terrorists, they'll be able to keep doing it. And I think that's a big problem. And I think a lot of the time, nobody wants to deal with it, because the word company is involved, right? So, it's like, "Well, we can't really designate a company a terrorist." Fine, don't call them a company then, they're not. They're basically a private military of Putin's. So, call them what they are.

SG: So, when we talk about private military or 'company', are we referring to groups like the Wagner group, which seems to be very prevalent in Mali, Syria, and unfortunately, in Ukraine as well?

SA: Yeah, two of the biggest are Wagner, as you said, Patriot, there's about maybe seven to eight that they deploy around the world that different oligarchs own. They all kind of have the same shtick, right, they might go in and help, they kind of take over some of the gold mining, they take over some of the security in a country. It basically uses Russian influence, but they get into where they are committing atrocities. There are assassinations. They move into the realm of terrorists.

SG: Well, certainly, the human rights abuses in various countries have caught a lot of attention, highly egregious actions, which go beyond any rules of engagement and war. It's definitely something that has to be flagged and brought to greater attention because I don't think many people really understand just how Russia uses different proxies to further its strategic objectives. There is this debate that's going on in Europe right now about whether Russia should be declared as a state sponsor of terrorism. Where do you sit on this?

SA: Yeah, we're having the same debate in our country [U.S]. Obviously, I do believe what we've seen in Ukraine for sure, just the atrocities they've committed against civilians, the fact that they've actually targeted solely civilians, right? You don't have Russia's capabilities and hit a supermarket accidentally, right? They're choosing to hit those locations. Those are war crimes. They're choosing to do the war crimes to break the spirit of the Ukrainian people, right? That just should not be allowed. And I do think we kind of tiptoe around Putin because he has nuclear weapons, but then it enables him and he's like, 'Hey, I can keep doing these.' And so, it's very…I know, it's a very difficult decision to make…because then what's he going to do? He's not a rational actor. But we do need to put our foot down, because we are showing, 'Hey, if you have nukes, you can do whatever you want.' So, if you're a country trying to get nukes, you're like, 'Hey, this is our top priority, we

need to get nukes because look at the power we get from that.'

SG: Do you think that the West was too soft and complacent prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, that perhaps there was a misreading of Putin, that if he's left alone, he won't launch the invasion and that the West basically was too soft in dealing with him in the first place?

SA: I think the West was too soft in dealing because I mean, this was even kind of intimated by our government, it's kind of like our government thought Putin was going to go in and take a little land, it would be called a ceasefire, he'd be happy. Very strange, right? It's like, this is Putin, he's going to go for it all. Luckily, the will of the Ukrainian people stopped that. But yeah, there was just this belief, 'We'll let him do a little incursion and just kind of let it happen, put some sanctions on him.' So, I do think the way we handled it was too weak, the way the Europeans handled it was too weak. And he knew he was going to get a weak response, and that's why he got away with doing what he did.

SG: Do you feel that he's been somewhat surprised by the reaction in that, yes, he definitely felt he could get away with this, and maybe he was also taking inspiration from the West's withdrawal from Afghanistan, that he thought that the West would not react aggressively. But subsequently, we've seen a strengthening of NATO with also the imminent expansion with Sweden and Finland joining. Do you think that has surprised him?

SA: I think that surprised him. I think what probably surprised him the most, he would never admit to it, is how weak his military is, and it's because there's rampant corruption. His soldiers were not prepared to fight. His military did not have the strategy to go in. They didn't send people in properly. They were telling people, they're in a training exercise, and they're selling off their gas. So, it's pretty crazy that they're basically one of the most powerful militaries in the world, and they could not perform. So, I think that's what's really surprising to him because the lack of performance is what I think allied the other countries. I think Putin would have gone in quick, like everyone said, within a month, taken what he wanted, ended it, everyone would have been like, 'Okay, status quo. This part's not Russia, let's just try to make agreements, make peace.' The failure of his own soldiers to get the job done, I think, is his biggest shock.

SG: And where do you feel this is going? Where is this going to end? How will this end? And how long do you think that this war is potentially going to last?

SA: I don't know. I mean, early on, people said they weren't going to have the funds to do the war. But sanctions haven't really been effective. Gas has gone through the roof. And so, Russia has the money coming in to carry on the war. So, I think as long as Putin wants to do this, he's going to do it. I mean, like I said, he's irrational. And now we've hurt his ego, right? He really didn't go storming in, taking the streets of Kiev. He's embarrassed. And we don't know what that means. It's very difficult to embarrass somebody like him and not expect a logical response to that.

SG: Do you think one of the challenges is that he doesn't particularly care about the loss of life for his own soldiers, let alone the Ukrainian people seem to be of zero concern to him, but when it comes to his own troops, it's almost as if he's willing to sacrifice tens of thousands of them, not even blink an eyelid as a result of that?

SA: Yeah, they've even said that back during the World War, right? Russia just sent in body after body after body, there was no strategy they sent them in to be slaughtered.

I think Putin feels the same way. I do think it's a Russian mentality. Like we are here to suffer. He gets away with it because they are so used to that in their culture of their government using them in that way. And now there's this talk that he wants to expand his military. So, I don't know if it's going to be a forced conscription. But it's going to be more people kind of sent in as cannon fodder. I don't think that's changing, but I think even if it was a different leader, we've seen that happen again and again, in Russia that's how they treat them, unfortunately. But as we saw, some of the soldiers weren't happy with it. And they killed their own generals. A lot of Russian generals died in this war, and they were not all because Ukrainians killed them.

SG: Right, and that seems to be something the Kremlin is very keen to cover up and reluctant to talk about, but it is a fact that they have lost a significant number of generals. And they're not just replaceable, because those are people in very important strategic positions. And the fact that the Russians have had to deal with fatalities at a very high military officer level just demonstrates some of the challenges they're facing, not just by a very strong Ukrainian response, but also the challenges within their own military as well, of which they still don't provide a full picture of,

SA: Right, yeah. What are the loyalties of everybody in their militaries? It's very hard to understand.

SG: Do you think that Russia, Putin in particular, faces internal dissent because of this war? Will it encourage more defections, people wanting to say that, look, this is a war that is going to drag Russia into the abyss? Or does he have a very firm grip on power?

SA: So that's a really interesting question. I think, obviously, the people most impacted are maybe the wealthy, right, they don't get to live their normal lifestyle, how does that affect him? But what I think will be the issue is, like I said, when he starts forcing people into the military, what will that change? Because it isn't entirely clear that the Russian people really believe in this war, but when it happened, they were kind of sold, 'Hey, we need this war, we need this war.' But once your sons start dying, your husband dies, that's a whole different take, because then you really do start asking questions like, 'What did they sacrifice for?' And I do think with the right messaging, Putin is going to be in a tough spot among his people, if he keeps going and pushes it on to a long war.

SG: A long war that will only bring further misery to the people of Ukraine, but also to Russia as well. And I think only Putin ultimately knows, perhaps, the end date, and even then, maybe we're not entirely sure where his mindset is at.

Today, we've spoken on the terrorism dynamics globally, we've spoken about the situation in Afghanistan, we've also now spoken about Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Where do you think the world is going, Sarah, in terms of the challenges, what type of threats and concerns worry you in the next few years?

SA: Well, you know, because we become so interconnected, everything almost happening in the world somehow impacts you in some way, even if it's as basic as supply chain, which we learned during COVID. It's like, "Oh, this one issue stops my toilet paper. Now I'm really passionate about it." So, it really seems like people have gotten more involved in paying attention to these conflicts. So then…we get more press on it, more reporting, more information. And we get to see all these things that were probably always going on, but now they're being exaggerated, for good or bad, right? So…I mean, I don't want to be negative, things do keep getting worse, relationships among countries are getting worse. We have been in war for so long it feels like, especially as an American, we just spent 20 years in a war, you know, people are fatigued. But they think, "What's the next war? What's the next war?" And it's such a weird mentality, right? Like nobody thinks of when is the end of the wars? And I don't know when we're going to get back to kind of the whole, "Hey, what do we do for world peace or peace among some of these nations?" Like, I think we're so far from that, we're only planning for the next war.

SG: Well, that's very depressing, indeed. I think it's also very accurate in terms of how the situation is unfolding globally. Certainly, I would have hoped that we could be focusing on the challenges of the environment and global warming as well, which don't really get a lot of attention. And we're certainly seeing the effects of global warming now in many countries, including in the continent of Europe, which has really suffered in the last few months. But yes, I think Putin's war machine tends to dominate the headlines, and what he may wish to do in the future I think only he knows, and even then, again, as I was mentioning earlier, somewhat unsure whether he does really know what he's actually dragged his country into.

Well, thank you, Sarah Adams for joining us on NATO *DEEP Dive*. We're very fortunate to have got your expertise, especially as you covered such a wide variety of issues and provided so much important insight. We're most grateful for you spending the time with us.

SA: Thanks for having me. I really enjoyed it.

SG: And we hope to have you again soon in the future.

SA: Sounds perfect.

Sarah Adams bio

Sarah Adams has held various positions within the U.S. governmental machinery including in the Department of Defense. She also worked overseas on behalf of the U.S. Government's intelligence missions in Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia. She previously served as a Senior Advisor for the U.S. House of Representatives' Select Committee on Libya after being recruited as an executive appointment from the Central Intelligence Agency, where she had previously been a Targeting Analyst. She is the author of Benghazi: Know Thy Enemy.

Episode 25 - Diana Soller and Resisting Dictatorships, October 2022

Key Reflections

- **The gas leaks on the Nord Stream pipeline are due to deliberate sabotage, with Russia being the most likely suspect.**
- **The Kremlin feels that it might lose the war in Ukraine and has resorted to military conscription to reinforce their positions along the frontlines. This has led to Russians fleeing the country, demonstrating the unpopularity of Putin's mobilisation drive.**
- **Russia is using private military companies like the Wagner Group and recruiting people from prisons. However, this is not an unusual strategy for Moscow who have utilised this strategy for other conflicts in the Middle East and Africa.**
- **As winter approaches, it will become harder for Russia and Ukraine to continue fighting as the terrain and conditions become more difficult to navigate.**
- **The protests in Iran following the death of Mahsa Amini, at the hands of the regime's Guidance Patrol, has created a spark that is now spiralling across Iran with mass protests by men and women. This is emboldening Iran's civil society.**
- **Calls to impose tough sanctions on Iran because of the violent tactics used by the Iranian authorities against protesters may not bring about direct change or end the theocratic regime.**

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

DS: Diana Soller

SG: Hello, and welcome to *DEEP Dive*, brought to you by NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel. Each episode, we speak to experts and practitioners in international security and defence, counter-terrorism, and geopolitical current events to gain insight into the most pressing matters of global affairs.

In this episode we speak to Diana Soller, a researcher at the Portuguese Institute of International Relations at NOVA University Lisbon. She is also a columnist on global affairs for the newspaper *Observer*, amongst others, and is the author of numerous articles in specialist journals and book chapters related to international politics. Previously, Diana was also an advisor at the National Defence Institute.

Diana Soller, very warm welcome to NATO *DEEP Dive*.

DS: Thank you, I'm very happy to be here with you.

SG: Let's look at several developments that are happening right now in Europe in particular. On the 26th of September 2022, there were four gas leaks on to Nord Stream pipelines that have

been reported to have actually occurred because of blasts that were detected. Sabotage is strongly suspected. Nord Stream one and Nord Stream two pipelines were damaged. And it comes at a time when Nord Stream has been at the centre of an energy clash between Europe and Russia, since the invasion of Ukraine in late February. Do you believe that there was deliberate sabotage in these pipelines? And if so, who could the culprit be?

DS: Well, I believe that there is no other possibility than sabotage. The sort of damage that the pipelines have gone through, it's impossible that it was just an accident. All experts are saying so. I think it's sabotage, it's almost impossible not to have been. If so, we have to ask first, who is the loser of this sabotage, and I think that the loser is Europe. Although many analysts say that it will be easier to just turn off the pipelines now there is no such issue anymore, and any gas coming from Russia cannot come anymore.

So, heading to this, this kind of sabotage is not possible by a small power, by someone that does not have high-tech submarines or equipment to do something like that. So, the possible suspects, let's put it this way, are, in my perspective, the most probable Russia. Although many people say that Russia is jeopardising itself by doing something like this. I also believe that this is an act of war. With a sort of MO of other acts of sabotage that Russia has done throughout its history. Russia is the type of country that prefers to lose rather than to be defeated. And so, I think this is the sort of thing that Russia would do in a moment of despair. And I think Russia is at the point where it feels encircled, and it has difficulties to get off this encirclement. So, I think this might have been an act of despair from Russia.

SG: You mentioned that Russia is in a moment of despair. We know that right now Russian men are facing potential military conscription, and a lot have now fled Russia, in the wake of President Vladimir Putin's partial military mobilisation order. The exodus has signalled the unpopularity of that order to the extent that people are willing to leave the country to avoid being sent to fight in Ukraine, and it's believed that as many as 300,000 could be called up to service. Do you think that Putin's move is an act of desperation, as the botched invasion now reaches the seven-month mark, and that the Ukrainian military has, in recent weeks, regained swathes of territory and seized the momentum?

DS: I'm not sure if this is exactly a call of desperation. What I really think is that Russia feels that the Kremlin feels that, at this point, at least conventionally, it might lose the war, which is something that the Kremlin will try to avoid in any way possible. So, I think we should see this mobilisation as something that is seen as really necessary, because although the Russians are known to be patriotic and supportive of the Kremlin's wars, this is the first time since putting become president of Russia that common people, although with military training or some military relationship with the state in the past, are called to wage war.

So, this is an unpopular measure. I would not make a correlation between the support of the Russian people for the war and the possibility of conscription and mobilisation, but I think this is the kind of measure that Putin would not want to impose. And by imposing it, it shows that, at least, the Kremlin feels that the odds are against them so they resort to this, which would be a last resort measure. And as you said, the official order that was issued by President Putin foresees the possibility of increasing the mobilisation or even reaching conscription, which would be, I would say, despair. For now, I would say it's a measure that shows that Russia feels the odds are against Russia in this war, at least in conventional terms.

SG: There are also reports that Russia is using private military companies like the Wagner Group, to recruit people from prisons, and also hire mercenaries. What does this tell us?

DS: It tells us two things. The first is precisely what I said in the last answer, that Putin didn't want to resort to mobilisation. The second thing is this Wagner Group, and the way it recruits, is something that is not alien to the Kremlin or previous wars that Russia fought. So, I'm not tremendously surprised. Russians have a way of waging wars, and this is something that we have known since World War Two, that implies and contemplates the use of mercenaries, especially violent ones, to actually play an important part in Russia's wars. So, this is not absolutely surprising. But it's not positive either.

SG: Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, has addressed both houses of Russia's Parliament, and he's announced the annexation of four regions in Ukraine, that Russian troops have been occupying, and he's justified it by claiming that the referendums that were held in Luhansk, Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, and Donetsk regions support this. NATO countries have said that they will not recognise the results of the referendum. What is your take on those referendums? And what happens next in terms of Russia's occupation of Ukraine? Is this Putin drawing a line or is this conflict going to continue?

DS: I'm not sure how the Ukrainians are going to react to this. First, I would like to say something which I think has not been emphasised, and I think it's important. In Luhansk and Donetsk, the referendums covered the entire provinces. It's not the case, neither in Kherson and Zaporizhzhia. So, for people to understand, we're not talking about entire provinces, but just little parts in them.

I think it's Putin drawing a line, a juridical slash political line, which makes these territories part of Russia's jurisprudence, territories that belong to Russia and that are Russian territory. The immediate consequence of this is that if Ukraine tries to seize back these territories that internationally, not only NATO, but internationally are not recognised as Russian territories, Russia might respond with the degree of commitment that it has been using for its territory. Meaning that if Ukraine tries to seize them back, Russia has legitimacy, from a Russian perspective, of using other sorts of wars, other sorts of weapons other than conventional. That means that chemical or biological weapons can be used, and tactical military weapons can be used, because any attack by Ukraine will be seen as an attack on Russian territory. So, actually, what changes is the commitment of the Russian doctrine towards these territories.

And now, it depends on two things. The first is how the Ukrainians are going to react to this red line that Russia has drawn around those territories that are legally Ukrainian in the light of international law. And the other thing is how the providers of military equipment for Ukraine are going to see and to interpret this new political reality. If they decide that Russia is not entitled to those territories, and Ukraine has the right to claim them back militarily, Russia has a free hand to use other sorts of weapons, and then the choice goes to Russia. And this leads us to a point where we are entering the most dangerous moment of this conflict. Decisions now are very difficult to guess, because what's at stake is really, really dangerous. So, we'll have to wait and see.

There are two possibilities regarding timing of these decisions. As everyone knows, winter is com-

ing, probably there's a window of three weeks to one month to fight before winter settles, and it's almost impossible for each side to continue conventional warfare. So, there is a choice between not choosing until spring comes or choosing right now and creating a chain reaction, that may be very dangerous. Prudence will be to stop at this point, the seizing of territory from Russia. We will see what the decision of Ukrainians and its allies will be.

SG: Some NATO countries have imposed sanctions on the people that were involved in organising the so-called flawed referendums that were taken in the provinces now occupied by Russian troops in Ukraine. We know that there have been a raft of other sanctions imposed on Russia since the start of the war itself. Do those sanctions stem Russia's aggression in Ukraine? Do they have any impact?

DS: First of all, I think what we should say is that I've never seen any war won by waging sanctions. The other thing is that sanctions have evolved since the beginning until now, in their spirit. In the beginning, there were ways that the European Union, especially the European countries, found to try to stop and dissuade Russia from continuing to wage the war, by inflicting, I would say, suffering to the common people, and tried to make them hold the government accountable in one hand, and on the other hand, to try to deny Russia, some vital elements to keep on waging the war and make it difficult, more difficult to wage the war.

I think they evolved since then, and I think now they are mainly punitive sanctions. They want to punish Russia for what it is doing. The last package of sanctions that the EU is trying to approve, because of the speech of Putin a few days ago, saying that it will increase the degree of threat, that he will escalate the war. So, this is a direct response to that. And then the second speech about the sanctions is about punishing Russia for the referendums. So, I think there is a change in the spirit of the sanctions since they started. I don't think that their outcome has been very hurtful for Russia so far, in the political sense, in the sense that the regime has been standing despite the political sanctions. It did not break the will of the regime to keep on waging the war. It might have hurt the people, but we don't have the actual numbers and the actual impact on the Russian economy of these sanctions. So, we can only guess that it hasn't been hurtful enough for people to question the government in a very systematic way so far.

Additionally, we have a problem with the setback of the sanctions, which means that the European economy—and the American economy also—are suffering a lot from what is going on. And although the inflation rates were mounting since—and are still a result of—the COVID-19 extraordinary measures, they are also part of the war effort that Europe has to make, and the US have to make to try to maintain the level of sanctions toward Russia. Obviously, the rise of the price of energy is a direct consequence of the sanctions. So, I think we have here a deadlock. NATO countries and the United States and Europe jointly have, I would say, waged economic war towards Russia. And I think it's too late to step back. And an increase of the sanctions would mean that the economic war has not been successful from the part of Europe and the US, so the Ukrainian allies. So, I don't think they can actually step back, but I don't think, at the same time, that they are getting the results they really want to get. So, I think that this will go on for political reasons. I don't think this has the positive sort of impact that they were expecting it to have.

SG: Speaking about sanctions, let's pivot to Iran, as I know you look at that issue in detail as well. And this is largely because of the ongoing series of protests and civil unrest against the regime in Iran that began in Tehran on the 16th of September 2022. The protests were a reaction to the

death of Mahsa Amini, who was a 22-year-old Iranian woman who died whilst in police custody. She was beaten by the so-called Guidance Patrol, also known as the morality police of Iran, who accused her of wearing an improper hijab in violation of Iran's mandatory hijab law. That incident created a spark that is now spiralling across Iran with mass protests by men and women. How significant are these protests?

DS: In terms of the maintenance of the regime, again, I never saw a regime, especially one like this, falling due to sanctions because of [opposition to] women's rights protests. However, in terms of its impact in the international community, I think they are very important for a matter of awareness. Although women's rights are something that, especially in Muslim countries, and especially in a country like Iran, which is a theocracy, are not going to change from one day to another, this awareness precludes something that happens in Europe and the United States very often, which is cultural relativism, something that I think is unacceptable. So, my hope, once I believe that this is not going to influence the course of the Iranian regime, is the rise of awareness with consequences, especially in the civil society. I also don't believe in a world civil society sort of idea. But I think that individual NGOs, women's rights watches, and these sorts of international political actors should use this unfortunate event to raise awareness.

SG: These are important points that you make. In terms of a final question on what we're talking about, some European Union nations want the EU to impose sanctions on Iran following the tragic death of Mahsa Amini. The bloc that has been responsible in terms of dealing with Iran when it comes to safeguarding nuclear issues that are of concern—some are concerned that if sanctions are put in, that that could further ostracise Iran, that they could become more rogue, more unpredictable. And then there are others that believe that it's now time to impose tougher, stricter sanctions because of the fact that there are very aggressive and violent tactics being used by the Iranian police on the streets. We know that hundreds of civilians have been killed and injured as a result of these protests. Where do you stand on the sanctions for Iran? I know you feel that they don't necessarily bring change to the situation and, as you mentioned about Russia, that wars are not won based on sanctions, regimes are not brought down because of sanctions. But is it viable to have them in this instance? Or would that be counterproductive?

DS: I think you already guessed my answer, which is, I don't think sanctioning regimes this way actually helps to heal whatever is wrong with them. Again, these sanctions would be limited. And I don't really think that these sorts of sanctions actually help to change anything. I think they end up backfiring on the people who already have so many difficulties. What I think that Europe, Great Britain, United States—when I say Europe, I'm always counting the United Kingdom, although I know it doesn't belong to the EU anymore, I'm speaking of broader Europe—what they should do is try to engage with the Iranian regime. I mean, do it the old-fashioned way, with carrots and sticks. That's the way that's the way it works. That's the way it always works in the sense of real change. So, what I think is that partners who are actually willing to introduce changes in Iran, rather, to stop or to dissuade it from using or creating a nuclear weapons programme, either of protecting human rights, they have to use the old-fashioned sort of approach, which is dialoguing, but dialoguing using very strong dissuasion sort of measures. And, again, I don't think sanctions are the kind of dissuasion that changes the sort of governments and these sorts of regimes.

So, please deal with Iran—but please deal with Iran and deal with Russia in a language that they do understand and in a language that they do respond to. And many times I feel a bit frustrated because I think we're talking about two different worlds—a world made of countries like Iran and Russia, where they actually only respond to force or the threat of force, and countries like the

European countries who think they can dissuade a country from doing something by waging economic sanctions, by publicly scolding them, by calling their attention for respect of human rights. That's not the way the world works. It never was. And I think Europe, especially Europe, because I think the UK and the US have known this for a long time, but Europe has to understand.

And now I'm going to use a metaphor that is very Portuguese. I mean, the Carnation Revolution, the one that created the conditions for our transition from dictatorship to democracy, it was a very peaceful revolution. There were no comebacks. And the symbol of our revolution is a little boy putting a carnation in a gun, in a machine gun. And I think somehow this is very symbolic for all Europe. But this was actually a very specific and unlikely sort of revolution because the dictatorship government was already falling, so the only thing that was needed was a little push, which made our revolution very peaceful. But this idea of putting flowers in guns, it's just doesn't work. It only works when you have a very powerful state behind you, like the United States, and the United States is no longer the sole superpower that can do everything it wants. So, the world has changed, Europe has to change accordingly, and what has not changed is the way that countries like Iran and Russia see the world and act in the world. The one that has to adapt is Europe. The ones that have to adapt are Europeans and not the ones like Iran or Russia that are actually acting as they always did.

SG: Well, you've provided a lot of interesting perspective and food for thought, and we're very grateful that you could join us. Diana Soller, thank you again for being on NATO *DEEP Dive*.

DS: Thank you so much for inviting me. It was a pleasure.

SG: It's been our pleasure.

Dianna Soller and Resisting Dictatorships

Dianna Soller is a researcher at the Portuguese Institute of International Relations at NOVA University Lisbon. She is also a columnist on global affairs for the newspaper Observer, amongst others, and is the author of numerous articles in specialist journals and book chapters related to international politics. She was previously an advisor at the National Defence Institute.

Episode 26 - Mahmut Cengiz and the Terror Underground, October 2022

Key Reflections

- **Both al-Qaeda and ISIS have strong representation through their affiliates in the Sahel region, West Africa, as well as the Horn of Africa and East Africa.**
- **There are concerns about terrorist travel in the post-pandemic era. Terrorists may find it easier to travel to places for training, recruitment, funding, and propaganda.**
- **An Afghanistan controlled by the Taliban has the potential to become a safe haven for terrorists once again. There are a number of terrorist entities operating there which include al-Qaeda, the ISIS Khorasan branch, and the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan.**
- **Cocaine trafficking routes between Latin America and the Middle East have fuelled the drug trade expansion and could converge with the narcotics trade in Afghanistan and Pakistan.**
- **There remains an ongoing challenge in the prevention of the procurement of arms and explosives by terrorists. In addition, a terrorist organisation's' level of operational success can be quantified with data including casualty rates.**
- **Neo-Nazi extremist groups are very active on social media and use digital platforms and encrypted messaging channels to spread their conspiracy theories as a call for violence.**

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

MC: Mahmut Cengiz

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In this episode, we speak with Mahmut Cengiz, an associate professor with the Terrorism, Transnational Crime and Corruption Center (TraCCC) and the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University. He also teaches courses on terrorism, American security policy and narco-terrorism. Mahmut has international field experience where he has delivered capacity building and training assistance to international partners in the Middle East, Asia, and Europe. Cengiz regularly publishes books, articles, and op-eds on terrorism and transnational crime. His 2019 book *The Illicit Economy in Turkey: How Criminals, Terrorists, and the Syrian Conflict Fuel Underground Economies* analyses the role of criminals, money launderers, and discusses the involvement of ISIS and al-Qaeda in illicit economies.

Mahmut Cengiz, warm welcome to NATO *DEEP Dive*.

MC: Thank you. Thanks for inviting me.

SG: It's our pleasure. There are several things that I want to talk to you about in our podcast. I think perhaps the most important dynamic that we're seeing now emerge is the potential regrowth of ISIS and al-Qaeda in Africa.

Let's deal firstly with ISIS. Where are we at when it comes to their movement in Africa, both North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa?

MC: It's a question for all of us, whether ISIS and al-Qaeda have been defeated. Because both organisations have lost their leaders. ISIS in 2019, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and in 2021, Ibrahim al-Qurashi. They all got killed in military operations. Also, just two months ago, Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's leader, lost his life in a military drone attack in Afghanistan.

But then, we began to discuss whether these organisations have been defeated or not, but what have we seen in the most recent trends? These organisations are spreading their influence in Africa. And for example, now al-Qaeda has a strong representation in the Sahel region by JNIM, Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin group; and al-Shabaab in Somalia is also a growing and emerging threat; and then another group, Ansaru in Nigeria. But I can tell you that ISIS is the most active when we compare it with al-Qaeda. ISIS is now active in more than 10 countries, and some of its regional affiliates, like ISIS in the Greater Sahara, or ISIS West Africa in Nigeria, or ISIS DRC in Congo and also Uganda, also ISIS Mozambique, in Tanzania and Mozambique. These groups are the most active ones. Also, they are listed as some of the deadliest organisations in terrorism databases.

SG: In terms of the ISIS franchises in Africa, how much of a command and control do they have that is independent from ISIS core in Syria and Iraq? Do these franchises operate independently? Or is there a sense of respect and obedience to the ISIS leadership in Syria and Iraq?

MC: We need some evidence to talk about whether organisations are independent of or dependent on ISIS core. But what we know is that these organisations are ideologically under the influence of ISIS, and also, they are networked with each other for logistics, for some transferring of weapons or explosives, also for providing some training programmes for each other. And mostly they prefer to use the name of ISIS because they know well that if they are a local jihadist group, no one would know about these organisations, and for example, in the last five or six years, these organisations began to compete with each other, just to be under the banner of ISIS.

Let me give you two examples in Mozambique and in Congo. For example, in 2017, Ansar Al-Sunna group in Mozambique pledged allegiance to ISIS. Until that time, no one knew about this local jihadist groups fighting for some Muslim grievances in northern Cabo Delgado. And in 2018, Allied Defence Forces in Congo, again, declared loyalty to ISIS core, and then this group also became popular. I think in 2021, both ISIS DRC and ISIS Mozambique branches have been designated as terrorist organisations, by the U.S. State Department. And today, after pledging allegiance to ISIS, after beginning to use the name of ISIS, now both organisations are more popular, and then they can get more funding, and also, they can get more and more recruits.

SG: In terms of the al-Qaeda factions in Africa, you mentioned earlier about Ayman al-Zawahiri being killed in a U.S. operation in Afghanistan. How have the al-Qaeda franchises reacted to Ayman

al-Zawahiri's death? Because if we look at the other franchises, such as AQAP and AQIS, they've been remarkably quiet. Does the same apply to the al-Qaeda franchises in Africa?

MC: I think first, we need to talk about the killing of the leaders of these organisations, whether ISIS or al-Qaeda, because it is more common for the Western world to use and to apply the word 'decapitation,' which is specifically targeting the leader. But what we have seen in the responses or some impacts over these regional affiliates, is that it is just taking several hours for al-Qaeda or ISIS groups to replace their leadership. So, that's why we cannot see some big impacts over these al-Qaeda regional affiliate groups. But I can see that JNIM; and also, Ansaru; and also, al-Shabaab again, they were quiet, but in terms of its impact on their operational capacity, I don't think that there have been some impacts on their capacity.

SG: In the environment that we're speaking about, there are concerns about the potential of terrorist travel in the now post-pandemic era. We've had that problem—for all of us—the fact that during the COVID-19 pandemic, we've not been able to travel, not been able to move, our lives have been confined, but increasingly now the ability to move and travel across the world is becoming easier. Does that also mean that for terrorists it will become all the more easy to travel to places for training, recruitment, funding, propaganda? Or have terrorists not really been impacted by the pandemic?

MC: When we look at the data, in 2019 and 2020—when we compare data just to see the impacts of COVID-19 on all terrorist organisations, and, as you said, our lives were all confined under during lockdown—but in 2019, according to one database, the number of terrorist attacks tremendously decreased in metropolitan and urban areas with some increases—slight increases—in conflict zones. But when we look at the U.S. State Department annex counterterrorism report in 2020, I think there was a 13% increase in terrorist instances, and also a 12% increase in the number of fatalities.

So, this data is showing that when we were all in our homes, terrorist organisations were outside, and they just continued to maintain their operational capacity. Also, for example, its more specific when we look at how COVID-19 impacted terrorist organisations or terrorist ideologies. For example, revolutionary groups took advantage of the worsening economy and weak government responses, and for example, they were telling their fighters that the governments are presenting opportunities for only wealthy people and ignoring again the poor people.

So, the second category I can talk about are the far-right extremist groups. Also, we all know that current extremist groups were very active on social media. So, they used digital platforms such as unregulated image board sites or censorship-free discussion platforms or encrypted messaging channels, just to spread their debunked conspiracy theories as a call for violence. Also, in their ideologies on social media, they were saying that democracy is a failed system. But when it comes to jihadist organisations…these jihadist groups are using a divisive version of the Quran and Islam. For example, ISIS core was saying that COVID-19 is God's wrath upon the West and also [that the] disease is the soldier of Allah.

And for example, when we look at this Uyghur- and al-Qaeda-linked organisation in Syria, the Turkistan Islamic party, they were saying that the outbreak of COVID-19 in China was a punishment for the Chinese government, who is still repressing the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Another exam-

ple, al-Shabaab was saying to its followers that this disease, COVID-19, has been spread internationally by Crusaders.

So, based on the pillars of their ideologies, terrorist organisations used and then just exploited this pandemic. But as I said in the beginning, data shows that there was no impact on terrorist organisations, so they did maintain their operational capacity.

SG: Speaking about the pandemic and how terrorist organisations have been using it and manipulating it for propaganda, we also know the situation that has unfolded in Afghanistan subsequently, with the return of the Taliban taking over—the fact that, as we've been discussing, Ayman al-Zawahiri was found in a house inside the centre of the capital Kabul—where are we at now when it comes to the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, and al-Qaeda? Is Afghanistan potentially going to become a safe haven for terrorists once again, with the example of al-Zawahiri perhaps being a disturbing demonstration of what could unfold?

MC: It has been another question for us, whether Afghanistan again would be a safe haven for al-Qaeda after the Taliban's takeover. Of course, there were some questions about ISIS Khorasan branch; it is the most active ISIS organisation, and as far as I know, ISIS-K is one of the deadliest organisations in terms of the number of fatalities in the 2020 U.S. State Department annex report. And since the Taliban's takeover, not only terrorism, but also in all other areas, we can see the failures of the Taliban. For example, Afghanistan's economy has shrunk 20 or 30%. Also, women are still oppressed, and activists are still being targeted and killed by the Taliban regime. Also, there are human rights violations happening again under the Taliban's leadership.

Of course, another question was about ethnic tension. And also, so far, we have seen that the Taliban government have failed to unify the country. I think in some regions, especially in northern states in Afghanistan, the ethnic groups, ongoing clashes, I think their numbers have outnumbered the Taliban forces in northern states in Afghanistan. But more specifically when it comes to terrorism, I think in a country where the leader of the Haqqani Network is the Minister of Interior, I don't think that we can see some effective fight against al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda is just enjoying the Taliban's leadership because Zawahiri, during the takeover, was praising the Taliban's takeover. And also, he was seeing it like a victory against the Western world. I think also, Zawahiri's killing is an indicator for us showing how the Taliban is turning a blind eye to al-Qaeda.

And also secondly, I think we need to talk about ISIS-K because the group has increased its capacity and are mostly targeting the Hazara Shias and also targeting Hazara gatherings or maybe their schools. And also, we have seen the spread of ISIS-K and its influence in Tajikistan, in Uzbekistan, also in Pakistan. I think last year, just a few months ago, we saw some attacks by ISIS-K in Uzbekistan and also in Tajikistan. I think also we need to keep our eyes on the TTP, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, also recently in Pakistan and in Afghanistan, we saw this group taking advantage of some security vacuums, left by the Taliban in the country. So now the Taliban again is [offering] a safe haven for al-Qaeda, but the Taliban's incapacity or security vacuums is really beneficial for ISIS-K, which is now in the world media as one of the deadliest terrorist organisations.

SG: With Afghanistan, there are so many different challenges that exist, which you have identified. Now, one of the other challenges is the narcotics. The Taliban are known notoriously for churning out heroin from the country, which provides a huge amount of financial resource for their agenda.

Increasingly, we're seeing more methamphetamines being produced by the Taliban. You've done a lot of research where you have looked at the cocaine trafficking routes between Latin America and the Middle East that have fuelled the drug trade expansion. Do you think it's conceivable that what you were looking at in Latin America and the Middle East could potentially converge with what is happening in Afghanistan and potentially Pakistan and Central Asia as well?

MC: Latin American drug cartels have inundated the United States and with tonnes of cocaine since the late 1970s and also, they added the European Union market to their drug trade. But then these organisations have been very resourceful, so they began to search for and also prefer less risky routes. And in the last two years, what we have seen when we look at the seizures by law enforcement in Colombia, in Panama, and Brazil—we can talk about an active cocaine drug trafficking route between Latin America and the Middle East. Also, more specifically, when we look at the groups, I can say Hezbollah, and also Sinaloa cartel in Mexico, have some strong linkages with drug trafficking organisations in the Middle East.

So how can it converge with Afghanistan? As you know, Afghanistan has been a production country for heroin. As far as I know, more than 90% of heroin consumed in the Western world, in EU countries, has been transferred from Afghanistan. So [there] was another question for us [about] the Taliban's capacity to fight against heroin and the drug trafficking. We saw some Taliban bans on poppy cultivation last April. Also, we saw another Taliban ban on the production of methamphetamines. But consider the Taliban government's capacity, also seeing well-developed networks, criminal networks in the country, also with other organisations, maybe on drug trafficking routes. Also, consider ongoing economic issues, because the Taliban government needs some cash money. So even though there are some bans, we don't think that the Taliban will be effectively fighting against heroin or methamphetamine. And so far, we haven't seen any networking between Latin America and Afghanistan, but I think in the short-term, it wouldn't be wrong to say that we will see increasing poppy cultivation and also heroin or methamphetamine trafficking in Afghanistan, because of, again, the Taliban's incapacity, or again because of the Taliban maybe needing some cash money.

SG: It's worth me mentioning here that as part of a DEEP research project, a publication called *Narco-Insecurity, Inc.* was published which actually looks at those different networks of narcotics that go around the world, including to Europe, which you were mentioning, and also how it fuels the firearms trade as well for the different criminal groups that associate with the Taliban. And that brings me to the other issue I wanted to talk to you about, which is that you've done extensive analysis on the prevention of the procurement of arms and explosives by terrorists. How is that changing in the last few years? Or does that stay the same? Are there new, disturbing trends that you're witnessing, or are the challenges still the same?

MC: When we look at data about terrorist organisations' attacks, I think very consistently, in the last five years, terrorism databases are recording around eight or nine thousand terrorist incidents. So, we cannot see any tremendous drops in the number of terrorist attacks. Also, when we look at how deadly they are, how brutal they are, terrorism databases are recording more and more casualties and fatalities. This is sending a message that terrorist organisations are now able to procure weapons and explosives, so there is no change. But I want to give you some data showing terrorist organisations' capacity in procuring arms and weapons or explosives or using them in their attacks. I think in 2020, according to a U.S. State Department annex report, just 13% of the incidents recorded one or two people killed, which meant that just in one terrorist attack, there were at least one or two people killed. But around 70% of the incidents recorded the killing of more

than three people in these attacks. So, when we look at the casualty rate, [this is] a number dividing the total number of casualties by the total number of terrorist attacks by a specific organisation. So, these casualty rates are showing us how deadly these organisations are, again, thanks to their capacity using arms and explosives. For example, ISIS-K was a leading organisation with a 15.4 casualty rate, followed by ISIS West Africa at 14.3, and also al-Qaeda [former] group HTS was a third leading organisation with a 7.5 casualty rate. When we look at also the weapon type, this is another indicator of their capacity, arms and explosives capacity. And now they're able to use biological agents and also some chemical weapons, also some medium-range weapons, which are automatic weapons, rocket launchers, and military grade explosives. Also, they're able to use these low-range weapons, which are homemade, which are improvised explosive devices, and which are IEDs. So, when I look at, again, their capacity to use various types of highly advanced technological weapons and also the casualty rate and also the terrorist attacks, I can say that we haven't seen any change in the recent trends on the procurement of arms and explosives of terrorist organisations.

SG: As a final question, we enter the last quarter of 2022; what concerns you in terms of international security, defence, the challenges that exist? What worries you about 2023 that we need to take notice of and be more cautious about?

MC: In terms of terrorism, I would say I think we need to give our attention to ISIS-K after seeing the group's capacity and the attacks in Afghanistan and how it's spreading its influence in neighbouring countries like Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Also, I would say we need to look at the Sahel region. Again, ISIS groups, ISIS in the Greater Sahara and the JNIM al-Qaeda group. They are splitting their influence. For example, just in this year, we saw the spread of their terrorist attacks in Togo and Benin, and also in Asia as well by this ISIS and al-Qaeda groups. Also, I think we need to give our focus to far-right extremist and right-wing extremist groups. So recently, we have seen that they are very capable of doing attacks in EU countries, in the U.S., and in Canada. So, in 2023, my expectation would be to look more at two types of terrorism, which is jihadist groups and secondly far-right extremist groups.

SG: Well, these are very important points that you bring to the table for the discussion. Very grateful to you, Mahmut, for providing so much perspective, and with data as well. I think it's always important to see, statistically, the challenges that exist and to what level they are. So very grateful that you were able to spend the time with us, and let me just thank you again, Associate Professor Mahmut Cengiz. Thank you so much for joining us on NATO *DEEP Dive*.

MC: My pleasure. Thanks for having me.

Mahmut Cengiz bio

Mahmut Cengiz is an associate professor with the Terrorism, Transnational Crime and Corruption Centre (TraCCC) and the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University. He has international field experience where he has delivered capacity building and training assistance to international partners in the Middle East, Asia, and Europe. He also has been involved in the research projects for the Brookings Institute, European Union, and various U.S. agencies. He is the author of several books including The Illicit Economy in Turkey: How Criminals, Terrorists, and the Syrian Conflict Fuel Underground Economies.

Episode 27 - Phil Gurski and the Multiplicity of Threats, November 2022

Key Reflections

- **The gathering and data flow of signal (SIGINT) and human intelligence (HUMINT) have been impeded by the pandemic and emerging technology used by hostile actors.**
- **Canada has three primary investigative priorities: counter-terrorism, counter-intelligence, and counter-proliferation. Within this, foreign interference is playing a more prominent role.**
- **Intelligence agencies and law enforcement need more resources to deal with the multiplicity of threats ranging from violent ideological movements to state-sponsored clandestine activity.**
- **China is getting more attention in the West especially over issues pertaining to their actions against Taiwan, the Uyghurs, Tibetans, and those from Hong Kong.**
- **The threat from al-Qaeda, ISIS, and affiliates has not disappeared in the West. Plots continue to be detected and foiled.**
- **The repatriation of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and their wives and children from camps in Syria is a massive dilemma with no obvious solution. Security concerns remain. Prosecution of those behind the most egregious actions should be pursued in Syria and Iraq.**

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

PG: Phil Gurski

SG: Hello, and welcome to *DEEP Dive*, brought to you by NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel. Each episode, we speak to experts and practitioners in international security and defence, counter-terrorism, and geopolitical current events to gain insight into the most pressing matters of global affairs.

In this episode, we speak with Phil Gurski, the President and CEO of Borealis Threat and Risk Consulting. Phil worked as a senior strategic analyst at the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) specialising in Al Qaeda and ISIS-inspired violent extremism and radicalisation. Prior to that Phil served as a senior multilingual analyst at the Communications Security Establishment. He was also a senior special advisor in the National Security Directorate at Public Safety Canada. Phil is the author of several books including T*he Threat from Within: Recognizing Al Qaeda-inspired Radicalization and Terrorism in the West* and *Western Foreign Fighters: the threat to homeland and international security.*

Phil Gurski, welcome to NATO *DEEP Dive*.

PG: Thank you, Sajjan. It's a real honour and pleasure to be with you on this podcast.

SG: It's great to have you with us. You've got a wealth of knowledge on so many security-related issues. You've written multiple books, and you keep providing perspective on the most topical challenges that exist globally. One of the things I wanted to start by asking you are the challenges when it comes to collecting intelligence, both against terrorist groups and hostile state actors during the pandemic. What were those challenges? And do some of those problems still exist?

PG: It's a great question. And I do think so, despite the fact that it's been seven, almost eight years now that I've retired from the intelligence community, I did spend 32 years in SIGINT and in HUMINT, and so I have an understanding of how intelligence is collected, how it's processed, how its analysed, and how it's distributed to clients. I think there are a couple of things, Sajjan, that happened during COVID. First of all was obviously the Canadian government, like many other Canadian government departments, and even private sector, engaged in a period where people weren't going to work. They were working from home. We all, I think, had far too many Zoom meetings over the past couple of years, or Microsoft Teams, and clearly you can't do that in intelligence, for the simple reason that you're dealing with information that is extremely sensitive in nature, including in terms of the sources that you collect. And so, sitting from your home and talking about human sources or SIGINT sources isn't going to cut it because of the technology—you couldn't be assured that your conversations aren't being interrupted, intercepted, and that your secrets would be out there. Of course, there's nothing more sacrosanct than sources. We say in intelligence that we can talk about many things, but we don't talk about sources or methods.

So, I certainly think that the pandemic certainly put a crimp in how these organisations operated, even here in Canada. Secondly, obviously, if you're meeting with human sources during a pandemic like COVID, you have to take certain precautions. You have to mask up, you have to maintain a certain distance. So, I think all of these things were extremely—they hampered, to some extent, the collection of intelligence.

I would also add that an ongoing issue—it affects SIGINT agencies, it affects all kinds of intelligence agencies—is simply the incredible speed of technological development. Now, when I worked in SIGINT in the '80s and '90s…telex was the sort of the technology du jour for many years in the '60, '70s, and '80s. Well, telex of course died out. Remember when fax machines came out, and we had to adjust to, how do you intercept a fax? How do you decompress it? How do you break it out? And since that time, I'm not a technological guru, but I'm sure your listeners are well-aware that the number of platforms that are out there, in terms of being able to collect the information, has expanded exponentially, and as an intelligence service, you have to have the technological wherewithal to deal with that.

The second thing I would argue, which is only getting worse, is the volume. And towards the end of my career in SIGINT, I was actually in charge of collection and data flow. And my data flow specialists were telling me that they couldn't keep up with the volume. And the analogy they used was like it was drinking from a firehose—that was in 1998-1999. A similar analogy now would be like drinking from Niagara Falls. The volumes of information are just so incredibly high. The amount of data that's being sent back and forth around the world is almost immeasurable. And then of course, most of that data is garbage, from an intelligence perspective. So, the old analogy of finding a needle in a haystack, the haystack keeps getting bigger, but the needle's not getting any bigger. So, I think there's a lot of challenges for security intelligence and law enforcement agencies to keep up with technological development, to keep up with advances and to figure out how do we work in a

new environment. As you're probably well-aware, many industries, including the Canadian government. It looks like this working from home is going to become a semi-permanent solution. You work from home three days a week, you come into the office two days a week. You can't do that in intelligence. So, I think there are a lot of challenges going forward in terms of what the pandemic illustrated that we were facing, and I can't see the situation getting any easier for those agencies in the foreseeable future.

SG: And that's raised a lot of thoughts in my mind as to the different dynamics that unfold from this. You used the analogy of needle in the haystack. So, one thing that came to mind—I know you've researched this—we're currently dealing with Russia's military aggression in Ukraine. The UK has had to experience Russian activity on its soil, with Russian spies carrying out clandestine activities, including poisoning people. You've researched the fact that there have been Russian spies within our own respective countries across the West. How does one deal with that in this environment, as you mentioned, with the technology gap becoming all that more complicated?

PG: I think the point you're making here is that things have gotten so much more complicated. So again, if I go back to my early career, I started during the Cold War, back in 1983. We knew who the enemy was—that was the Soviet Union and its allies. That was our focus. That's what drew our attention. All of our efforts were basically directed against that particular nation [and] its activities—largely military, but also economic and political. And as a consequence, it helps you to focus your attention. I remember that when I was hired back in '83, I was one of 12 people, recent university graduates, and they called us 'the rest of the world.' So, we did everything else but the Soviet Union. Out of an operation of 1,000 people, there were 12 of us that looked at the rest of the world. In some ways, it would be nice to go back to those days—not the threat of nuclear war and the constant sort of sabre-rattling of the West and East back then, but today, we're faced with, as you mentioned, not just Russian activities throughout NATO countries, Chinese activities throughout NATO countries as well. There has been recent reporting in Canadian media that China has set up police stations across Canada, which they say is simply to help people with their passports and information, but no, it's that they collect intelligence on Chinese-Canadians and put pressure on them to not criticise China in Canada. Then there's the terrorist threat be it the far-right or the far-left.

It worries me that intelligence agencies and law enforcement are not necessarily getting any bigger in terms of their resources. And as a consequence, you're being asked to do more with less. And what you try to do is prioritise where the biggest threat is, but how do you measure the threat from, let's say, Russian trolls or Russian cyberattacks versus possible terrorist attacks? How do you make that calculus that this threat somehow merits more attention than that threat? I would not want to be necessarily back in intelligence, although I miss it terribly. It would be a really difficult set of decisions to make on where to allocate your investigations. You only have so many surveillance teams, for example, only so many intercept capabilities. You only have so many investigators to recruit human sources. So, I think we're faced with a situation right now where the multiplicity of threats, and I've only touched on a couple of them, seems to be growing greater than our agencies' ability to monitor them effectively. Not to say they're not going to do the job—I think they are doing their job—but they're being forced to do a heck of a lot more than perhaps their resource allocation, in a perfect world, should allow them to do.

SG: You said, 'multiplicity of threats.' From a Canadian perspective, what is the current priority? Does it continue to be transnational terrorism, or has it increasingly become state actors? You mentioned Chinese presence in Canada—that's interesting, I wasn't aware of the case study you

mentioned—and then you were also talking about Russia. What tends to weigh heavily on the minds of decision-makers in Ottawa?

PG: China is getting a lot of attention. We in the security intelligence realm, we've been warning about China for 40 years now—that China is not an ally, they're not a friend. They are engaged in technological theft. We believe that many Canadian companies basically had their ideas stolen by the Chinese. They're engaging in the monitoring and putting pressure on Canadian citizens of Chinese extraction to force them to shut up when it comes to criticism of China. And the Canadian government finally seems to be getting the message. A minister just recently said that we have to reassess our China policy. So, Canada for the longest time was happy to trade with China, and they realised that if we trade with China, we can't upset them by calling into question their government and criticising them for their actions abroad, or their actions against the Uyghurs, the Tibetans, the people in Hong Kong, etc. That is definitely a priority from a security service perspective.

So just to give your listeners a sense, the security service—the CSIS, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service—has three primary investigative priorities: counter-terrorism, counter-intelligence, and counter-proliferation. We also throw foreign interference in there, which is kind of a subset of counter-intelligence. And you have to allocate resources to address all those. Counter-terrorism ruled the roost for the past two decades. In the post-9/11 period, from an operational tempo perspective, most of the resources were dedicated to counter-terrorism, for obvious reasons. We'd just seen the single greatest attack in history—3,000 dead in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania. We detected a lot of plots here in Canada that were Islamist extremist in nature. We foiled them, thanks to great intelligence and law enforcement. But even there, we're seeing a bit of a shift. Over the past, I'd say, five to six years, the far-right, however you define it—white supremacist, white nationalist neo-Nazi, the list goes on and on—has risen in terms of its threat level. And this is a bit of a change for us. Because we did look at the far-right quite extensively in the 1990s, and in all honesty, to quote a good friend of mine, 'These guys couldn't make a cheese sandwich.' They were incapable; they had no intention of doing anything in Canada; and as a consequence, they weren't seen as a priority.

That has changed. We had a significant right-wing terrorist attack in a mosque in Quebec City in January of 2017, so five and a half years ago, and there has been a reallocation of resources away from Islamist terrorism towards the far-right. What worries me though is that the jihadi threat hasn't gone away, certainly not in the United Kingdom, through Western Europe, we're still seeing plots that have been detected and foiled. We're seeing the odd attack here and there of course globally. Islamist extremism represents by far the single greatest terrorist threat on Earth; it kills thousands of people a year, whereas the far-right is nowhere near that.

SG: You mentioned that the jihadist threat hasn't gone away. We know that there remains this problem that is challenging and difficult to address, and that is the repatriation of foreign terrorist fighters—FTFs—and their wives and children, who are now young adults effectively, because they've been living in all of these camps inside Syria, and that status quo effectively remains as a status quo. What do we do about those FTFs and their families, Phil? Is it just that they stay in Syria or that there's an actual practical way to bring them back, prosecute them, or for those that may not be radical, potentially reintegrate them?

PG: Well, how much time do we have? I actually wrote a whole book, *Western Foreign Fighters*, back in 2017 that was published by Rowman and Littlefield in the United States to talk about this

issue. But in brief, from a NATO perspective, we've seen a real variety of responses. Some countries have repatriated women and children, even men. Some countries want nothing to do with them. France has been a holdout for the longest time. Canada, typical Canadian sort of sitting on the fence, sometimes we do, sometimes we don't. We have brought a few home. The problem is, if you do bring them home, how do you prosecute them, based on what? Because the evidence and the witnesses are all in Syria and Iraq. And you're not going to fly the witnesses—the Yazidis and the women who were raped and the children who were abused—you're not going to fly the back of Canada or England or France for trial. So, we did try to put one person on trial, and it ended up being a complete failure, and the person was exonerated. Gathering the evidence to stand the test of a Western court, as opposed to a Syrian or Iraqi court, is going to be difficult.

I have always advocated that the trial should be held *in situ*, in Syria and Iraq. That's where the crimes were committed, the Syrian and Iraqi people and the Yazidis, I would say, and the Kurds have a right to see justice done for crimes committed against them and their families and their communities. The problem, of course, is that Iraqi and Syrian justice isn't quite the same as Western justice. There's capital punishment, for example, allegations of torture, no true defence of the people on trial, so that's problematic. As a consequence, most Western countries have sat on their hands. Now, the exception I do make, Sajjan, is I think the children should be repatriated as soon as possible. And I would even go further; the children should be repatriated and removed from their parents, because the parents brought them to Islamic State. The children didn't choose to go there. Some were born under the caliphate, for example. The parents were the ones that made a conscious decision, fully aware of the consequences of joining a heinous terrorist group like Islamic State. I would argue that makes them unfit parents, and many people have been very critical of me in this regard, but I have seen instances of other countries—in Central Asia, for example—that have repatriated children, put them with extended family, or worst-case scenario, state care.

This issue is not going away. There are those that say "we have to bring them home because we have an obligation"—I only have to cite the Shamima Begum case in the United Kingdom, which is one that seems to be never going away right now—"that we owe it to them", and that "they have to be seen to have served justice," and more importantly, "if we leave them in the camps like al-Hol and other camps in Syria they'll radicalise further and they'll become a terrorist threat down the road." That is possible.

However, if you put your security hat on, if somebody is sitting in a camp in al-Hol, they're not posing a threat to London, or Manchester, or Paris, or Toronto, because they're too far away. Secondly, if you do repatriate them you have to monitor them. You have to investigate them. Are they still radicalised? Do they still hue to the Islamic State ideology? Do they pose a threat to national security? And we did have a case back in 2018 of an ISIS wannabe, who got as far as Turkey, was turned back, and when she came home, she carried out a terrorist attack in a hardware store. Now luckily, she wasn't very competent, she didn't really injure anybody, but she well could have, and we have seen attacks by returnees in other countries throughout the NATO alliance.

So, it's a very tricky question to which there is no single answer. And I think that if you're a politician in a Western country, standing up and saying, "let's bring back the ISIS terrorist" is, as one person said, "political suicide." The public don't want them back. And if, heaven forbid, you have a terrorist attack carried out on your soil by a returnee, the public wants to know why did you bring them back? If you'd left them there eight people wouldn't have died in Manchester or Leeds or whatever. So, I think it's a very delicate political question and as a consequence, most countries have just basically punted this ball down the field. They want nothing to do with it and so, I would

expect more dithering in the months and years to come.

SG: You mentioned the fact that the young children should potentially be brought back to their respective countries because they're innocent, they're not the ones that made that choice. I guess the dilemma that exists is that some of these young children, as I was mentioning earlier, they've now become young adults, and they have seen awful things that none of us have been exposed to. They were part of ISIS propaganda videos; they were forced to carry out executions. There's this concern in some circles that it would be very hard to reintegrate them because of the mental scars that they carry, but still feel that there is a more viable way to bring them back into society.

PG: I think so. I'm not a child psychologist. But I do know that children are more—the younger you are the more resilient you're psychologically and mentally. I saw a heart-breaking video, Sajjan, a couple of weeks ago about a young boy in Iraq or Syria, whose parents fought for the caliphate, and I believe his parents—maybe his mother's alive, his father died. And he basically was a mini-ISIS terrorists at the age of six. He was constantly angry, he would pretend to shoot people, he pretended to put IEDs in the middle of the road. This kid is six years old. And the ones that are older than that, the 12-year-olds, the 13- and 15-year-olds, we have a real problem because we have seen terrorist attacks that have been planned by people in their middle teens.

So, they become subject to an investigation by MI5, or CSIS, or the FBI, or whatever. And we in the West, rightfully, I think, look upon young offenders, i.e., those under the age of 18 in most of our countries, as being treated separately. For lack of maturity, your mind hasn't developed fully as a human etc., but if you do pose a serious threat to national security, a 15-year-old can do a lot of damage. A 15-year-old can get a gun, or a knife, or whatever, or build a bomb and carry out an attack.

So, it's very, very tricky, but I do think that if there's any hope for any kind of rehabilitation to get them off this pathway, it's a much greater chance to work the younger you are, whereas the people in their 20s, 30s, and 40s—yes, there are deradicalization programmes, I'm aware of them. But I keep telling people the lesson for all of us is the Fishmonger Hall Attack back in 2019, where somebody who had graduated from a prison deradicalization programme was lying and he killed two social workers before he himself was killed.

You know, Sajjan, when you're working in security intelligence, you live by a motto that's not fair, but it's true. "You're only as good as your last failure." Nobody really cares when you get it right. Everybody points fingers when you get it wrong. So, again, if you were to bring back a 15 year old and say, "we want to rescue this child, we want to rehabilitate them, reintegrate them into society" and that 15 year old takes out a knife and stabs two people to death on the metro or on the tube, and then essentially commits acts of terrorism, people want to say, "well, why didn't you leave that person in a camp in Iraq?" It's not fair, but that's the nature of public opinion, that's the nature of what happens the aftermath of a terrorist attack.

SG: Sure, and speaking of teenagers, we're talking about people that left as young children, uprooted, they get radicalised, they're exposed to the propaganda of ISIS. And then on the other side, you have this new—not new movement—but an emerging, growing movement of incels. Where you've got these teenagers—incels being 'involuntary celibates'—people who are increasingly getting radicalised online, their hatred of women [and] misogynistic doctrine tends to domi-

nate their lives. Is the incel movement a major concern that we should be prioritising on? I ask this because there have been examples in Canada of incel terrorist attacks.

PG: Great question and a very contentious one. So, the Canadian government has classified violent incels as terrorists, I disagree 100% with that classification. First of all, most incels are not violent, I wouldn't even call it a movement, it's a gathering of people who happen to share their grief that they can't form meaningful relationships with members of the opposite sex for a whole host of reasons, and some of them blame themselves, some of them blame society. There's all kinds of [reasons].

I just had a podcast with journalists on this, that's on my website that goes into details. To me, if an incel is violent and actually kills a woman, I'll get back to that in a second, that to me is a case of violent misogyny not a case of terrorism. I don't classify incels as terrorists because 'incelism' is not an ideology, it's not a political system. And under Canadian law, and I think under many laws of NATO countries, terrorism has to be either ideological, political, or religious in nature. That's what the Canadian criminal code says. I don't see 'incelism' as an ideology. Many people disagree with me. Now there have been incels that have adopted far right ideology, such as white supremacism, male supremacism, etc. Maybe that's a little bit different.

But there have been cases in Canada, as you know, but the problem is that these cases don't really support the notion that this is terrorism. So, the most famous case is a man called Alek Minassian, who, back in 2018, drove a van down a major thoroughfare in Toronto killing 11 people and wounding 20. He was found guilty, not of terrorism but of first-degree murder and attempted murder. And in her ruling, the judge, quite categorically stated—Alek Minassian claimed he was doing it in honour of Elliot Rodger, who was the individual in San Diego that carried out an attack in 2013—the judge found that Alec Minassian was not an incel, he lied. He lied because he wanted more notoriety. Alek Minassian was just a terribly mixed-up young man who decided to kill people, whether or not it's because he couldn't get a relationship is rather irrelevant at this point. But the judge found he was not an incel.

Then we had an attack in Toronto in 2020. The trial has actually just finished now. Where the young man killed a massage parlour therapist and injured two others, he pleaded guilty to first degree murder. But the Crown Prosecution of Canada says, "we're going to retry him on terrorism." Which begs the question why? He's already pleaded guilty to first degree murder. He'll already get the maximum sentence under Canadian law; you don't get more years for being a terrorist than being a murderer.

So, I have pushed back against this notion that violent incels are terrorism. In terms of whether it should be prioritised, yes, insofar as you've got that sort of mixing of a very, very small number of violent incels who also hold right wing extremists' Ideological views. In that case, it would be part and parcel of your right-wing investigations. You don't need a separate incel desk dealing with the incels, at least based on what I've seen. And I do think that a lot of attention has been paid to this. I think too much attention has been paid to it. But again, you've had some very high-profile murders in this country and as a consequence, the government is waking up and saying we should do something about this. But what it should do, going back to my earlier point Sajjan, how many resources do you have? You've got finite resources and if the government keeps piling on do this, do this, do this. You start spreading very thin, whereby you get to be a kilometre wide and a centimetre deep, and that's never good when you work in security intelligence.

SG: Well, the challenge of course, is, as you mentioned, the resources. I think with the incel movement, it is very multifaceted. I also don't think it necessarily will apply to one particular ideology, because you see people that are misogynistic that are tied to ISIS and al-Qaeda as well, and they're not necessarily got much in common with say the people who carried out those attacks in California and Toronto, other than their hatred for women, which is an odd commonality that they seem to share when it comes to radicalization.

PG: But there's also, sorry Sajjan one small point, there's also incels who are far left, they believe in far-left causes and again, for your listeners, they may not know that the term incel is actually a Canadian term. And it was invented by a Canadian woman back in the 1990s. She said, "I'm not happy I'm not in a relationship I'm involuntarily celibate." So, it was a Canadian woman who had nothing to do with terrorism that invented the term of the 1990s.

SG: So, the angles that we're looking at seem to be very multi-pronged, in the sense that we're looking at the challenges of individuals. We're looking at transnational terrorist groups, and we've also been talking about state actors as well. As a final question to throw at you, you mentioned China a few times in our discussion. Just now, the 20th Party Congress took place in Beijing, where Xi Jinping was given a third term, as the paramount leader of China. Where does that situate China in terms of its relationship with the West? Do we expect anything to change? Could things be more positive? Or should we expect more challenges with China to come in the next five years?

PG: Definitely very much the latter. Xi Jinping has essentially tried to recast himself as the new Mao Zedong, as the paramount leader in China. They've been very aggressive, of course against Taiwan. They've put a million Uyghurs in concentration camps in Xinjiang province, which they call re-education centres. They're putting pressure on Tibetans; I was reading some interesting articles in *The Economist* about this. The whole Belt and Road Initiative is a very worrisome initiative from a Western perspective because it's gaining influence in much of South Asia and Africa.

The bottom line is China was never really our friend to begin with. We certainly had a very robust economic relationship with China, which is neither good nor bad depending on how you want to see it. Factories closed in North America and Europe and went to China. So, we lost jobs, but we got cheaper products. So, maybe it was a bit of a trade-off. It seems that we're on the verge of an even more aggressive Chinese government, now that Xi Jinping has got his third term. I'm guessing that security, intelligence, and militaries, so we're talking about NATO partners, are going to see China more from the threat lens than from the international alliance trend going forward. Depending on what China does with Russia, of course, they've been rather supportive of the Putin invasion of Ukraine to date, we've seen China's relations with the Iranians improving and with the Saudis. To me, we're going to have to beef up our resources looking at China because I don't see their relationship getting better anytime soon. The same time, whether or not China will eventually invade Taiwan to bring it back into the sort of bosom of the Chinese state, I don't know. But it seems to me that we're going to be speaking of China more from a rival perspective, rather than an ally or a friend perspective going forward. And that's going to have the concomitant demands on resources we've already talked about several times in this podcast.

I don't see a silver lining in this cloud going forward. And as I mentioned earlier, even my govern-

ment, which has been rather reticent when it comes to being critical of China, is finally standing up and saying, “yes, what China represents is not in Canada’s interest, we want to join the international community in condemning the situation Xinjiang etc, etc.” So, I think we’re in for some rough waters ahead when it comes to the relationship with the PRC.

SG: Well, you certainly laid out a lot of the problems and challenges, and resources that are going to get stretched right across the board. But it’s been fascinating to have this conversation with you, I’ve known you for a long time. So, I’m really glad that we’ve had this opportunity to look at so many different facets of international security. Well, let me just thank you again, Phil Gurski, it’s been a pleasure to have you on NATO *DEEP Dive*.

PG: It’s been an honour as well, Sajjan. I’m sorry, I was so negative, but I tried to be a realist as opposed to somebody who believes in unicorns and rainbows, but no, it was a great conversation and I really do value you reaching out to me to be part of this. I’ve listened to some of your guests before and it really is an honour to be in the same ballpark as some of the guests you’ve had on your podcast so far.

SG: Well, we’re very humbled to have you as well as a key part of providing the perspectives that we need to hear even if they’re not all unicorns and rainbows.

PG: Thank you.

Phil Gurski and the Multiplicity of Threats

Phil Gurski is the President and CEO of Borealis Threat and Risk Consulting. He worked as a senior strategic analyst at CSIS (Canadian Security Intelligence Service) from 2001-2013, specialising in Al Qaeda/Islamic State-inspired violent extremism and radicalisation. He served as senior special advisor in the National Security Directorate at Public Safety Canada from 2013 until his retirement from the civil service in May 2015, and as consultant for the Ontario Provincial Police’s Anti-Terrorism Section (PATS) in 2015.

Episode 28 - Pieter Van Ostaeyen and the Status of ISIS, December 2022

Key Reflections

- **The ISIS affiliates in Afghanistan and sub-Saharan Africa are growing in momentum, recruitment, funding streams, technology, and ability to launch attacks.**
- **Throughout 2022, ISIS have attempted various daring operations to free prisoners in facilities in Iraq and Syria. Although the strategy is not new, every prisoner freed is a surplus for ISIS.**
- **Nations are divided over repatriating their citizens from ISIS detention camps in Syria. These camps have become cesspools for extremism, but equally, bringing people back is not straightforward since many in the camps are radicalised.**
- **ISIS is becoming more prominent again on social media and has intensified its efforts on platforms such as Twitter, where previously banned accounts have become active.**
- **The pandemic and Putin's war in Ukraine have taken some focus away from counter-terrorism, but Belgium still has 125 terrorist fighters unaccounted for. Some in prison, due to be released, have claimed their ideological beliefs remain extreme.**
- **The Kremlin-affiliated private military company, the Wagner Group, has been engaged in the destabilisation of Syria as well as countries in the Sahel, exploiting natural resources.**

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

PVO: Pieter Van Ostaeyen

SG: Hello, and welcome to *DEEP Dive*, brought to you by NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel. Each episode, we speak to experts and practitioners in international security and defence, counter-terrorism, and geopolitical current events to gain insight into the most pressing matters of global affairs.

In this episode, we speak with Pieter Van Ostaeyen, a historian and Arabist with a background in mediaeval history. He is currently completing his PhD at the University of Leuven in Belgium, researching the usage of social media and the ideological strife between jihadist groups. Pieter has also served as a visiting fellow at the European Foundation for Democracy in Brussels as well as a member of the editorial board at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) in The Hague. Pieter is a prominent primary source researcher and the author of several books looking at the transnational jihadist movement. He is currently investigating how ISIS is using artificial intelligence to utilise hate speech and the jihadist perceptions of the Crusades and exploitation of religious texts.

Pieter Van Ostaeyen, welcome to NATO *DEEP Dive*.

PVO: Thank you very much. Thank you for this opportunity. It's an honour.

SG: It's our pleasure. Let's look at ISIS, as you have studied this group in extensive detail. What is the state of ISIS in Iraq and Syria today?

PVO: Ever since the fall of the town of Baghuz in March 2019, the presence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has seriously degraded. If we look at a number of attacks in Syria and Iraq, they have been dropping steadily since 2019. So, in Iraq and Syria, the group is still active, they're still present. The most spectacular operation they conducted lately was the prison break in northern Syria earlier this year. But for the rest, basically, the group is back to where it came from—just a jihadist insurgency. Nothing more than that.

SG: You mentioned the prison break that took place earlier this year. And throughout 2022, we've seen ISIS attempting various daring operations to free prisoners in facilities in Iraq and Syria. Have those been ultimately successful for ISIS? And what have the consequences of those attempted prison breaks been?

PVO: Well, every single prisoner they can free is a surplus for ISIS, of course, because they replenish their ranks. And they have been able to do so in some cases. So…every successful prison break is a successful operation. But this isn't a new code of conduct, basically, it's been going on for years even. In 2013-2014, and even before the Islamic State [ISIS] was created in Syria, they were already conducting these prison breaks throughout Iraq, so it's a strategy they have been following for years already. It's nothing really new.

SG: On a related point, some countries are seeking to repatriate their citizens from the ISIS detention camps such as al-Hol, al-Roj in Syria. What are the challenges in doing this, bearing in mind that some of the women served as brides to ISIS terrorists and many of the children that have grown up in these camps have potentially been radicalised?

PVO: The main issue is that most European countries didn't want to repatriate their ISIS fighters or families. It's been an ongoing debate throughout Europe [for] years already basically. And it still is ongoing. For example, Belgium is very reluctant to repatriate at all. The bigger issue is the fact that we left them there and basically that those camps are like the ninth gate of Hell, if I understand correctly. What is worrying from my own perspective is that if we repatriate them, how are we going to deal with them? We have no idea if deradicalisation programmes in any form are actually working. And I have the idea, generally, that a lot of the people that we have been repatriating already still are radicalised. So, I don't think that repatriation is the golden key, but it should be because leaving them there on the ground in Syria and Iraq—that's a possible recipe for catastrophe.

SG: If we look at how ISIS is evolving in the present age, what types of technology is it utilising, even though it may not be at full capacity like it was before? And at the same time, connected to this, what are their funding streams? What are they doing in terms of getting their messaging out? Is it successful? And how are they funding their operations?

PVO: On the funding…recently there has been a published a UN report that explains all the funding streams. For example, what is most worrying right now is that it seems that there are a lot of

hubs active throughout southern Africa—not only in Mozambique, but even in South Africa itself—and that seems to be worrying. There have been links discovered with other countries as well. So, in the case of funding, yes, they might have found new ways. In the sense of technology, I do think that everything has remained more or less the same, at least [on] the surface.

As [for technology] what I'm seeing, they still have a significant presence on Telegram, and it's quite easy to find them there, to follow them there, and to catch up on their daily news. They have been very active lately as well on local media; they have a particular subgroup that is specifically aimed at IS-KP fighters, so the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (IS-KP). And they have been quite active, and they are recruiting other people to translate texts to spread the word to recruit. So…in a way, it's back to the future. We're seeing what we saw 10 years ago, the recruiting is still going on social media. I might even add it has intensified a lot since Twitter has been taken over by Elon Musk. He propagated free speech again, and he said that they would release some previously banned accounts. We see a lot of Islamic State [ISIS] accounts returning to Twitter and openly propagating Islamic State [ISIS] news again, whereas, for example, a few months ago, that was purely impossible.

SG: You used the term "back to the future." Could ISIS re-emerge in terms of its recruitment strategy of people in Europe? Because we're now in this so-called post-pandemic travel period—it's increasing people's ability to move, which is greater than it was before. Could this be utilised by ISIS to attract a new wave of foreign terrorist fighters? Is there an appetite for those that are getting radicalised in Europe to once again link up with ISIS, or are their priorities now elsewhere?

PVO: They're definitely trying. As I mentioned just now, in Khorasan province of Afghanistan, they're trying to recruit new people from Europe. I'm pretty sure that the same thing is going on throughout Africa. The only issue for those recruits right now is that it's a lot more difficult to travel to the war zone. Especially because of, basically, the distance, and the hurdles they have to take before they arrive there. Going to Syria was easy—you just have to travel through the Schengen Zone, cross the border with Turkey, and then you got into Syria quite easily. It's not the same going to Afghanistan and probably isn't as easy as well to go to the Sahel region, for example, or join ISIS in Congo or Mozambique. So, it has changed. The will is still there by a lot of people here in Europe, in my opinion, to go there. But it's less organised than it was before, and the hurdles are bigger. It's a geographical issue for them right now, in a way.

SG: That's interesting. You're speaking to me from Belgium; this is an important country in the context of what ISIS has done in the past. We all remember the 2016 Brussels bombings by ISIS recruits that resulted in the death of 32 people and over 340 injured, many with life-changing injuries. It was one of ISIS' most audacious terrorist attacks, using coordinated suicide bombings both at the Brussels airport and a railway station. How has Belgium dealt with the ISIS challenge subsequently? And what's the status of the terrorist situation inside Belgium today?

PVO: First of all, most of the measures we have taken in our battle on jihadi groups of whatever origin were taken immediately after the foiled attack in Verviers in January 2015. Then after the Paris attacks in November 2015 and the Brussels attacks in March 2016…we took a number of measures, but most of the measures that were taken were short-term. They were aimed at destabilising these groups and proactively trying to track them down. But there was no real interest in taking measures on a longer term, like, for example, education, integration, and cleaning up neighbourhoods—literally cleaning them up, cleaning up the streets, taking care of housing and stuff like

that.

Ever since, however bizarre it may sound, but ever since COVID kicked in, the attention seems to have dropped a bit. And then when President Putin decided to invade Ukraine, now the attention has completely dropped. The main focus right now here in Belgium is on the ongoing war in Ukraine. And people tend to forget that we still have 125 Belgian terrorist fighters that are unaccounted for, ever since the fall of Baghuz, in March 2019. And the fact that a lot of the people we have convicted have nearly served their time already, and they're going to be released soon. A lot of them, when they come out, they say, 'I'm not deradicalised, I'm more radical than ever.' We see a perfect example of that, for example, in the person of Jean Louis Denis, nicknamed Le Soumis, he was the leader of Resto du Tawheed, the sister organisation of Sharia4Belgium. When he came out of prison, I think two years ago, he said, 'I'm more radical than ever and I'm going to continue my struggle for an Islamic state.'

We see the same thing happening in the UK. Anjem Choudhury even came back to Twitter and basically, he's reposting his ideas of 10 years ago. So, we're threatened in a way that history will repeat itself for at least some of these individuals. One big question we might ask ourselves is, indeed whether they will be able or willing to join a next war zone, that's a whole other thing.

SG: And that's perhaps the future challenge that counter-terrorism agencies are going to have to address. You mentioned Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine; it raises a topic I wanted to ask you in connection to everything. What has been Russia's role in Syria currently, because we know that they have utilised the private military company, the Wagner Group to help assist in its operations in Syria. We've seen the Wagner Group in Ukraine, as well. But based on your understanding of events in Syria, what exactly does the Wagner Group do? And has it actually contributed to the destabilisation of Syria?

PVO: Definitely the Wagner Group is, in a way, the secret, private militia of Putin, something like that. Not so secretive anymore, but especially in Syria, they were doing all the dirty jobs. What is most worrying right now about the Wagner Group is not the fact alone that they are active in Ukraine, but the dominance of the Wagner Group in countries in the Sahel, like for example, Mali. Since the last coup in Mali, the government there has entrusted the Wagner Group almost with everything. And at this point, the Wagner Group is not only a major player in a military role in Africa, but it's also exploiting the natural riches of African states. They have been in control of gold mines, cobalt mines, whatever, throughout the entire continent, and they're building up their empire, quite successfully.

SG: Just goes to show you what a potent ally the Wagner Group is for the Kremlin, assisting in its operations around the world, not just in Ukraine and Syria, but as you mentioned, also in Sub Saharan Africa as well. I wanted to pivot to another dynamic, which is the role of Iran. We know that Iran, much like Pakistan, has served as a conduit for al-Qaeda and affiliated groups to travel in and out of the country. Does ISIS, or affiliated groups like IS-KP, have the same opportunity to utilise Iran? And if so, what does Iran get out of all of this?

PVO: What we see from the confrontations between the Islamic State [ISIS] and Iran, it's not like there is some kind of a mutual understanding. They're sworn enemies. The one thing we hear from the Islamic State [ISIS] from Iran are successful attacks, if they kill, for example, a police officer

somewhere or attack a military point or whatever, but most of them are small scale attacks. It's not like the mutual agreement, I would call it, between al-Qaeda and Iran, where we still suspect that the top leadership of al-Qaeda right now still resides in Iran—who was likely to be named as a successor of Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of al-Qaeda, Saif al-Adel. And as far as we know, the man has been residing in Iran for years. And that also might explain why we still didn't hear anything about the succession of Dr. al-Zawahiri as a leader of al-Qaeda, even though it's been about 190 days, I'm not exactly sure, but it's been a long time that al-Qaeda has been leaderless. Another thing that Iran has, from its point of view, successfully contributed to is the war in Syria, obviously, because they send over militia in big numbers to Syria to fight the dirty war of the al-Assad regime.

SG: You mentioned about many al-Qaeda leaders residing in Iran, and you also spoke about the death of Ayman al-Zawahiri. Well, Ayman al-Zawahiri, as we now know, was found in a compound in the heart of Kabul, under the protection of the Haqqani Network. The question I have for you is, how did ISIS react to the death of Ayman al-Zawahiri? They both had been very much attacking each other, verbally, with strong criticisms on either side. Did ISIS celebrate the death of al-Zawahiri? Or have they been somewhat muted?

PVO: From an official point of view, I would say that their reaction was meek. They didn't really celebrate it or make any big statements about it. But in private conversations with ISIS fanboys or fighters, it's also not always easy to make the distinction between them, they were openly mocking al-Qaeda. They were saying, 'We've always said that Zawahiri is an empty shell, al-Qaeda is an empty shell, you shall see.' I assume that the bigger hope for a lot of the fanboys or the lower-level ranks, is that they will incorporate a lot of al-Qaeda fighters in the short term, but I'm not really sure that it's going to happen. Especially since the rift between al-Qaeda and the Islamic State [ISIS] has been so immense for the last decade, I doubt that anything major will happen.

On the other hand, there was the al-Furqan [Media Foundation] statement announced today [30 November 2022] by the Islamic State [ISIS] earlier today, and one of my close contacts was told two days ago already that this would be a major statement by the Islamic State [ISIS]. So, we have no idea whatsoever what is coming up. Could be anything.

SG: That's interesting. As a final question, you've got a background in mediaeval history, looking at the Crusades, you have been an extensive researcher on groups like ISIS. How much does it help you to have the prism of history that aids you in the work that you do? I am a historian, so I was just curious to get your take on whether that lens has been a very helpful tool to your research?

PVO: Oh, yeah, definitely. For me, it's obvious if I weren't a historian, I wouldn't be doing this at all. If I would just have studied Arabic and Islamic studies, I would have probably engaged in language studies or something. But since my background as a historian, I have always been fascinated by the impact that early history can have on current events. And if you look, for example, a very stupid example maybe, but when the international coalition started bombing the Islamic State [ISIS], it took them exactly half an hour before they called it a new crusade. So, for me history is the foundation of my scholarship. It's basically a pyramid building up. History is a cake, and the topping is my knowledge of Arabic and Islamic Studies. That's, for me, that's at least how it's how it's working.

SG: Well, that's an excellent analogy to use, and from one historian to another, I certainly respect and admire the work that you've done and contributed significantly to our understanding about the dynamics of ISIS and other jihadist groups. Let me just thank you once more, Pieter Van Ostaeyen, thank you so much for spending the time talking to us today.

PVO: Thank you. It's been my honour and my pleasure.

Pieter Van Ostaeyen and the Status of ISIS

Pieter Van Ostaeyen is a historian an Arabist with a background in medieval history. Pieter has served as a visiting fellow at the European Foundation for Democracy in Brussels as well as a member of the editorial board at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) in The Hague. He has been analysing the conflict in Syria since the outset in 2011. In 2012 he began reporting on foreign fighters and extremist groups such as Jabhat al--Nusra, Ahrar as-Sham, Jund al-Aqsa and The Islamic State.

Episode 29 - Julia Ebner and Embedding with Extremists, December 2022

Key Reflections

- **Jihadist and neo-Nazi extremists have succeeded in penetrating each other's echo chambers despite being on the opposite sides of the ideological spectrum. There are also shared traits, such as antisemitism.**
- **The pandemic has radical subcultures, such as alt-jihadism, which overlaps with neo-Nazis. There is cumulative learning across extremist groups.**
- **In both neo-Nazi and jihadist movements there is a strong prevalence to violently abuse and control women. Both want to return to a distant past, where women had no rights, absent of societal structures.**
- **Women play a prominent role in terrorism, as recruiters, groomers, and perpetrators of violence. Some of them have a femininity crisis. There are comparisons between male and female suicide bombers in the radicalization pathways.**
- **It is becoming harder to distinguish between an online threat and an unfolding plot. The language and narratives produced in communications by terrorists can be used to improve their detection and prevention practices.**
- **Russian-sponsored media outlets give airtime and repeat the hashtags and campaigns driven by extremists and other fringe communities. Ideology does not matter as long as it creates chaos within Europe and North America.**

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

JE: Julia Ebner

SG: Hello, and welcome to *DEEP Dive*, brought to you by NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel. Each episode, we speak to experts and practitioners in international security and defence, counter-terrorism, and geopolitical current events to gain insight into the most pressing matters of global affairs.

In this episode, we speak with Julia Ebner, a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), specialising in extremism, radicalisation, viral disinformation and terrorism prevention. Julia advises parliamentary working groups, security agencies and tech firms, and delivers lectures globally. She is the author of the books, *The Rage: The Vicious Circle of Islamist and Far-Right Extremism* and *Going Dark: The Secret Social Lives of Extremists*. Julia is currently completing her DPhil in Anthropology at Oxford University.

Julia Ebner, welcome to NATO *DEEP Dive*.

JE: Hi, thank you for having me.

SG: In your book, *The Rage*, you look at extremist movements, both online and offline, and you're one of the first people to show how neo-Nazi and jihadist extremists have succeeded in penetrat-

ing each other's echo chambers. What made you decide to go down this path of research and what did you learn that perhaps you didn't anticipate before?

JE: It was interesting because back when I started with that research, it was mostly jihadist/ISIS inspired attacks that we saw across Europe and across the world, really. But I was wondering what the impact would be on our societies, especially our liberal democracies in Europe. And what I saw was that there was big backlash coming from the far-right side of the spectrum, where anti-Muslim resentment was growing and where it seemed like the jihadist attacks were directly feeding into the strength of far-right extremist movements. So, that made me interested in investigating, a bit further, what the interplay was between jihadists and far-right extremists.

And what was really surprising, or at least I didn't anticipate, [was] the extent to which there are parallels in the narratives, in the strategies, and of course, also in the goals that both of these fringe groups, that are on the opposite sides of the ideological spectrum, have in common. And mainly, of course, the black and white narratives of pitting one part of the population against another, perceiving the world as very black and white, and dividing it into in-groups that are being victimised and an out-group that is being demonised and sometimes dehumanised. And that was really interesting.

And then of course, also the goal of bringing about dramatic political and societal change and using terrorist attacks, for example, to further exacerbate these existing divisions and to further accelerate a potential political collapse. That's really the goal that a lot of these extremist fringe groups have in common because they are on the less powerful side in the power game.

SG: That's very interesting. One aspect that I found very revealing about what you were just saying is—is it fair to say that both neo-Nazis and jihadist need each other, effectively, to utilise their respective recruitment streams?

JE: I would say so, to some extent. Of course, we see that they have existed independently from each other, but there is a sense that they really help each other in amplifying their rhetoric and their propaganda and in really lending credibility to their narratives. Jihadist movements who recruit a lot of alienated Muslims on the basis of the statement, 'us Muslims are being discriminated against, are targeted by hate crimes,' their claims are partly so credible because there have been attacks happening against Muslim communities, and a lot of these attacks have been carried out by far-right extremists.

And vice versa, far-right extremists who would then say, 'well, we've seen all these jihadists inspired attacks, that's the danger of immigration,' or 'that's the danger of Muslim communities who are growing in European countries or in North America,' unfortunately they can make an argument based on the number of attacks we've seen. So, there is a sense that they're feeding off one another.

And there have also, interestingly, been instances of cooperation because, of course, they have shared traits as well. For example, antisemitic narratives and conspiracy myths. Where, for example, in the supermarket hostage taking that appeared around the time when the Charlie Hebdo shootings happened in a suburb in Paris. There we had actually the weapons that were supplied

to the jihadists who carried out that hostage taking, were supplied by a far-right identarian from the north of France. So, there have also been very odd cases of actual collaboration between those two different sides of the ideological extremist's spectrum.

SG: When you talk about this odd dynamic, there's another new emerging trend that has taken place, possibly due to the pandemic, or the pandemic may have proliferated it, is this dynamic of alt-jihad subculture. Do you think that that is a growing concern? Do you see overlaps between that alt-jihad subculture and the far-right neo-Nazis in action? And in terms of how they operate online and what the eventual goals are?

JE: Absolutely, this has been really fascinating from a research perspective, but of course, also quite concerning to see the extent to which extremist groups are borrowing from each other and also learning from each other. There is almost a sense of cumulative learning across extremist groups. So, what initially the alt-right did, on the far-right extremist side, was that they borrowed a lot of the elements that seemed to work well in ISIS campaigns. They used a lot of the tactics to appeal to younger generations, which ISIS was of course pioneering and really managed to do, unfortunately, quite well, to recruit people between the ages of 18 and 25 especially. So, the alt-right copied some of their tactics, with national action, using very similar slogans even using a 'white jihad' kind of rhetoric, so, really applying the rhetoric of ISIS and jihadists.

And now we're seeing as you say, the opposite trend, where Islamist extremists and jihadists are using some of the online tactics and social media campaign tactics that the alt-right has, has pioneered, to some extent. The use of memes and satire and humoristic visual content, that's something that was more an innovation by the alt-right and they're sometimes using the exact same memes that originated from alt-right channels. We actually released a report at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, where I'm a research fellow, that's called *Islamogram,* that really shows how Islamist extremists have adopted some of that alt lingo and alt vocabulary and visual strategy.

SG: So, it seems to be a very vicious cycle where they're feeding off each other and it's growing and it's metamorphosing in various different ways, very disturbing ways. I want to also address the misogyny angle here because we know that in both neo-Nazi and jihadist movements there's a strong prevalence to violently abuse and control women. Neo-Nazis and jihadist, they're different, but then we're also seeing similarities that you are identifying. Why does misogyny play such an important role for these respective extremist entities?

JE: It's a really important common denominator as you say, both have such a deeply ingrained or deeply inherent misogynistic element in their ideologies and in their narratives. And the reason partly, that that is the case is because they both want to return to a distant past, where women had no rights, where we didn't have modern, liberal societal structures, where women fulfilled a very different role in society. And it's interesting because this is coupled—this kind of idealisation, or glorification of the past, where human rights were not respected to the same extent as today and women's rights especially—with a desire to use the techniques of the future to be an early adopter of new, innovative online techniques and use new technologies. but couple those with very old ideologies. So, it's an interesting dichotomy of old ideologies coupled with new technologies.

SG: Another related aspect is that we've also seen women play a prominent role in terrorism, as recruiters, groomers, and even engaging in violence itself. ISIS were very prominent in that

approach. There have been cases in both Germany and the United States recently, where women who were part of ISIS have been prosecuted for enslaving other women, during the height of ISIS' so called 'caliphate,' and literally handing these women over to ISIS male fighters as female slaves. Can you explain why women would want to play such a prominent role in terrorist groups and engage in some very disturbing behaviour, are motivations similar to men?

JE: It's a very good question that I've asked myself multiple times, especially when speaking to female members of both Islamist extremists and far-right extremist groups. But what seems to be interesting, and such a paradox because of course, they would be part of a deeply misogynist group, is that they would often say that they felt empowered by it, and they had a completely new way of looking at what it means to be a woman. Some of them had a femininity crisis. So, we often talk about the masculinity crisis as being a major driver of extremism, and interestingly, I could see a similar identity crisis among some of the women, who couldn't really cope with, for example, double burdens, with the fast-paced dating life, and who were just frustrated by some aspects of being a woman in today's world. So, that was an interesting commonality and a parallel to what drives male extremists.

But of course, there were other factors too and they were actually very similar to what is driving men. So, there is something more. It's not true to look at women as completely unique and very different, having a very different radicalization pathway. From my research and also from what other researchers wrote, even in terms of female suicide bombers, there are many parallels and many commonalities in the radicalization pathways.

SG: You've mentioned several times some of the research that you've done, you're a primary source researcher, you don't just talk about issues from afar you go very deep. And that leads me to what I wanted to talk to you about next, which is that you've written another book *Going Dark*, where you literally go undercover, adopting five different identities, and joining about a dozen or so extremist groups from across the ideological spectrum. What was that like? And did it take a toll on your mental health?

JE: Yes, that was definitely an interesting research project and an investigation, really my goal was to understand better what drives people on a very human level to join extremist groups and also to stay within extremist groups, and to understand the tactics better. And I thought the best way to do that is to really be on the inside of an extremist group. So, I adopted lots of different identities to join different groups across the ideological spectrum. I built up five different avatar accounts over time, to be recruited by extremist groups like Generation Identity, the white national nationalist movement, but I also went to a neo-Nazi festival in Germany. So, I also did offline investigations. I also spent time with white nationalists, actually meeting them in a pub in London and going to an event at an Airbnb in Brixton.

And that was definitely something where I was increasingly concerned about my own safety, and it's also the reason why I didn't continue it. Because it definitely took a toll on me, I think on a psychological level as well, because of course, many researchers working in that field of radicalization prevention are exposed to a lot of content that can be deeply traumatising, especially over time, and can turn into chronic trauma. But being so close also in the offline world, really meeting up with people, had a different dimension to it as well, because of course there were campaigns against me after that. There were hate campaigns, including death threats and sexual threats when they found out who I really was—which was inevitable because of the books that I published

and the articles that I wrote.

SG: I can imagine that must have been extremely challenging to deal with. Related to this, did you notice people becoming disenchanted, wanting to leave these groups that you were embedding yourself in? And if so, what led to the choice of leaving? Did this experience provide any insights on what more can be done to stop individuals from succumbing to violent ideological doctrines?

JE: Definitely. There were a few cases, and it seemed to follow a wider pattern that I could observe from up close, which was people leaving after some kind of event or incident that really questioned their own worldview and their perception of the in-group versus the out-group. So, for example, Charlottesville: I was on the inside of the organisation teams and looked at what was happening in the run-up to the Charlottesville rally. And when the events then turned violent and actually led to one counter-protester dying, being murdered in the car terrorist attack there, that really alienated some of the people within the movement and led them to leave the movement, because they were so surprised that this could happen. The same was true when the Christchurch shooting happened, where you saw that a few people could just not really combine being part of a community that they felt was very much reflecting their own state of mind, their own ideologies, but then seeing that community turn towards violence. That was definitely something that led to some people leaving. But equally, when all of a sudden, the enemy—or the perceived —was no longer perceived as so evil…because some of the individuals would then have positive experiences with the so-called enemy and would start to question these black and white narratives. So usually, some kind of surprising moment that would lead them to break up their narratives about the "us" and the "them" was a good starting point for people to leave.

SG: So, to connect the thread further, you've been researching the language and narratives that are being produced and written communications by terrorists, including manifestos that are associated with violent attacks. You co-authored a very important peer-reviewed journal article in relation to this. Can this be used to help security agencies; defence ministries improve their detection and prevention practices when it comes to counter-terrorism?

JE: That would be the hope. It can of course add one additional layer to early warning systems, for example, to really see when someone is radicalising towards violence, because it's getting increasingly hard these days to distinguish between what's an empty threat online—because of the sheer amount of threats that we have in the online spaces—and what's actually something that should be further investigated and should be taken seriously. And the idea of the systematic terrorist manifesto analysis was to both quantitatively—statistically—but also qualitatively examine, in terms of the language and the social psychological drivers revealed through language, what distinguishes the communications of terrorists from the communications or texts written by people who would never resort to violence.

And what came out of this was that there is almost a formula of different factors that seem to be statistically significant among future terrorist perpetrators who uploaded the terrorist manifestos—and that was identity fusion, which has already been found in previous research to be linked to extreme forms of violence. And it means basically when your personal identity merges with your group identity. And that can be tracked in language as well, and it's revealed subconsciously, so even if you strategically escalate or deescalate in your language, it goes beyond that. Even the use of satire wouldn't really distort this phenomenon of identity fusion. And that's often then combined with violence-condoning group norms—such as the justification of violence, the glorification

of previous attackers, or the glorification of martyrdom—and with dehumanising and demonising language towards a perceived enemy group. So those are the different factors that seem to be uniquely or exclusively a pattern in terrorist manifestos, as opposed to non-terrorist manifestos. And I would hope that this can help at least maybe allocate the resources to the right groups or to individuals online who are really posing a credible threat to violence and who might actually resort to terror tactics.

SG: I'd like to pivot to another dynamic. You have done so much primary source research. I'm curious, do you ever come across the role of hostile state actors, such as Russia, who may engage with proscribed entities to cause social tensions with other countries? Because we know that Russia engages in a lot of actions that are designed to cause problems in many countries, and we're seeing a lot of psychological operations coming out of the Kremlin during the whole conflict in Ukraine. Has that ever come across your path?

JE: It definitely has. And there have been many touch points for my research. At the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, we've done a lot of research into disinformation campaigns and how they interact with radicalization and amplification of what fringe and extremist groups do. So, it's interesting to see a parallel in the goals of fringe actors, extremist actors in, say, our liberal democracies and foreign state actors who are hostile to our democracies, like Russia. Russia is definitely an important one among them because it has been the Kremlin's goal to destabilise the European Union, to destabilise the UK and North America. And so, there is a common sense that they're trying to reach the same goal. It's been really difficult to prove the exact links, but there have been amplification mechanisms, which we could pinpoint in our research. For example, Russian-sponsored media outlets really giving airtime and repeating the hashtags or the campaigns that were driven by far-right extremists and also by other fringe communities. It doesn't really matter to them which ideology it is, as long as it creates chaos within Europe or within North America. So that's an ongoing, I guess, question, to what extent can we prove that there are actual Russian officials who are behind this or who are funding this? I believe lots of journalists and researchers are really on this, but it's still a tricky topic to approach.

SG: Yes, I can imagine. You spoke about fringe narratives and how Russia may wish to exploit that for their own agenda. It sort of makes me want to track back to some of the things that we were discussing earlier, in the sense that have you noticed what the main gateways into online extremists' communities are, for both Islamist and far-right? Are there commonalities, things that are identified as "acceptable" ways of getting lured into these dangerous pathways?

JE: Yeah, definitely. There's the exploitation of similar grievances, and they often have something to do with personal experiences, personal feelings of loss of status or socioeconomic issues, or even a feeling to be an outsider, to not be heard by politicians. All of these grievances are then projected or turned into a bigger narrative that fits the group or the movement's ideology. And that's the interesting parallel between all types of extremist movements—that they're very good at turning personal grievances into something bigger that would reflect the group's ideology. And of course, conspiracy myths are kind of an intermediary here. They're used to make that connection, to make that bridge. And very often, that's quite handy, especially in times of crisis.

We saw that with COVID and also the Russian war in Ukraine, that some of the information vacuum and the uncertainty in those crises was exploited and misused by extremists. And they could really tap into entire population segments that seem to be more vulnerable and seem to look for

some kind of overarching explanation for their own personal losses or fears or their own lack of perspective. And so I think it's really important also on a political level to really spot what are the population segments in a crisis—and that can be the health crisis, that can be even to do with the COVID impact on mental health and on socioeconomic situations—what are the population segments that might be most likely to develop a sense of anti-establishment or grievance or feeling of deep discontent with the status quo, who can then easily be brought to the side of extremists and extremist narratives? And the same is true now with the economic and energy crisis. This is a major opportunity, unfortunately, for extremist movements to recruit more people into their arms.

SG: You've demonstrated throughout our conversation just the breadth of research that you've undertaken. And it's very important in terms of helping us understand and demystify a lot of the different narratives that feed into extremism and how they operate. So, a final question. It's a preconceived, leading question, I guess. You studied at the London School of Economics and Political Science. You took the master's course Political Islam that I happen to teach along with Dr. Kirsten Schulze. How much did the course help you in your career path?

JE: I would say it was even the kick-starter of what got me interested in the topic. And it helped me really to understand the underlying patterns of different forms of extremism. So, I still benefit from the course today, and I'm not just saying that because you're hosting this podcast, but it's been really very fundamental in my thinking about extremism, about radicalization. And it was what initially got me interested in the topic because it was a really fascinating course. And so, I can definitely recommend it to anyone who is studying at the LSE. But yeah, I'm very grateful for what I learned in the course and also for all the questions that it prompted.

SG: Well, you remain one of the all-stars of the course, and everyone's very proud of what you've done and what you're continuing to achieve. So, thank you for the plug for HY435 at LSE. Let me also just thank you again, Julia, for spending the time talking to us about all these very important issues, and we look forward to your ongoing research. And let me just say thanks again for joining us on NATO *DEEP Dive*.

JE: Yeah, thank you so much for having me.

Julia Ebner and Embedding with Extremists

Julia Ebner is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Calleva Centre for Evolution and Human Sciences at the University of Oxford (Magdalen College) and a Research Affiliate at the Centre for the Study of Social Cohesion. She worked as a researcher for the Quilliam Foundation and the Institute for Strategic Dialogue for several years and acted as a Special Advisor on Terrorism Prevention for the United Nations and has given evidence to parliamentary working groups, intelligence agencies and tech companies. She is the author of internationally bestselling book Going Dark: The Secret Social Lives of Extremists.

Episode 30 - Daniel Koehler and Dealing with Radicalisation, January 2022

Key Reflections

- **The phenomenon of 'code-switching,' in which individuals switch from one extremist ideology to another one, has some core components including antisemitism, toxic masculinity, and intolerance towards a democratic, pluralistic society.**
- **In a short span of time, sovereign citizen conspiracy theories have managed to spread globally and are believed to have fuelled the 2022 plot to overthrow the German government.**
- **Social media platforms have amplified the threat of conspiracy theory-based terrorism throughout the pandemic. In some cases, teenagers and children have been lured into extremism from online gaming platforms.**
- **Specialists with an expertise in countering violent extremism are needed if deradicalisation is to work. Those working in mental health are well-placed to understand the factors that fuel radicalisation.**
- **The Mothers for Life Network was established to connect parents whose children had gone to join the so-called ISIS caliphate in Iraq and Syria. It has provided a support structure for the communities and families.**
- **'Disguised Compliance,' where people pretend to take part in deradicalisation programmes only to commit an attack after, is a concern. Voluntary deradicalisation may improve the chances of individuals cooperating.**

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

DK: Daniel Koehler

SG: Hello, and welcome to *DEEP Dive*, brought to you by NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel. Each episode, we speak to experts and practitioners in international security and defence, counter-terrorism, and geopolitical current events to gain insight into the most pressing matters of global affairs.

In this episode we speak with Daniel Koehler who is the Director of the German Institute on Radicalisation and De-radicalisation Studies (GIRDS) which he established in 2014. Daniel's research is primary focused, and he has developed several corresponding programmes in dealing with radicalisation. He has also published numerous articles and chapters on the topic. Daniel works with governmental agencies to help coordinate prevention networks against violent extremism. Amongst several affiliations with universities and institutes, Daniel is also on the Editorial Board of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) in The Hague.

Daniel Koehler, a very warm welcome to NATO *DEEP Dive*.

DK: Thank you so much for having me, I'm really excited to be here.

SG: Well, it's our pleasure.

Let's look at the work that you've done, including what you've written. Why did you write *From Traitor to Zealot* and what did you learn from the research?

DK: *From Traitor to Zealot* is my most recent book that came out at the end of last year with Cambridge University Press. It's really about the phenomenon of side switching across hostile extremist ideologies. For example, the neo-Nazi becoming a far-left anti-fascist or far-left extremist switching to become a Salafi jihadi, for example. And here in Germany, there are a couple of well-known cases of former terrorists like for example, former left wing terrorist that is currently one of the leading Salafi jihadi preachers in prison, or a former co-founder of the Red Army Faction, a left wing terrorist group, the Red Army Faction, Horst Mahler who is now an open neo-Nazi, an open Holocaust denier.

So, these cases are kind of well known, but it turned out when I spoke to colleagues, [asking] what does actually explain their side switching? Are there any theories? Is there any background research? No one had any idea about it. It seemed to me that there is actually nothing out there and that that was really, really stunning because these are such fascinating biographies. So, I wanted to understand how they explained their side switching to their environment, to the public. And it turns out, many of them actually have written autobiographies or given interviews or given some kind of statements, where they try to explain that they're not traitors, but they're actually more convinced or more serious about core values and core attitudes, within their extremist environment.

So, I figured if we can understand side switching across ideologies, we might be able to identify something like a source code for extremist radicalisation, the core narratives, the core moving, ideological components, so to speak. And I found that, for most of them, antisemitism, toxic masculinity, and strong hatred against a democratic, pluralistic society, are driving forces, that in each form of violent extremism they are active.

SG: That's very interesting. It brings me to the recent plot that happened on 7 December 2022, when 25 members of a suspected far-right extremist group were arrested for allegedly planning a coup d'état in Germany. You spoke about this dynamic, about entities that were opposed to a democratic pluralistic society, can you talk more about this plot and how significant it is?

DK: At the moment it is very difficult to tell because we're very early in the investigation process and obviously we'll have to wait for the court trial and for the information to come out to really see how far this group has progressed. But from what has been reported in the press, and what kind of information the Federal Prosecutor General has released, it is a very, very interesting kind of group, that was supposedly mainly driven by a combination of sovereign citizen ideology and beliefs, so beliefs that deny that there's a legitimate German state currently, on the one hand, and on the other hand, by QAnon the U.S. based conspiracy theory that claims that there's a global paedophile sex trafficking ring led by Democratic elites and societal elites, where children are abducted and tortured to gain some kind of drug for them.

And if that's true, this QAnon-sovereign citizen plot would be definitely the most serious and sophisticated—largest—QAnon terrorist plot in the world, which is quite interesting to see how quickly QAnon has spread in Germany, which has basically arrived with the pandemic and early 2020. But there's no question that this group was actually posing a threat for a successful coup d'état. They could never have actually brought down the government or taken overpower. Even though they had obviously people with military training or police background, even some people who could have opened the doors to the parliament building, but the German democratic system was designed with the experience of the Second World War, and the Nazi rule. So, our political system, the strong federalism, the strong separation of powers, is designed deliberately as an antidote against specifically extreme right coup d'états. So, it would be very, very difficult, if not impossible for a group like that to do any significant damage to the political system, to the state, but obviously, they could have abducted and killed individuals, they could have created a panic, they could have conducted bomb attacks, so I would definitely not want to say that they were not dangerous at all, but then we're not really dangerous to the federal democratic order or to the political system. So, that's important to make the differentiation.

SG: Very much so, and as you say, the case is still unfolding so more is to be established about it. You spoke about the pandemic earlier, has the pandemic fuelled radicalisation and made it harder to counter because of the fact that so many dynamics emerged during two and a half years that were perhaps difficult to monitor and track because of the fact that the ability to be physical in contact with people was harder.

DK: It definitely has fuelled radicalisation, it even brought, more or less, a new form of extremism to Germany. When the pandemic started, in early 2020, in March and April, and the lockdown came in full effect later on in Germany, we saw this immediate rise of conspiracy based anti-Vax, anti-COVID, measures movement called the *'Querdenker'* literally *'lateral thinkers,'* QAnon, and many, many other conspiracy movements, were basically united through their shared belief that either the pandemic does not exist or the virus is just manufactured to suppress the people, or it's just not that dangerous, the government is using it as an excuse to spy and oppress the people. And later on, obviously, they came in with all these conspiracy theories about the vaccination, it's just pure poison to kill white races etc, etc.

So, this whole conspiracy movement grew rapidly in Germany and mixed with sovereign citizen movements, far-right, extreme right movements, so neo-Nazi groups and sovereign citizens were very quick to prey and to kind of benefit from that movement and to intermingle, to bring in their own narratives and ideologies. And very quickly this whole conspiracy-extremist environment, which was actually later on classified as extremist, by the German intelligence because they are so full of hatred against the government, against the democratic society, and so pro-violence, that they grew so quickly and outgrew every other extremist environment in Germany, by far even combined there. They're just so large in terms of people who consume these narratives that are usually highly antisemitic, pro-violence, against democratic order, against the police, against the government, and that has resulted in a string of violent acts, for example, the murder of Idar-Oberstein, the plot to kidnap public health minister Lauterbach, obviously, the current plot that you mentioned, there was a murder-suicide in Brandenburg where a father killed his three daughters and his wife, and then committed suicide because his wife had a fake vaccination passport that was detected and he thought that his children would now be taken away into this QAnon global paedophile ring, so he killed his whole family.

So, there was a whole string of violent acts and plots that came out of this conspiracy-extremist

movement, which is really, really difficult for the German counter-terrorism, counter-extremism environment, to grasp, to understand where these people come from. They typically have no background in extremist radicalisation, extremist environments, that come from everywhere in the society. But the plot that you mentioned, the most recent one, you had a pilot in there, you had a singer in there, you had a doctor in there, you had a judge in there, you had a cook in there. So, very diverse, different backgrounds that are only united through these hardcore, extremist conspiracy theories, and that is quite worrying. We currently see, in that particular form of extremism, the main threat to our domestic security

SG: Building on that, has online radicalisation gone deeper into the dark web and through encrypted messaging as a result of the pandemic and some of the dynamics that we're talking about?

DK: To be honest, I think that those extremists and terrorists who actually think about operational security and technical countermeasures and hiding their steps and go deeper into hiding, they definitely exist, and they definitely are out there. But with the current threats, the conspiracy based threats, and larger scale, for example, the *Telegram* environment, et cetera, they have turned to mainstream platforms like *Telegram* or gaming platforms during the pandemic, where they believed they could openly speak and exchange information without being detected because they thought that *Telegram* would never, ever cooperate with the German authorities and for a long time, it didn't. And so, they believed *Telegram* to be a safe space. So, my impression was that the speed and the sheer size of people getting radicalised through the pandemic, has resulted in them actually using less OpSec and less measurements for staying hidden. So, learning the dark web and learning to navigate the dark web, it requires some kind of technical skills, right? In most of these individuals, they radicalised so quickly that they actually wanted to engage right away with this extremist community. For most part, they directly went to *Telegram* or on gaming platforms like discord, but mainly telegram and used their names and use their real handles and they believed that that the authorities would never actually find them.

SG: You spoke about online gaming platforms. Can you talk to me about the radicalisation of children that is happening through those online gaming platforms?

DK: Yes, that's also, I think, a very, very concerning trend that we've seen in a number of Western countries, in the UK, for example, in the US, a decrease in the age of suspects in far-right terrorist circles, especially there's a link with a 'Terrorgram' environment on *Telegram* 'Atomwaffen Division', Feuerkrieg Division', 'Sonnenkrieg Division', where we know that some of the leading members and founders of these groups are essentially children, they're 12, 13, 14 years old. So, we have started a research project, where we looked at police investigations that involve children and extreme right radicalisation on online gaming platforms. And we've published on that and looked at a couple of cases of 12-year-olds and 15-year-olds. And what happens on these gaming platforms is actually that they use the gaming, to bond, to connect to other, older individuals, still teenagers, but older, who are openly extreme right. They're using extreme right codes and symbols in their handles, in their avatars. And then they bond, they basically play for example, a strategic Second World War simulation game, and then they will discuss, 'what's the Wehrmacht?', 'who's Adolf Hitler?', 'what's the Holocaust?' And then they get invited into gaming adjacent platforms like on *Discord*, certain *Discord* groups and service where it stops being about the gaming, it starts [being] about the political and ideological indoctrination right away.

So, they get taken off the gaming environment and being put into this ideological, high pressure,

indoctrination environment, where the goal of these older neo-Nazis or extreme rightists is to change offline behaviour. So, these kids are basically used to immediately do something offline, to commit crimes, even plot terrorist attacks. And then they get channelled into *Telegram* groups from these gaming servers on *Discord*. So, it's almost like a pipeline that by playing video games, they get to know others who are openly extreme right, and they get invited into groups on *Discord*. From there, they get channelled into *Telegram* groups within the 'Terrorgram' environment, with the goal to actually radicalise them on the highest pressure. So, as quickly as possible because these older teenagers, obviously they don't know how long these kids will stick to their online community.

So, very concerning and these kids have, usually from what we've seen, they have broken family backgrounds, they're often times victims of bullying, they have mental health issues, so it makes sense for them to seek out strong hierarchies and alliances and loyalty in these online virtual groups, at least it's what they are promised there, right? They have to give a pledge of allegiance and fill out questionnaires to give them the status of the lead when they are in these groups. And this is why they actually obey these calls for criminal activities. I've seen what these kids actually said: 'I had to do it because he was the leader of the group, or he was the deputy of the group, and I didn't want to lose my status in that environment.'

SG: Well, indeed, as you said, this is a very dangerous pipeline. If we pivot to how to deal with this, how to counter it, you've worked a lot in deradicalisation. There are often ideas of what deradicalisation entails and there are sometimes misconceptions of it too. What would you say are the most significant misconceptions about deradicalisation?

DK: Oh, there are so many. I think one of the first is that deradicalisation does not require any kind of specialisation and training and expertise, so that you can just, quote unquote send a psychologist or a therapist or a social worker or a police officer to do the job, and there is no social worker training or psychologist education on the world, that would qualify you automatically to handle extremist radicalisation, you need to study that in particular, you need to do specialise on that.

So, as communities of expertise, we need to build a professional field where people can study and specialise in countering violent extremism or deradicalisation, that's the first. So, whatever your background is, as a psychologist, as a therapist or social worker, specialise, train more, to really focus on countering extremist radicalisation and deradicalisation, it's very, very complex and hard work.

Second, I would say, is the role of ideology. So, many people think that deradicalisation versus disengagement essentially means, "Do I talk about ideology, or do I not talk about ideology?" And when they mention ideology, they have something very abstract and intellectual in mind, like a worldview, or like a philosophical system, "I need to debate *Mein Kampf*" or "I need to debate the Quran" or "need to teach them the correct form of Islam," or whatever. And actually, in reality, it's much more nuanced.

So, deradicalisation is really about identifying the individual driving factors for a person to radicalise, to understand really what makes them so fascinated, what draws them into the extremist environment. And this can be friendship, this can be social issues, can be a quest for justice and significance. There are so many motives, but they are very individually mixed. So, you need to understand the individual person and his or her drivers. And then identifying alternatives to that and

making positive alternative options available to the person so that they don't need the extremist environment anymore. And it's not just about solving negative issues like bullying or like mental health issues. Obviously, they are important, but it's not all about that. It's really about providing them with a positive vision of something to strive for, something that they equally find fascinating, like really that gets them fascinated and attracted. And for that, I personally use a much more nuanced understanding of ideology, as really like a DNA that has different components, building blocks.

For example, political ideas, like justice and honour and masculinity and violence, and how they are configurated, how they are understood by each person, drives them to certain behaviours. So, during deradicalisation, usually if it's done correctly and properly, we actually kind of try to carefully restructure the DNA, the ideological DNA of these individuals so that in the end, they might still be driven by a quest for significance, a quest for justice, but now they have a different understanding of what justice means for them and how they can achieve it in a peaceful way, in a more holistic way, for example. So, it's very detailed, very hand-tailored to each individual's needs. That's the key actually.

SG: Detailed, specifically tailored, nuanced—these are key dynamics that you're raising. It leads me to one of the projects that you've worked in, which is the Mothers for Life Network. So, my understanding is that this is a network of mothers whose sons and daughters went to Syria and Iraq, and in many cases, they never returned. Tie this into two questions I have for you: what has this network been doing to deal with this, and can it play a role in the deradicalisation of people that are in those ISIS camps in northern Syria?

DK: When the network was established in late 2014-early 2015, it basically grew out of a specific need that these parents had across different countries. At the time, most countries did not have any family counselling support for the relatives of those radicalised in a Salafi jihadist environment. So, these parents looked for help. They looked for support to understand what had happened and what they could do as parents to help the children, ideally, to come back and deradicalise and reintegrate. In some cases it actually worked, but mainly it was first and foremost a self-help group, to cope with the effects of having a family member, your child radicalising and being killed in Syria and Iraq, or being treated as a terrorist, and in most cases, they were a member of a terrorist organisation, these children, and that is exceptionally destructive and toxic for the remaining families, even for other family members and siblings that were also at risk of radicalisation, for example. So, there has to be a specific support structure in place for the families and communities that are left behind when someone radicalises, so that was the first step—provide the self-help group, actually, that these parents, and mostly mothers, could talk to other mothers who had been through the same experience, so that they knew they're not alone, that they knew how to handle the stress and the hurt, all the anxiety, the fears.

And the second one was obviously that there are also other parents of children who are in the early stages of radicalisation, who are not that far gone and have not left during Iraq. And then these parents became almost beacons of light that attracted these other parents in their own countries, because they were much more trustworthy and much more approachable than most security agencies, intelligence and police agencies in these countries. So, they were automatically contacted by other parents asking, "What can I do now? How can I spot this, and how can I prevent my son and daughter from going down that pathway?" So, these parents turned into natural counsellors for other parents, and this is why I wanted to create a network where they can help each other to be better at that. And…I provided training to some of these parents, I've connected this self-help

group to various support structures in different countries, ranging from the U.S. to Norway to Italy, so that when these parents are approached by others asking for help, they could refer them to existing and professional help structures to actually do what they had been missing in their own experience. So, these two things are main components of the Mothers for Life Network also.

Also, we tried of course to raise awareness for the stress and the destruction that radicalisation does to families and parents. Many of these parents, I've got to say, were secondary victims; their children radicalised, and in many cases, the society has treated them as the person to blame. They said, you know, "It's your fault as a parent that your son or daughter has radicalised," even though in many cases I would say it's the society as a whole that has to bear the blame. This creates more friction and more conflict in the communities. And Mothers for Life really is about healing and connecting the families back to the communities and back to the authorities and other institutions that they needed.

And your other question regarding the effectiveness of deradicalisation in the camps over there, I've got to say, it depends a lot on the local situation. Obviously, a deradicalisation programme cannot really work in a situation that does not provide human rights, that does not provide all the access to the basic services a human being has a right to, for example, education and health and mental health, and all the other services. Obviously, if there are grave human rights abuses, if there's a grave danger to your health and your safety in these camps, then deradicalisation would not be the first thing I would do with them. In my perspective, providing them with a safe and healthy environment, mostly for these women and children, would be the best strategy for deradicalization currently, before you start talking about ideology and teachings of ISIS etc. But I can only speak from my perspective or view from what I've read and heard about the situation in the camps. So wherever there's diseases, where they are diseases, where there are human rights abuses, where there's violence raging, and no one actually is taking care of the basic needs of human beings, then radicalisation will always be a major option for these people to escape these situations, to make meaning and sense out of it, that you are in such a horrible situation.

SG: You raise a lot of important points to do with the challenges that exist and also what you have to say, not just about the Mothers for Life Network, which is an important grassroots organic movement, but also the specifics about the camps themselves and what needs to be prioritised there. We've seen people game the system and pretend to reform, pretend to be taking part in deradicalisation programmes. We've seen it in Austria, in the U.K., but then they end up carrying out attacks. What is, in your opinion, being missed in seeing the fault in that programme that perhaps, on reflection with the benefit of hindsight, could have perhaps identified those gaps?

DK: It's actually quite brilliant and timely that you asked this question because I just recently finished a research project together with the University of Queensland looking at disguised compliance in deradicalisation programmes. And we interviewed a number of deradicalisation programme personnel across the world and asked them about their experience and their perspectives on it. And I would say in those countries where you have mandatory participation in these programmes—forced participation—in most cases in the United Kingdom, for example, or North African and many Asian and other countries, where there's basically no question, you're forced to participate, and then you have a much higher rate of disguised compliance, of trying to game the system.

While in countries like Germany, where, for the most part, deradicalisation is completely voluntary, you automatically end up with those individuals who have some kind of interest in cooperating with

you and then taking part in these programmes. In Germany, for example, most programmes here cannot offer any hard benefits for example, early release from prison or anything like that. If you participate in a programme, it doesn't make any sense actually to waste your resources and try to game the deradicalisation programmes. It's actually much more about building a trust-based relationship and learning how to cope with all the different aspects of your past and your biography. So, they do get some benefits psychologically…they learn a lot about themselves, and eventually this might be taken into account by a judge, and they might see it as proof that these individuals are actually reintegrating and rehabilitating. But as a deradicalisation programme in Germany, they can never assure you and guarantee you that you'll get out of jail earlier just because you participated in the programme. So, this makes a very, very important difference.

So, we have to understand, when you talk about deradicalisation as the system, there is not *the* one deradicalisation programme. There are many, many different types of programmes across the world, dozens of different types, actually. So it's more about understanding what specific type of programme and what kind of setting, pre- or post-prison or in prison, active or passive, mandatory or voluntary, what kind of staff, what kind of goals, all these factors play a very important role in understanding the performance of a programme and the expected rate of recidivism or, let's say, faked, disguise compliance. But generally speaking, from what we know…these programmes tend to have a much, much lower rate of recidivism than any comparable ordinary reintegration and rehabilitation programme. But it might also be a problem that when it comes to terrorism and violent extremism, societies have a very, very low threshold tolerance for failure. So, even if a programme has worked 20 years without a single case of recidivism, and then there's this one case of fake compliance who conducts an attack, and then everyone would basically think the whole programme is a waste and is a failure and is being played by these individuals. So, it's really about the context and to see some kind of nuance here, where and how and how long these programmes have operated.

SG: Speaking about context, very often when we talk about deradicalisation, it's connected to countering violent extremism, which is a very open term in many ways because of so many different dynamics that are involved. It's often associated with civil society, with civilian institutions. Increasingly, there is this discussion about, is there a place for CVE, countering violent extremism, in the military, in terms of operations abroad, where there is engagement with other societies? Do you think there is a viability for CVE for the military?

DK: Oh, absolutely. I think the German experience has shown for over 20 years now that there's a strong role and strong tradition even for governmental PVE and CVE, mostly in intelligence and police communities, but also within the military, first and foremost, obviously looking at the threat of extremist radicalisation of soldiers, of military personnel. And obviously, this is a whole different story to talk about. But law enforcement and military communities are very particular. They have very specific psychologies, very specific collective identities. And obviously, they need to take care of protecting themselves against hostile influences from the outside and from the inside. And I think that most Western countries have overlooked the threat that actually is posed by extremist radicalisation in the ranks in their own midst that can lead to grave operational insecurities and even terrorist threats. So yes, first of all, PVE/CVE has to be adapted to the specific needs of a certain environment of, for example, the military culture, the policing culture, or even the intelligence community.

But beyond that, the military engages other cultures when they are deployed. And in many cases, certain acts of military personnel or military forces in deployment are cited by persons who later

became Salafi jihadist terrorists for example or went down other radicalisation pathways. So, I think really, it's really understanding CVE as a part of civil-military relations and the way a military acts and behaves when they are confronted by and with a different culture, a different context, obviously. So, it does play a role. And obviously in many cases, what the military, at least the U.S. military or the NATO countries, have termed after the Afghanistan war "counterinsurgency," for example, they've tried to find a way to not make insurgencies grow by their own actions. For example, be much more careful how to engage with certain cultures and not to use unnecessary force for example or be culturally aware and appropriate in your actions to not drive people into the arms of insurgents, and that can be framed as countering violent extremism.

SG: Well, you've addressed a very important dynamic. In fact, this whole discussion that we've had, you've helped to demystify a lot when it comes to countering violent extremism as well as the issue of deradicalisation and raise some of the growing and challenging concerns that we will have to face well into 2023 and beyond. Let me thank you again, Daniel Koehler, for joining us on NATO *DEEP Dive*. We hope to have you back again sometime.

DK: Thank you so much. It was a pleasure talking to you.

Daniel Koehler and Dealing with Radicalisation

Daniel Koehler is the founding Director of the German Institute on Radicalization and De--Radicalization Studies (GIRDS), Fellow at George Washington University's Program on Extremism and Editor in Chief of the JD Journal for Deradicalization. He also advises the Ministry of the Interior in Baden-Württemberg, Germany, on guiding the state-wide Countering Violent Extremism activities.

Episode 31 - Alex Tiersky & Michael Cecire and Holding Russia Accountable, January 2022

Key Reflections

- **The U.S. Helsinki Commission was established on 3 June 1976 as part of détente during the Cold War, to monitor human rights conditions in Europe. It is based on the idea that human rights within a given country was a subject of legitimate scrutiny for all countries.**
- **The commission is a bipartisan, independent agency, which operates like a congressional committee, holding hearings, issuing statements, going on international travel, and engaging in inquiries.**
- **In the United States Congress, there is a sense of bipartisan and bicameral backing when it comes to the issue of Ukraine. Discussions focus on Putin's malign influence internationally as well as the moral element of the war itself and what it represents in principle.**
- **Active collection of evidence to document Russia's war crimes and human rights abuses in Ukraine is ongoing. The need for an official genocide resolution is important, both symbolically and practically.**
- **The Wagner Group is known to carry out nefarious activity both in Ukraine as well as in other theatres, such as Mali and Syria. There is bipartisan support in the U.S. to label the entity as a terrorist organisation.**

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

AT: Alex Tiersky

MC: Michael Cecire

SG: Hello, and welcome to *DEEP Dive*, brought to you by NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel. Each episode, we speak to experts and practitioners in international security and defence, counter-terrorism, and geopolitical current events to gain insight into the most pressing matters of global affairs.

In this episode, we speak with Alex Tiersky and Michael Hikari Cecire who both work at The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), also known as the U.S. Helsinki Commission, which is an independent commission of the U.S. Federal Government.

Alex serves as the Commission's Global Security and Political-Military Affairs Advisor. He also is the host of the Commission's podcast series, Helsinki on the Hill. A former Specialist in Foreign Affairs at the Congressional Research Service, Alex was Director for the Defence and Security Committee at NATO's Parliamentary Assembly.

Michael focuses on the South Caucasus and Black Sea regional affairs, as a senior policy advisor. Previously, he was an analyst at the Congressional Research Service, as well as being a policy

advisor and researcher on Eurasia issues supporting the Department of Defense and other U.S. Governmental agencies.

Alex and Michael, a warm welcome to NATO *DEEP Dive*.

AT: Sajjan, it's really great to be here. Thanks for inviting us on the show.

MC: Thanks so much, I really appreciate it.

SG: It's our pleasure. Let's talk about the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), which is also known as the U.S. Helsinki Commission. I'm a historian, so I've always been very intrigued by names that are grounded in history. Where does the name of the U.S. Helsinki Commission derive from Alex?

AT: Sajjan, it's a great question and something I find myself answering frequently from grandparents and cousins and friends and explaining that, 'no, we're not located in Finland, we don't do restaurant recommendations for Helsinki.' The history of the commission is actually a really interesting one. Your listeners might be familiar with a major diplomatic negotiation and agreement that was reached in the 70s, during the period of detente between the East and the West. It was called the Helsinki Final Act, named for the city in which it was signed. And the Helsinki Final Act essentially established a set of principles, by which security across the Soviet and Western blocs was going to be at least discussed.

What was really ground-breaking, from our perspective, in the Helsinki Final Act principles, was that for the first time, there was an explicit linkage made between the security internal to a state and inter-ethnic tensions that might lead to conflict within a state, and how that might contribute to conflict between different states. So, interstate conflict. And as a kind of segue from that principle that was agreed, again by the east and the west, was the idea that human rights within a given country was, therefore, a subject of legitimate scrutiny for all of the countries. Again, the ground-breaking element here was really that the human rights situation in any given country could be questioned by governments outside of the country.

And so the signature of the Helsinki Final Act again goes back to 1975 and the signature was between the heads of heads of state of these various countries. But of course, Michael and I work for members of the United States Congress, and we know well that the United States Congress likes to get involved in some of these conversations, and that was just as true then as it is now. As the Helsinki Final Act was being finalised, there was a delegation of members of the United States Congress travelling in Europe and in the East, and they met with dissidents from the Soviet Union, who recognised this ground-breaking principle of human rights being open to legitimate scrutiny, from the outside.

These human rights activists took the opportunity to talk to the members of Congress, including this this one fascinating woman, Millicent Fenwick, who really in a sense, is kind of the mother of the Helsinki Commission, and explained look, 'this agreement allows you, the outside world, the

United States Congress, to hold our government to account for the abuses they're inflicting on us [and] on our society. Let us give you the evidence of these human rights violations and then you can use this agreement, the Helsinki Final Act, to hold the governments to account and hopefully improve conditions for us.'

So, Millicent Fenwick came back to Washington very inspired by these dissidents, in the Soviet Union, and said, 'you know what? We agree that the Helsinki Final Act is absolutely ground-breaking, but we're not confident, necessarily, that our most senior executive branch authorities will continue to hold the Soviets to account for their violations of human rights. We need to create an institution that will in a sense, be the conscience of the United States government, and of the broader signatories to the Helsinki Final Act, to make sure that this is top of the agenda every time that there's a bilateral discussion. Let us create a commission that will monitor the commitments made under the Helsinki Final Act and primarily on human rights.'

So, she drafted legislation and, one thing leads to another as they say, on 3 June 1976, the Helsinki Commission, formerly known as the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, was created. So, that's how we get from the Helsinki Final Act to the Helsinki Commission. Again, the formal name being the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe.

SG: That's very interesting, indeed. And it's grounded in Cold War history. Looking at, of course, the role, the dynamics of the Soviet Union which no longer exists. But in many ways the current manifestation that is Russia comes up a lot. So, with that in mind, what is the nature and the role of the U.S. Helsinki Commission today?

MC: Yeah, I can jump in here. I should apologise to your listeners ahead of time, given I seem to have a frog in my throat, I'm battling a bit of a cold, but hopefully that doesn't slow us down too much.

In terms of the Helsinki Commission's structure and role, the thing that we think is very important to understand, and is a point of pride for us, is that we are a bicameral, bipartisan, independent agency and I'm throwing a lot of words in there, but what that essentially means is that we have leadership that come from both chambers of Congress, from both the Senate and the House. We have 18 commissioners, nine from each of the two chambers. And we also have a toe in the executive branch as well, statutorily. We have 21 commissioners in total, including one from each of the Department of Defence, Department of State, and Department of Commerce.

But because of our overwhelmingly congressional leadership, we tend to be seen as, and are sometimes recognised as, being something of a legislative branch entity, although technically we're not, we're technically an independent agency. We have this foot in the executive branch and in the legislative branch because of our leadership, but we're actually on, for those who care about these sorts of things, on the State Department's appropriations line. So, it's a little bit of fun trivia.

But what that means in practicality is that we can operate in a lot of ways like a congressional commission, or even in some ways like a congressional committee, in that our congressional leadership will hold hearings, they will issue statements, they will go on international travel and engage in inquiry. And so we work a lot to support our bipartisan, bicameral congressional leadership. And

it also means that we have the ability, if our leadership is so interested, to do things like develop legislation in response to a problem. So, that history that Alex was speaking to a moment ago really is not only about platforming and elevating issues and topics of concern, although that's a big part of it, but also identifying potential remedies. And sometimes the remedy really is about elevating and shedding light on a problem. But sometimes the remedy is truly a matter of policy tweaking and that can be our leadership writing letters to the president, to secretaries of executive branch agencies, but also developing legislation itself to fix whatever the problem is that we've identified.

SG: It's a very important aspect that you raise, Michael. Alex, do you want to add something?

AT: I do, thanks, Michael gave a terrific overview. I would just add one key element that is pretty poorly understood, I think, outside of those of us who work in this domain. [It] is the role that our members play in a field called parliamentary diplomacy, it's come to be known as parliamentary diplomacy. So, where our members, of course, are very active here in the United States, as Michael suggested, in writing legislation, and here, I would point for instance, your listeners may well have heard of the Magnitsky sanctions, that's something that we're quite proud originated here with the Helsinki Commission and our leadership really driving this forward through the Congress, very consequentially.

But also as they travel, as Michael suggested, frequently they're participating in both informal bilateral meetings, with heads of state or ministers of various countries, whether it's in those countries or in their offices here in Washington, and of course, we support all of those activities. But also they're part of a formal organisation, focused on this field of parliamentary diplomacy, called the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. And this is a standing body that meets regularly to discuss issues under the aegis of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which again comes back to where we started, that organisation founded on exactly the same set of principles that the Helsinki Commission was founded to monitor. And in that Parliamentary Assembly, the senators and members of the House that we work for, will travel and engage in dialogue directly, whether it's on the Ukraine aggression, with the Russians, either participating or not, the conversations with the Ukrainians, but also their German and French counterparts are there, all of the Central Asian states participate, and all of the so-called 'neutral' European states are also a part of this 57 participating state organisation.

So, that can be a very fruitful forum for our members to both generate consensus, for example, on the support of Ukraine, in the current situation, as they face Russian aggression, but also to promulgate best practices in various fields, for instance, on combating the trafficking of human beings.

SG: So, you mentioned Russian aggression, this naturally leads us to a broader discussion on the role of the U.S. Congress in foreign policy. What are the congressional views when it comes to supporting Ukraine as well as dealing with the Russian aggression in the Ukraine itself, led by the Kremlin?

MC: Well, I would say, first of all, that as a disclaimer we can't really portray a full on congressional view, but I would say the dominant view, and certainly a view that is shared in strong part by our commission leadership, has been one of robust, enduring, and strong support to Ukraine, to Ukraine's independence, to its fight for its survival, and very much against Russia's—I would say it's and we would say it's—genocidal war of conquest there. And so, I think we've seen expres-

sions of that quite clearly in Congress over the past 10 months or so, since the full-scale invasion started. Not only expressed through these large appropriations that have been—these drawdowns—to provide Ukraine with humanitarian and economic and military aid during these trying times, but also in a raft of other measures of support that demonstrate just how clearly this is an affront to our principles, and how clearly we see this as an attack, not just on Ukraine, but on European security more generally, and an attack on global peace more broadly.

So, it's something that I think we in the Helsinki Commission, feel very intimately and we think about constantly, and we sometimes say that we're in something of a wartime footing and so much of what we do, and so much of that history that Alex talked about before, really does put into sharp relief what is being abrogated by this invasion, conducted by the Kremlin, in Ukraine. Ukraine's sovereignty and the right of its people is very much enough, I would say, but we see a much bigger narrative of play here too, in the sense that since the agreement was forged, in 1975, there has never been a clear demonstration of an incineration, or an attempted incineration, of these principles, as we're seeing in Russia's war in Ukraine right now.

And so, it becomes this thing where we have to think about certainly the moral urgency with regard to Ukraine itself, but also the fragile, and interdependent nature of the European security architecture, and the ways by which preserving that architecture, preserving our ability to take for granted the idea that one country just can't roll into another and take what it wants and destroy what it wants at will. And the way that is connected to our ability to advocate for human rights, to promote democracy, to enable exchange internationally, not just in Europe, and the exchange of ideas, certainly, but also of basic economic commerce, is so much dependent on this this notion that we have taken for granted and we should want to take for granted, that one country cannot just attack another because it decides that that's somehow it's right or convenience.

So, I think we all know what's at stake here. And I think Congress as a whole has responded quite powerfully in various ways, certainly in the provision of aid and material supply to Ukraine, but also supporting the moral aspects of this conflict, the moral aspects of our role here, and defending what we see as the importance of the European security architecture for Ukraine, for Europe's security, for our national security, which I think is quite closely intertwined with that, and for global stability writ large. And I think one little slice of that [which] we can see is quite evident, is in the way this war has disrupted food security across the world. And again, that's a very small straw that we're looking at, as impactful as that is. And so, you can see what the implications are more broadly, if Russia is allowed to get away with everything that's been doing in Ukraine.

SG: Alex, please.

AT: Thanks. Again, I think Michael's response was completely spot on. I think the only thing I would add is I would describe the members of the United States Helsinki Commission, the senators and the members of the House that we work with most closely, really as the vanguard of what is a really broad cross-section of bipartisan, bicameral support for Ukraine and in opposition to the Kremlin and Putin's malign influence across the entire region and the broader world. Our commissioners are continually looking for ways to do more, faster, better to support Ukraine and to thwart some of Putin's aggressive actions and the tools that are available to him.

But I also think it's important to underline two other things: the commissioners who we work for are

not new to this issue. In part, through their engagement through the Helsinki Commission, through the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, they've been in direct conversation on the challenges Ukraine faces from Russia for decades but especially since the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. They've been intimately involved in the conversations over the setting up of a mission of international monitors on the border of Ukraine, the border observation mission that the Russians have vetoed, as well as a broader special monitoring mission that the OSCE has launched. So they've been quite familiar with how Russia has been violating every principle under the Helsinki Final Act in its aggression against Ukraine, at a minimum since 2014, but long since before as well.

As a second part, because you asked, "How does the Congress feel about Ukraine?" I think we have to acknowledge that there are voices that are very limited in number that are amplified in the media megaphone that have expressed some scepticism about assistance to Ukraine. I think it's absolutely fair to say that the members of Congress who we work for are quite confident that the bipartisan, bicameral consensus will absolutely hold going forward. And to the extent that there are questions about, for instance, accountability for the assistance that's being provided, those are questions I think that our Ukrainian friends welcome entirely and are not inappropriate from the perspective of providing accountability to the taxpayer who's funding a significant support. I think our members would tell you that it behoves all of the leaders in the political system of the United States to continue to make the case on why this assistance is necessary, which of course our commissioners believe that it is, and how it will be accountable to the taxpayer and their representatives. And again, it really is our sense and the sense of our leaders that that consensus is not in any danger.

SG: Well, that's very encouraging to hear, especially about the bipartisan support for Ukraine. Essential, in fact. Both of you said very important things. Alex, you talked about Putin's malign influence, and Michael, you talked about Russia's genocidal conquest. You both are also working on two very important legislative initiatives. Let's look at those. Michael, I'd like to talk to you first about what you're working on, and that is explicitly naming Russian aggression as genocide. What's happening on this front?

MC: Yeah, happy to talk about that. So in terms of what's happening, as a commission, we've worked on a resolution text that was introduced in the House by our co-chairman, Representative Steve Cohen and our ranking member, Representative Joe Wilson, and a version of that, a companion bill with very similar text was introduced in the Senate by Senator Jim Risch, as well as co-sponsored by our chairman, Senator Ben Cardin, as well as our Senate ranking member, Senator Roger Wicker. So the Senate Foreign Relations Committee has actually passed unanimously Senate Resolution 713. And we hope and expect for it to pass in the wider Senate in this Congress, so before the year is up, and so that's something that we're very excited about.

In the House [of Representatives], we haven't seen quite as much movement there. There is quite a number of members who have expressed strong support for this, and there seems to be a great deal of interest in it, but sometimes, that's the way these things go. I think we still have hope that we can get something through in this Congress, but if not, I think there's a real opportunity in the next Congress as well. And I think that, again, speaks to the bipartisan nature of the work that we're doing.

More broadly, I think what is important about these resolutions—and I'm often asked, "What's so important about a non-binding resolution?" which they are, and "Why does this matter?" And it's

always interesting to me because when we speak to our Ukrainian friends, both government officials from Kyiv, parliament members, civil society members, and even people from the front lines, they'll tell us their kind of wish lists for aid and arms. They'll talk about the material needs in the country more generally. And then they'll say something interesting: they will almost always say "Also a genocide resolution. Also, a genocide resolution." And I think that speaks to just how powerfully that notion resonates with Ukrainian society…the idea that the world, and particularly the United States in this regard, sees what they are enduring…that we understand what it is they're going through and that we're willing to speak out and call it by its name. And what we're trying to do with these resolutions is separate out the legal adjudicative process, which we know is important, which we know has authority, but also needs time.

It needs patience, and it rises and falls on technicalities, and we've seen this in other contexts as well. It could be years, maybe even many years, before any kind of a full-blown adjudicative process is able to be completed for a genocide declaration to be made on that basis. But based on the evidence that we have in front of us, which is overwhelming and compounding, and based in the spirit of the 1948 Genocide Convention, that spirit of prevention that really animates it, we felt it was very important to have a political declaration. And we're not the first to do that. Ukraine has done one in their parliament, but also the Baltic states, Poland, Czech Republic, and our friends in Canada and Ireland as well. So we see that there's a great opportunity here to really speak out and provide a little bit of added leadership in the world on this issue that is so important, and to provide that political declaration.

The thing is, for our part, we look at the criteria laid out in Article 2 of the Genocide Convention in terms of intent and pattern of action. And it's so plain and clear to us what Russia is doing. Russian politicians, including Vladimir Putin himself, have expressly stated on multiple occasions in print, as well as vocally, this idea that Ukraine should not exist and have intimated, in some cases actually directly said, you know, called for its physical destruction, to use the Genocide Convention term, "in whole or in part," and we say that that's absolutely the case here. In terms of intent, it's quite clear. And in terms of pattern of action, it's also very clear, and one of the saddest things about this job has been collecting this sort of evidence and compiling it together. So we have this kind of compendium, and you can't just put it all down and be done with it because that list expands every day.

Every day brings some fresh new horror to the floor. We learn about new mass graves every day, new torture chambers that are that are installed and employed on a systematic basis, mass instances of rape and abuse, even these cases of torture chambers that are created explicitly for children, things like that, mass deportations and kidnapping through camps that essentially are meant to enforce Russification or for those who can't be, they're basically disposed of. So, it's a truly horrific time, and the words I have really don't do justice to the enormity of the scale of what is being perpetrated against the Ukrainian people. And so for us and for our leadership, this is quite evident, that genocide is happening. And we appreciate the complexity and the loaded legal nature of that term, but in consultation with some of the top experts in the world, we've been quite reassured that not only is it justifiable for us to engage in a political declaration, but it's absolutely important because in the spirit of prevention, as demanded by the 1948 convention to which we are a party and Russia is a party and is actually in U.S. code, but also in terms of being able to continue to build that case for the legal side as well. So the political declaration actually feeds into, in a lot of ways, the legal case.

I would also say there are also tangible aspects of this that are very important to us. So for exam-

ple, being able to say clearly on a matter of such moral urgency as this is a real morale booster for Ukrainians who I would say are enduring and continue to endure the unendurable. And Ukraine isn't winning this war because they are materially superior or because they have more of something than Russia—except for more of heart, more of morale, more of a sense of purpose. And so we can absolutely continue to feed into that. I think being able to speak to what is happening there and call it for what it is makes a big difference in this regard. It also helps further isolate the Kremlin internationally. And I think it nudges the fence sitters a little bit further—that this is not just another conflict, that this is something that is extraordinary in many ways.

Not that mass atrocities themselves are extraordinary, sadly, but one state doing this to another state and attempting to change the borders of a country, or to eliminate a country entirely as essentially is the case made here, and in doing so, uses genocide as a part of the concept of operations which is, quite clearly what is happening here in Ukraine, is extraordinary and needs to be fought against and needs to be isolated. And I think it also sends a signal domestically that this is what we're fighting for. This is what we're fighting against, that this truly is a test of principle and moral urgency. I think people respond to that, and they understand that. And I think that's partially why we have such strong bipartisan support for these resolutions. And I think it's also why we have such strong bipartisan support for Ukraine more generally.

SG: Well, Michael, you've brought in so many important dynamics in that and some very disturbing aspects as well as to the egregious actions that Russia is committing in Ukraine. And one thing that stood out was you mentioned about how even there is specific targeting of children who are being tortured, and that just demonstrates the challenges that do need to be addressed and highlighted, and I'm very glad that you're part of this process to bring the notion of genocide into legislation, which is very important. Let me come to you, Alex, as well, because you're also looking at some very important legislative initiative, and that is naming the Wagner Group, which is a Russian private military company, as a foreign terrorist organisation. Many in Europe have been calling for that. Is there a similar demand in the U.S., and how far away are we from this becoming a reality?

AT: Sajjan, thanks. There absolutely is a demand for this in the United States. I don't think there's any question about that. Your listeners are likely aware that the Wagner Group is essentially a group of mercenaries…a network of mercenaries that are both for-profit and at the beck and call of the Russian state, although Putin denies any formal linkage to the institutions of the Russian government with Wagner. I think your listeners may also know that the Wagner forces in Ukraine have been implicated in many of the most gruesome and horrific acts that Michael described that would contribute to this definition of genocide. The Wagner operatives have been kind of the pointy end of the spear, both as a warfighting force, but also as a force that uses terror, fear, violence to political ends. And I would say, in addition to that, it's quite clear that the Wagner Group is not only a malign actor in Russia, but also elsewhere in the world as well. Wagner was implicated in some of the worst human rights abuses in Syria, in Mali, in the Central African Republic, where they're also conducting predatory behaviour on some of the economic assets of those countries.

We are seeing Wagner's malign influence really spread in some ways. And a group of members that we work for really coalesced around this idea that we should call things what they are and address this particular element of the threat head-on. And the best manner to do so would be to designate it formally as a foreign terrorist organisation, which is what a bill that they've introduced called the Holding Accountable Russian Mercenaries Act or the HARM Act would accomplish. Essentially, the designation as a foreign terrorist organisation would be designed to, first of all, again,

be clear that if you're signing up to be an operative within the Wagner Group, the world will consider you to be a terrorist. The United States will not allow you to get a visa, but also much more, I think, crucially in the short-term is a provision that would allow the executive branch of the United States, but also the court system and the legal system here, to go after those who are providing material support to Wagner of any type. So logistics, funding, all of these things that Wagner and its broader network rely on.

So again, the HARM Act would really be designed to get after what is one of the most noxious tools of criminal influence, both in Ukraine, but also more broadly. And then of course, there's the broader conversation of whether this is some element of a broader designation of the Russian Federation as a state sponsor of terror. But this bill does not address that question; this bill really is specific to the Wagner Group itself. Again, I credit the members who introduced this bill, Senators Wicker and Cardin, a Republican and a Democrat in the Senate. In the House, we had four members introduce a bill led by our co-chairman, Congressman Steve Cohen, but joined by a Republican, Mr. Joe Wilson, another Republican, Mr. Richard Hudson, and a Democrat, Congressman Veasey of Texas. These six members came together and decided this was absolutely something that was in the interest of the United States and something that needed to happen.

SG: Well, the Wagner Group is an entity that we have seen has committed terrible acts of human rights abuses in Syria, in sub-Saharan Africa. They seem to hold no qualms about their actions against civilians and even who they recruit. So it is, again, a very important piece of legislation, Alex, that you're working on, in terms of proscribing them because it needs to be dealt with quite urgently, especially with what's also unfolding in Ukraine as we speak.

AT: Agreed.

SG: Unfortunately, as always is the case with a podcast, we are short of time. It's our enemy, just like other enemies we have to face. But let me thank you both, Alex and Michael, for spending the time to talk with us about the important legislative work that you're doing. It's so important, it could have massive, positive ramifications in not just bringing countries together, but also dealing with threats and protecting lives as well. And I wish you both the best of luck in your endeavours and hope that 2023 can continue to be a successful time for both of you in what you try to achieve.

AT: Thank you Sajjan. It was a real delight to be with you on the podcast today. Thanks for inviting us.

MC: Thank you, I really appreciate it.

Alex Tiersky & Michael Cecire and Holding Russia Accountable

Alex Tiersky serves as Global Security and Political-Military Affairs Advisor to the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) also known as the U.S. Helsinki Commission. He has responsibility for a broad portfolio of "first dimension" issues throughout the OSCE space and beyond. Michael Cecire works at the CSCE as a senior policy advisor focusing on South Caucasus and Black Sea regional affairs. Previously he was an analyst at the Congressional Research Service, as well as being a policy advisor and researcher on Eurasia issues supporting the Department of Defense and other U.S. Governmental agencies.

Episode 32 - Terri Nicholson and a Career in Global Security, February 2022

Key Reflections

- **The proliferation and diversity of communication methods represents a real challenge to law enforcement today, who must keep up with the technology as it develops.**
- **Following the money is key to disrupting and dismantling serious organised crime groups. Much of the money being used to support the Taliban regime now has its origins in organised crime, spanning decades.**
- **There are parallels with law enforcement and the private sector security. This includes dealing with risk management and ensuring the safety of staff.**
- **Teamwork and interoperability are essential to counter-terrorism work, as is adaptability, since agencies have to collaborate efficiently and effectively in real time to foil potential attacks.**
- **Women in national security are increasingly taking on important roles and provide unique skill-sets to aid counter-terrorism operations and crisis situations.**
- **People from diverse backgrounds should be encouraged to work together in the field of international security, as sharing different perspectives and approaches allows for better operational ability overall.**

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

TN: Terri Nicholson

SG: Hello, and welcome to *DEEP Dive*, brought to you by NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel. Each episode, we speak to experts and practitioners in international security and defence, counter-terrorism, and geopolitical current events to gain insight into the most pressing matters of global affairs.

In this episode, we speak with Terri Nicholson, Senior Vice President for International Security at Paramount, the global film and television production and distribution company. Prior to this, Terri had a 30-year career in British law enforcement serving in various high-ranking positions, including being the Deputy Senior National Coordinator for Counter Terrorism and Head of Operations at the Metropolitan Police's SO15 Counter Terrorism Command. Terri is also a recipient of the Queen's Police Medal (QPM) which is awarded to police officers for gallantry and distinguished service.

Terry Nicholson, thank you for joining us on NATO *DEEP Dive*.

TN: Good morning, Sajjan. And thank you for inviting me.

SG: It's our pleasure. This is going to be a very interesting discussion in order to understand how one goes from being a very senior police officer to Senior Vice President at *Paramount*, which is one of the world's largest film and production companies. So, in order to understand this journey, let's start at the beginning. What made you want to become a police officer?

TN: So, it's interesting 30 years on having to think about those reasons I probably spouted at my interview, but for so many people, the rationale for joining the police will be things like the expressed desire to help others, to support their communities, and create a safe working environment, to save lives, and all of those very good reasons why. But in truth, in my own formative years of my teens in particular, these were probably not the dominant factors in my own thinking. But caring professions and public service are in my DNA essentially, from my mother and sisters working in care, in education, in nursing, as senior nurses, and I also have the flip side of it in my family. I come from a very large family, as you may know, of eight children. I also have a brother who is in 24/7 care settings. So, I have the sense of public service on the other side and what good looks like there too.

My uncle had joined the police and was in quite a senior rank, but he never considered the police to be a job for a woman and in fact, my father didn't either. I once floated the idea when I was quite young of joining the Police Cadets, and if I'm honest there too, my dad thought it was a crazy idea and it was much more about me being able to continue my sporting prowess than it ever was to do some good in the community at that time. But as one of a family of eight children and in particular, one of six quite powerful women in that setting, I needed to assert my own position within the hierarchy of that family, six fantastic sisters, as I say.

I was an inherently inquisitive child. 'Downright nosy,' my mother might say, always questioning, always asking 'why?' and frankly always wanting more information. That's kind of stayed with me throughout my career, I must say. I would often sit on the stairs listening to those adult conversations, whether familial or visitors. I would pretend to be asleep when my sisters came home from their nights out, and they were debriefing what had happened. But another real feature of my childhood was that I was someone who believed in fairness. I could not tolerate injustice, I still can't, in any shape or form and I was always a supporter of the underdog, encouraging them to do the best that they could within their settings. I also, quite surprisingly again maybe, I pushed a lot of boundaries when I was a youngster, I wasn't a complete conformist. I describe myself as somebody who was very comfortable operating in grey, as well as in black and white, something that I think is crucial in exercising discretion within policing.

I was never afraid to speak, I was a tad defiant, and that manifested itself in me leaving school actually, a matter of months before I completed my A levels, which went down terribly well with my father, who was a highly intelligent man. I decided to join the bank. Why did I pick the bank? Not because I wanted particularly to join banking, but it was a racing certainty of me getting a job at that time. There were lots and lots of jobs in banking, very different, of course, from today. So, I went my own way and I had dabbled with joining the Police Cadets, as I say, that was really a crucial point. I think I reached a turning point after five years in the bank when I was interviewed, ironically, as a witness in a police investigation into a share fraud [case]. I decided there and then, quite impulsive again, that I would join, by now 22 years of age and much more worldly wise. And in particular, I vowed I would be a detective.

If you think back to those days, in the 1980s—late 80s—the nearest thing we had to a blue light programme was *Z-Cars,* I mean it's that long ago. So, I therefore can't even claim any sort of undue influence of media and television on my decision making. So, I joined with O levels, no degree at that stage, that came later, and went back to school, to Hendon, which I struggled with. I didn't like the uniformity of the curriculum, I was never brilliant at it the first time around, why would I be

at the age of 22? But it all changed when I had my first posting. Of course, the irony now is that I wouldn't even be able to join the police with those qualifications, something that I feel quite passionately about. I feel that many people like me, who developed their academic interests later on in life would be excluded and still are, including many kids who come from deprived upbringings, who can't afford to go to university. And I'm very proud to say that I served in every rank, from the rank of constable all the way up to assistant chief constable as a detective and that is probably one of my career highlights, I think.

SG: Well, it's a very interesting story that you tell and shows how important family is in helping to shape your career and your interests and your moral compass as well. You said you had various different roles in law enforcement. In the 1990s, you worked in tackling organised crime. What were the main challenges back then and do some of them still exist?

TN: So, I think the first thing to say is, as an eternal optimist, I really view challenges as opportunities. I always have always will. My glass is always half full. I could talk for a very long time about this area, but let's confine it to a couple of key areas. Let's think about communication as a challenge then and a challenge now, for different reasons, of course. But today, of course, it might be said that the proliferation and diversity of communication methods is a real challenge to law enforcement and how can they possibly keep up—catch up, arguably—but certainly keep up with the amount of technology and apps that are out there with it all proceeding at such a pace. Well, communication was a challenge back then too, but for very different reasons. And it's hard to believe when I first joined, there were no computers. We didn't have desktop computers in policing. Crime recording was manual. It's insane when I think about it now, there was no World Wide Web, it was not actually invented until 1989, at the time when I was joining policing. And we communicated on landline telephones, and I vividly recall my acquiring my first Hutchison telecom pager and stopping to make a call at a telephone box to call the office or call one of the victims of crimes that I was investigating.

And of course, the criminals faced equal challenges of communicating back then. Mobile phones were like the proverbial house bricks, very rare, and the fact that they didn't exist actually presented opportunities for us really, in physical meetings that were then capable of being evidenced and there was no Zoom, hard to imagine that too really. So, virtually every trial that I ever was involved in featured physical surveillance evidence, which had been gained by virtue of their lack of communication methods, and then we step forward to now and, of course, the opposite is true and how on earth are law enforcement and other agencies keeping up with those advances in technology and developing them at the same pace as the criminals are exploiting them.

Certainly my children couldn't swipe left or right on a mobile phone to look at photographs when they grew up, but my nephews and nieces most definitely can. And the use of the Internet as a tool by extremists, it's not just, of course, in organised crime, but the use of the tool of communication by extremists remains a challenge where radicalization—there has been very recent articles on how many people are radicalised online before going on to commit terrorist acts. The use of the Internet as a tool by them, where radicalization occurs from the comfort of one's bedroom in anonymity, often outside the purview of those key family members and influences that I relied on so much in my childhood for my moral compass, that limits the intervention opportunities, prevention opportunities, at the early earliest stages. And of course, so many investigations feature this as a factor.

And then that brings on quite nicely to the challenge of prioritisation with limited resources. And of course this is applicable also to organised crime and to counter-terrorism. Joining policing from the banking fraternity meant, ironically, I almost had a photographic memory for numbers. It's sad to actually admit that I do remember many of my customers' numbers still, from way back in the early 80s. And of course, I only wish that I had that same prowess in my mathematics exams at school. But I was always a financial investigator. As a very young DC I believed very passionately that following the money was key to disrupting and dismantling serious organised crime groups. Of course, they respond to demand for goods and services and to financially profit at the end of the day, from their criminal activities. This of course differs in terrorist cases where the motivation is often different. But in organised crime, that's certainly true.

And this remains highly relevant in today's context, as well. When we see on the news yesterday, the evidence of people smuggling and the utter misery of those who are exploited by serious organised criminals in that setting. But of course not everyone agreed with me at the time that following the money was the right course, it was far more sexy to seize guns and drugs and the focus was understandably on the commodities. My view was then and absolutely remains that it should always be a combined disruption and dismantlement strategy. And I was personally really pleased to see the recent Rusi paper published very recently which advocates this multidisciplinary, public-private sector collaboration to tackle economic crime as a national security threat. And I spoke about this at least 10 years ago, in a presentation and I remember it very well.

And reflecting on your own presentations on Afghanistan and the Taliban leadership in place note there now, there are names and families that I recognise from the 1990s and 2000s, that were the subject of considerable international interest then, in various jurisdictions, some very widely publicised and others less so, and yet we still grapple with the challenge of proving that the money being used to support the Taliban regime now, has its origins in organised crime, which go back decades and continue into modern day challenges. So, you know, I could probably have picked 10 challenges out in this area, but I thought to look at those two, they are both highly relevant in today's setting.

SG: 'Follow the money,' something that you were stressing on just now, I found that very interesting. Also, you brought in the Taliban. I know we've discussed this in the past. I was particularly curious that you once told me that, in the 1990s, a lot of your work involved investigating the Haqqani Network. And that just shows you how far back that movement goes, because they are the ones effectively now running Afghanistan and are, not just a proscribed terrorist group but they're into organised crime as well. I'm just curious, what type of dynamics did you have to deal with when it came to investigating the Haqqani network?

TN: So, this was more, rather than specific investigations I was involved in, these were the investigations that were ongoing by others more so, and you can imagine a considerable interest from the United States in the activities of the Haqqani family and the listing of them in terms of sanctions, that was really my involvement, as a financial investigator, being aware of the considerable interest of many, many international locations, not just the United States, in the activities of the Haqqani family, and others of course. And I spent nine years of my service, nine very happy years, on the National Crime Squad, targeting the highest echelons of organised criminality. In virtually every one of those cases, there was an international dimension to them. And often in areas like Afghanistan, where, of course, the drug supply routes were an ongoing challenge for us in the United Kingdom, where we were on the receiving end of that. So, it was not specifically cases that I had worked on, but cases that others were working on that were part and parcel of the intelligence

picture.

SG: That's very interesting. Post 9/11, you had numerous roles and eventually became head of operations at the Metropolitan Police's SO15 counter-terrorism command, which is the largest counter-terrorism unit in the UK, arguably one of the largest in the world. Looking at the terrorism threat back then, you were responsible for the disruption of numerous plots in the UK and overseas—plots that could have resulted in the deaths of thousands of people. What were the most interesting and tense cases that you had to work on?

TN: So the first thing to say is—and I will reflect on this, no doubt, later too—but teamwork is absolutely the essence of success. I claim absolutely zero kudos for those disrupted plots. It was my team. And when I say my team, I mean, the policing team, the wonderful teams at the agencies that I had the pleasure to work with, and the commitment of all of those people to keeping the public safe. So, this was not the Terri Nicholson show. It was very much about the fantastic teams I had the pleasure to work with. I feel really proud to have investigated and led on so many really interesting cases, many of which had these tense moments that you refer to. And working as a senior leader in counter-terrorism means operating often in ambiguity, where the jigsaw pieces are not clear, and of course, the stakes could not actually be any higher when the lives of the public are at risk with the decisions that we are trusted to make.

I was head of operations at SO15. On one occasion where one of our surveillance teams was deployed on a subject of an attack planning priority operation, and the subject of that operation was planning an attack on a US Air Base, US personnel, and I recall receiving a phone call at about 5:30 in the morning by the very dedicated SIO, who was telling me that the surveillance team was heading south down the M1 at that very moment at ridiculous speeds, nearly impossible to follow the subject. It was hard enough to do that during the day with him…often quieter of course at that time of the morning, and so compromise was always a more likely outcome. And of course, to this team, losing him was not an option. They knew the intelligence of the imminence of an attack plan. They knew that the intelligence suggested he wanted to carry out an attack in the days that followed, and that he had openly supported other attacks as well, was in the advanced stages of planning himself and using these as his motivation to do one himself. And in fact, that morning, he'd actually gone to a food market to buy food and simply just returned home afterwards.

It was a really twitchy moment. I couldn't help but think, in any market setting at that time of the morning, lots and lots of people going about their business and lots of weapons that could be used if he were to decide to execute his plan there and then. So that was a rather twitchy and tense moment to say the very least of it—one of many. He was actually arrested and charged a matter of days later. and he's currently serving a life sentence. I'm very pleased to say it was a fantastic operation. Again, the dedication of the teams was paramount—excuse the pun with my new life of course.

And in fact, the attack that he openly supported was actually the murder of drummer Lee Rigby. And I was the on-call superintendent when Lee was brutally murdered in broad daylight in South London in what was one of the worst atrocities one can imagine—a beheading on the streets of London at any time. And in the hours that followed that attack, we needed to work at pace to be certain, of course, that the two murderers were not part of some wider network and that, for example, other attacks were not being planned. And of course with so many proactive CT operations, there are real pivotal moments, and split-second decision-making is required very often in the

operations room, and you rely very much on the skills and experience that you have acquired to make good decisions, always with the overriding objective of protecting the public. And that is a huge responsibility on one's shoulders and one that I never took lightly.

Another occasion that I recall, when I was again head of operations, chairing a straightforward internal senior leadership team meeting without my mobile phone next to me, but with a television screen—we had screens in our office for obvious reasons so that we were able to watch the news as it was coming in, particularly things that were happening internationally—and there was a news flash on the news, it was Sky News, I recall it well, from a beach in Sousse in Tunisia, where a gunman had open fired and killed a large number of people on the beach who were holidaying at that time. Clearly at that early stage, no nationalities were given, but I could see on the screen in front of me British-branded clothing worn by British people, and I immediately concluded that there were going to be British victims on that beach. Helpfully sitting next to me was one of my SIOs. I immediately mobilised my team to deploy to Tunisia that day. And the reason for doing that was so that we could achieve the repatriation of any of our victims back to the United Kingdom as quickly as possible because it was quite clear the casualty count was rising by the minute. This was an incredible example of cross-government collaboration. We were able to use RAF Brize Norton for their return. Clearly, they have just enormous expertise in dealing with military repatriations, and this felt fitting. In fact, there were 30 British victims. It was no mean feat to negotiate with the Tunisian authorities' access to our victims, and to ensure we were able to have post-mortems done as quickly as possible so that they could be returned back to their loved ones.

To stand on the tarmac with the families who had lost their loved ones, every single one of them with their own stories was utterly humbling. I found myself having to pull myself together in the toilets. I have not confessed that to others until now. Having met one of the families in particular, that literally was a mirror image of my own, a very close family. Their bravery and humility was simply astonishing, and I will never ever forget being with them in the family room while they recounted stories of their wonderful mum who had gone on holiday for, I think, one of the first times in her life without the kids and found herself deceased on the beach, just tragic. But I was immensely proud of my team working with the authorities literally through the nights in Tunisia to ensure that people could have their loved ones back as soon as possible. And the resilience and professionalism they showed was just quite astonishing. I remain proud to this day of some of those. And of course, there were very, very many more. I was involved going back to 2001 in the 9/11 response and assisting the FBI in those days to investigate some of the cases that had links back to the UK. So my roots go back a long time into the investigative world within CT, many a proud moment, but equally, and this is really important to say, some devastating moments, particularly in 2017 when we had attack after attack, and that felt very personal, and I still to this day feel very, very strongly about the impact on so many victims during that time in particular.

SG: You've brought up so many important past case studies of terrorism. It takes me back to what I was doing at that time as well. And it's interesting to see how engaged you are in dealing with them, as well as the fact that you identify teamwork being a very important tool, both within the UK and also internationally as well. The other thing, Terri, is you're very humble. I know that you have been very important to the disruption of these plots. A lot of your colleagues have always mentioned you as being so intrinsic to that, and your humility is, of course, a very important characteristic. The other thing is that, as a woman in law enforcement, you've served with distinction. We've seen that women actually are absolutely essential when it comes to counter-terrorism, to intelligence gathering, to international security. You're a very clear illustration of that. Where are we at when it comes to women attaining senior positions now in international security? And what is it that women are able to provide and add that is different to men? It's perhaps maybe an obvious

question, but I guess we don't really talk about it enough.

TN: Absolutely, and it's a subject I have always been deeply passionate about. And in fact, about underrepresented groups full stop, actually, not just women, but particularly women, because I happen to be one of them. So I'm going to start with, let's recognise that huge amount of progress has been made in this area. We see, certainly when I was in counter-terrorism in the in the latter part of my career, large numbers, the Senior National Coordinator, Helen Ball, was a female, we had a female assistant commissioner, we had a female deputy assistant commissioner on the Protect and Prepare side, I was head of operations at SO15. So there were some large numbers of females in influential and senior positions. And I made it my mission when I was in that world to recruit many, many more into the world of CT and to also take chances on some who didn't necessarily have the right profile or the right track record, or whatever that looked like, because some of them were immensely talented and needed encouragement, and that's often a feature I find of women.

But look, there are multiple case studies, which indicate that women tend to have high levels of self-awareness. This in turn encourages, of course, greater team collaboration and support to colleagues. We often facilitate collaboration and information sharing, which is absolutely critical in the CT space when you are working with partners and communities. Women often also, I feel, contribute different perspectives, whether that's as a wife, as a partner, as a mum, as a sister, as an auntie, and we often offer alternative approaches to behaviours, which I think increase opportunities for intervention and increase opportunities to create harmony where there are disputes. And I definitely speak from personal experience there. Our interviewing styles, I often think, can be a little bit more emotionally driven, empathetic, and more compassionate. It's not to say that we're not shrewd individuals, but our way of displaying it sometimes can be different. Many women have really strong soft skills, balancing a team, often during highly emotive, highly charged investigation, where the stakes, I've already said, are really high, and people are working at pace to do the right thing. We encourage, I certainly do encourage, information sharing. And of course, the other important dynamic here is when we are engaging with witnesses, family members, who come from very paternal sometimes misogynistic dominated environments, gaining their confidence is absolutely essential, whether that's in CT or in the investigation of any crime.

And in fact, it's applicable, I think, in law enforcement writ large, but I also want to be really clear that I really advocate mixed teams. The more diverse in all aspects, the better for me. Diverse teams, in my view, are the absolute key to success, better decision-making, better outcomes, and of course, women are essential component parts of that. Some of my greatest supporters throughout my policing career have been males. And they have pushed and encouraged me to get to where I got to, and I shall never forget that too. But often, women need more encouragement to get out there and apply in the first place. And I saw it as a personal responsibility to make that happen for many of them.

SG: Thank you for explaining that in such important detail. It sums up a lot of what the significance of women is in international security and why they're so important and why more needs to be done to encourage more women to engage in international security and provide an environment where they will want to be part of it as well. A few years back, you changed your career path and took on a very interesting role, which is your current position as Senior Vice President at Paramount. What does your job role entail? And how did your background in law enforcement help you in your current work?

TN: I used to say almost daily, I literally have the best job. At times, I actually used to say, I can't believe I'm being paid to do this, I had such satisfaction from dealing with so many of those cases. And I was incredibly lucky to land some really fabulous jobs along the way, leading brilliantly dedicated men and women alongside some of the best agency partners. And I honestly never intended to retire, although I had completed 30 years of service, it was literally not on my radar. But now I truly have the best job, I really do have the best job. And I head up the international security, production, and event safety for all of the brands that sit underneath the Paramount umbrella. Of course, Paramount itself needs no explanation to people. It's a really diverse mix of brands, from Channel Five, to Nickelodeon, to Network 10 in Australia, to Telefe in Argentina, to Television in Chile, MTV, Bellator, and many, many more underneath that.

And there are real parallels, I think, in my previous life. Look, risk management involves everything from ensuring the safety and security of our executives and staff travelling, to our talent filming and performing, to our vulnerable contributors, and of course managing the odd crisis along the way, including keeping programming on air during the middle of a global pandemic. We are a public service broadcaster too, and there were some real challenges, of course, but we did it and did it well. And there are so many similarities albeit the context differs rather from CT. And I do remember saying right at the start of this that my ability to operate in the grey area as well as in the black and white is absolutely critical, and I absolutely remain on that point. I'm often advising on high-risk programming, as we must tell stories in my current role that need to be told, however uncomfortable that might be for some and how risky that might be. But I literally love every second of what I do. Four and a half years coming into my fifth year has absolutely flown by. Paramount is a great organisation that really truly embraces diversity and the values that I consider to be important, and that was a real factor for me in the decision-making to move from one to another. Coming from a life of public service, I was never going to leap into the first job that was put across my radar, it had to be the right fit, and I had to be the right fit for them too. I'm really proud to hold such a senior position in an organisation that truly cares for its employees and genuinely wants to make a difference to communities across the globe. And I really feel, and this has always been important to me, that I make a difference every day to somebody. And that was important way back in my policing and counter-terrorism career, and it's equally important to me now.

SG: It's worth also mentioning, in case people didn't know, that Paramount was the distributor for some of the biggest Hollywood movies, such as Top Gun 2, to which Terri happened to have access to the premiere. I was very jealous when you told me that!

TN: Indeed, it comes with very many privileges, and we make some fantastic content, that's for sure.

SG: Well, selfishly, I hope when it comes to content, you may think about when my book on al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri comes out that potentially Paramount may want to turn that into a mini-series of some kind.

TN: We should talk…

SG: Definitely! Let me just thank you again, Terri, for joining us on NATO *DEEP Dive*, for providing

so many different perspectives about your career and how it evolved, and providing a lot of life lessons to people that are going to be listening to this. I'm very grateful, Terri Nicholson, for you joining us on NATO *DEEP Dive*. Thank you.

TN: Thank you so much.

Terri Nicholson bio

Terri Nicholson is the Senior Vice President for International Security at Paramount, the global film and television production and distribution company. Prior to this, she had a 30-year career in British law enforcement serving in various high-ranking positions, including being the Deputy Senior National Coordinator for Counter Terrorism and Head of Operations at the Metropolitan Police's SO15 Counter Terrorism Command.

Episode 33 - Lynne O'Donnell Part 1: Detained by the Taliban, February 2022

Key Reflections

- **There are many people at the highest levels of Taliban leadership in Afghanistan who have foreign passports. This includes Taliban spokesperson, Abdul Qahar Balkhi, whose real name is Hassan Bahiss. Balkhi is a New Zealand passport holder living in Hamilton.**
- **In addition to their misogyny, the Taliban regime have also been clear and direct about their homophobia. There is daily persecution of the LGBTQ community in Afghanistan.**
- **The Taliban have adopted a policy of coercive intimidation towards foreign journalists, arbitrarily detaining them. On occasions, mobile phones were confiscated, and journalists were forced to write messages under duress designed to absolve the Taliban.**
- **The Taliban's General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI) have been using social media to monitor articles that journalists have written about them before they took control of Afghanistan in August 2021 as well as thereafter.**
- **When journalists have refused to comply with the Taliban's draconian rules, they have been threatened with violence and even death.**
- **Journalists and photographers that captured images and video footage of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri's Kabul residence have been arrested and detained for long periods.**

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

LOD: Lynne O'Donnell

SG: Hello, and welcome to the NATO DEEP Dive podcast, on this episode I'm joined by the highly esteemed author and journalist, Lynne O'Donnell for a three-part special on Afghanistan and the Taliban head on.

Reporting on matters inside Afghanistan as a columnist for Foreign Policy magazine, Lynne was detained by the Taliban in July 2022. In this first of three podcasts, Lynne recounts her own personal experiences in facing down the Taliban's misogyny and intimidation tactics.

Lynne O'Donnell, a warm welcome to NATO *DEEP Dive*.

LOD: Thank you for having me. Nice to be here.

SG: It's a pleasure. You've got a huge amount of experience when it comes to looking at Afghanistan. You are one of the few people that have travelled back to the country since the Taliban retook Afghanistan. Could you explain more about your time there, what you encountered, what you saw, and just how dire is the situation?

LOD: Yes, well I went back last July, July 2022, because I wanted to report on what the situation was in Afghanistan, at that time, as we came up to the first anniversary of the Taliban's takeover. I had been quite coincidentally on the last commercial flight to leave Kabul, just hours before the Taliban came back and took over. I left with my friend and colleague Massoud Hossaini, who's a Pulitzer Prize winning Afghan photographer, and we had spent three or four months covering what turned out to be the final months of the war. And we had seen first-hand, and reported on, the way the Taliban were squeezing their way into Kabul. And we saw that it was pretty clear what was going to happen and we had both been declared high value targets for the reporting that we had done.

Nevertheless, I thought that a year later, now they were purportedly forming a government and in control of the country, even though we had heard a lot of things about how awful things had become—even worse than under the Republic for most Afghan people —I wanted to go back and see it for myself. And so that's what I did, and I got a visa, the embassy here in London, where I live, issued me with a media visa. They did ask me to sign an affidavit accepting all risk. I went in, I registered at the airport as foreign visitors have to do and then the following day, I presented myself at the foreign ministry to meet with the spokesman, because I knew that that was what I had to do. My guest house had to register me, and I had to come back to them with a certificate from the foreign ministry to say I was there legally and working as a correspondent, so that's what I did.

And I met with a man who calls himself Abdul Qahar Balkhi, but that's not his real name. His real name is Hassan Bahiss and he is a New Zealand passport holder. And I have been told by people in the United Nations, who have attended international conferences where Bahiss has also been in attendance representing the Taliban, that he travels internationally on his New Zealand passport. He has family, it's well documented, living in Hamilton, and he's married to a woman who is also Taliban *royalty*, you might say, and they were apparently married in Australia.

So, this alerted me to the fact that there are very many people who are working at high levels of the Taliban who have foreign passports, and use those foreign passports, and her family living abroad, daughter's going to school abroad, and who are able to take advantage of the comforts and freedoms of the countries where they have grown up, where they have lived, and where their families still live. Hassan Bahiss also has high profile brothers and cousins who are working in think tanks and big multilateral institutions as well.

SG: So, there's so many important points that you've already addressed here. One is this aspect of Hassan Bahiss, also known as Abdul Qahar Balkhi, as you mentioned. He seems to be very important. He in many ways, is the face of the Taliban, the face that they want to promote. You had a direct encounter with him, which you have written about in *Foreign Policy* magazine, where you were also detained by the Taliban, they took possession of your own mobile phone. It was a very frightening encounter, reading it. Could you talk more about that experience and just how the Taliban are actually approaching people directly; the aspects that don't necessarily get enough attention in the media?

LOD: Yes, I think you're right about this sort of stuff not really getting as much attention as it should, because it's indicative of the Taliban modus operandi. I went to see Balkhi, Bahiss, whatever we want to call him, in good faith, knowing that that was what I was expected to do as a visiting foreign correspondent. He told me that the intelligence agency, the General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI), did not and would not recognise me as a journalist. He told me that stories that

I had written were false, that the sources that were quoted in them did not exist, that I had made them up. He cited a couple of stories in particular, although he didn't even seem to know that one of them had been published before the Taliban even took over the country in July of 2021. And I just said that to him.

And he said, "Oh, really,"

And checked his phone to see the date, but another one had been recently published and interestingly enough, they were both about sex. One was about the way women were being treated in areas of Afghanistan that were being taken over by the Taliban. There had been rumours of forced marriages and I went to a place that had fallen to the Taliban for four days, and then been retaken by local militia and armed police, and I talked to people there about what had happened during those four days. And the Taliban had indeed, collected the names of women and ages of them, marital status, affiliations, and told them that they would be married off to Taliban fighters as reward□—a very old-fashioned concept for their loyalty. And I wrote this story for *Foreign Policy* and as Massoud likes to say, it was like a bomb going off, because forced marriage is effectively sex slavery, and that's what we call it. And they went crazy. They set their bot army after us like nobody's business.

The other story was about Taliban treatment of LGBTQ people, who I would argue are even more vulnerable, in many instances than women and girls and are treated much worse. So, those two stories were particularly offensive apparently. Bahiss effectively threatened to have me killed.

He said, "we have a way of dealing with people like you"

And he remembered to me a suicide bomb attack on a bus carrying employees of a television station home from work that had taken place in 2016. And a lot of people had died. It was a really terrible thing to do. And, of course, he cited that as an example of how people like me could expect to be treated.

Now the reason that they had attacked that bus, the *Tolo Television* bus, was because during a siege of Kunduz city a few months earlier, *Tolo* had reported live from Kunduz, that the Taliban had stormed into women's dormitory at Kunduz University and assaulted the young women there. And that hadn't been the case at all, the university was on break time. And there hadn't been anybody there, but *Tolo* refused to retract the story. You know, as journalists and media organisations every day there's a "we were wrong. We need to correct this," or "when we said this, we actually meant that," we are on the front lines of reporting history. So, these mistakes are understandable, I think, and forgivable, and more often than not, corrected, but for some reason, the man who runs *Tolo TV* refused to retract it.

And I interviewed him about it later.

And he said, "Oh, we dropped that from the report."

But the Taliban held that grudge and they threatened an attack and this suicide attack on the bus

carrying people, who weren't even journalists, they were like graphic designers and people like that, was their revenge.

And he said, "and we're proud of that."

And I said, "you killed a lot of innocent people that day,"

He said, "and we're proud of that."

And I said, "you know, one of the people that you killed was a friend of mine,"

And he said, "and we're proud of that."

So, I was effectively being threatened. My life was being threatened directly by the spokesman for the Taliban's foreign ministry, for turning up in the country, and for writing stories that I was able to verify. He demanded that I give him my notes, footage, recordings, and names and contact details.

Which of course I said, "look, the people named in that particular story all used their own names, you do your own work."

So, he told me that the intelligence people would contact me, which they did. They asked me to come for a meeting. I realised that I was going to be harassed, I started to notice that I was being followed, and so I booked a ticket. I wanted to stay about a week and do some decent reporting and move outside of Kabul.

I booked a ticket to Pakistan, for two days hence.

And I said to the GDI (General Directorate of Intelligence) guys, when they called me "look, I'm gonna leave. I know that you don't want me here."

They said, "if you don't have a meeting with us to confess your crimes,"

These are the words they used, "we're going to make sure that your name and details are on all ports of entry and exit for Afghanistan, so you will not be allowed to leave the country until you have met with us."

I said, "okay, guys. Come over to my guest house." And I set up a WhatsApp group with Australian diplomats who were based in Doha, and with Massoud Hossaini, the photographer that I work with, who's a close friend, I mentioned him before, with location tracking, and they came to my

guest house. They threatened me there, there were four of them. They kept telling me in a very Kafkaesque way that I knew what my crimes were.

They took me away, under armed escort, to the headquarters of the GDI, which is opposite the back gate of the former NATO base, and used to be the Republic's intelligence headquarters. And they kept me there for four or five hours. They shouted at me, they interrogated me, they accused me of all sorts of things. They didn't take my phone off me, which I thought was very interesting. And sitting in the back of the car, on the way from my guest house to the GDI headquarters, a man called Zahir, who had taken my passport off me, I carry it in a in a pink plastic *Hello Kitty* folder so that it's anonymous in my bag, and he had taken it out of the folder and thrown that on the table, and then flipped through my passport and thrown that on the table, before they took me away. And then sitting in the back of the car with him, he put my passport back into the *Hello Kitty* folder, and then handed it back to me. I thought that's a bit odd.

'Tap tap tap' I texted my Doha diplomatic gang, "he's just given me my passport back"

And I looked at him and I said, "have you got any kids?"

And he said, "yeah,"

And "how old are they? And do they go to school? Are they girls or boys?"

And he took his phone out of his pocket. And he started flipping through photographs and showed me pictures of his kiddies. And I thought this is really weird. And so, when we got to GDI headquarters, and I'm sitting in a very typical Afghan, bureaucratic office with big chairs and a sofa and too much furniture and a big desk and a fan and tea and glasses and sweets on the table.

And they started shouting at me, eventually I said, "look, guys, if you're going to ask me questions, at least, you know, let me answer. Otherwise, this isn't a conversation and I'm just, you know, this is just silly. There's just no sense in it."

And so I think they realised that they weren't dealing with somebody who was going to be intimidated or quaking. I can't say that I was not afraid because I think fear is a sign of intelligent life and there was no stage there where I thought this is going to end. Well. I could very well have been put in a hole in the ground for the next six months. I didn't know whether it was going to end like that or not, but I couldn't see the point in them treating me the way they were.

And eventually it became a conversation and they gave me a bottle of water and I handed it to one of them so they could open it for me and there were lollies as I said, and they kept accusing me of being an agent.

And eventually I said to them, "you know, don't you, Mr. Zahir, that I'm not an agent."

He said, “yeah, but I am an agent *laughs*.”

It was just all silly. So they wanted me to—do you want me to keep on going about this?

SG: Yes, it is both disturbing and riveting, your encounters, so please do keep talking.

LOD: Alright, yes. They also pointed out the stories about the sex slavery and forced marriages and the one about LGBTQ people and said to me, “There are no gays in Afghanistan.”

I said, “There’s gays everywhere, you know, don’t be silly.”

They said, “Maybe in Europe, but certainly not in Afghanistan. There’s no gays in Afghanistan. Why do you call us extremists?”

I said, “Well, I think this position is pretty extreme, don’t you?”

“Why do you call us terrorists?”

“Well, I don’t make this stuff up. You know, the United Nations Security Council lists your leaders, dozens of them, as terrorists.”

“So why don’t you say bad things about the United States?”

I said, “Check everything that I’ve ever written in my life. You will see, nobody is safe. Everybody gets a pasting, and I report what I find is worth reporting, so just check it out.”

And on it went. They had their own boss on speakerphone but tried to tell me that it was a woman, “you people think that we don’t employ a woman, but my boss is a woman.” And the next thing, he’s got his boss who’s a *man* on speakerphone. It was just crazy Kafkaesque stuff. So, my editor at *Foreign Policy* called me because…I don’t know how word got out, I had suspended my Twitter account, I didn’t tell anybody about this, but I guess it’s difficult to keep these things to yourself. My editor called me, and he said, “Are you safe?”

And I said, “One moment please. Excuse me, Mr. Zahir, am I safe?”

He looked down from his phone and he said, “You’ve got tea. We’ve got the aircon. You’ve got water.” The other guy said, “I even took the top off your water.” And Mr. Zahir said, “So yes, you’re safe.”

I said to my boss, “Mr. Zahir says that I’m safe.” He said, “Okay.”

So, then I said to them, “How does this end?” And they said, “Well you have to apologise.” I said, “Sorry.”

He said, “No, no, you have to do a bit better than that.” And I said, “I’m really sorry.”

I said, “Oh, I get it. It has to be public. You want me to tweet something.” So, they made me reinstate my Twitter account. And they dictated—they hadn’t allowed me to take notes or photographs up until this stage, and the only time they really became physically threatening was when I picked up my phone to take a photo and then they all stood around me. And they said, “If you don’t tweet something, if you don’t send the tweet that we want you to tweet confessing your crimes, then you’ll go to jail.”

Got out my notebook, got out my pen and said, “What is it that you want me to say?” And they dictated what they wanted me to say. They made me type it out onto a tweet. They gave my phone to a young guy who divided that tweet into a thread, and then they gave it back to me and I tweeted.

Then their boss, the man on the phone, said that he didn’t like it. And so, they made me delete it, and they rewrote it. And as far as I could see, it was exactly the same. We had a difference of technological prowess here. So, somebody had an Android, and I have an iPhone…and one was on Telegram and…for some reason, we had to go to Telegram to get the tweet that they wanted. And I’ve looked at both of the tweets, and they’re exactly the same. I don’t know what it was that the boss saw that he wanted changed, but it didn’t get changed. So, then they made me tweet it again.

But before we went through this rigmarole, I said, “In all sincerity, guys, I just want to tell you that if you do make me do this, the people who follow me on Twitter will know that it’s not me, and it will make you look silly.” And they had a debate about the meaning of the word ‘silly,’ and they decided that they wouldn’t look silly, and they made me do it anyway. With the storm that followed that was unleashed immediately this Twitter thread appeared, it just bore me out. I mean, one guy even said who knows me, he’s in the United States, an Afghan guy, said, “Australians don’t use Z in words like ‘apologise,’ so this is definitely not Lynne.”

And it went on from there. So…I was looking at the clock. At ten to six, I sent an email—because at no stage did they tell me they couldn’t use my phone—ten to six, I sent an email to a media organisation in the States that I was supposed to be doing a podcast with in ten minutes, and I said, “I’m afraid I won’t be able to join you at six o’clock Kabul time because I’ve been detained by, I am being detained by the Taliban.” And the email came back, “Oh, not to worry. We can reschedule.”

Then I said to the guys, “Okay, so what are you going to do? You’re going to take me back to my guest house now?

They said, “No, no. Now we have to do a video recording.” So, they moved the furniture, and I was wearing a hijab of course, and I sort of straightened my hair and redid my scarf and patted down my clothes. I said, “Do I need any lipstick on? Do I look okay?” And they’re like, “No, you look fine.” “Okay, so tell me what it is that you want me to say.” Scarf back on. They said…they told me what they wanted me to say, which included the rider at the end that I hadn’t been coerced into making this confession. I said, “Okay, we rolling? Off we go.”

And I said, “My name is Lynne O’Donnell. I’m a journalist. I don’t know anything about Afghanistan, about Afghanistan’s culture, or Afghanistan’s people, and I make up all of my reports, and I don’t have any sources.” And I took off my scarf, and I wound it around my neck, and I held it up like a noose, and I said, “And I haven’t been coerced into making this confession.”

And they looked at each other, and they looked at me, and we all burst out laughing. And they said, “Oh, you better do that again.” So, I laughed all the way through the next take. And I said, “Was that okay?” I mean, you know, I was laughing, still laughing, “Do you want me to do it again?” They said, “No, no, that’s fine.”

…So now we’ve gone through all that, I said, “Well, you know, it’s a bit late, isn’t it now, are you going to take me home?” And this guy, by now Zahir is sitting on a sofa with his hand on his forehead saying, “Oh my god, you’ve got no idea what pressure I’m under.” Oh, you poor lamb. He said, “Now that we’ve done all this, if there’s any help that you need with your reporting, just let us know. I said, “Okay, let’s go to the Panjshir.” There’s a hot war on in the Panjshir and surrounding areas. And he said, “Oh no, I don’t think we’ll be able to go there.” I said, “Okay. Well, what about Badakhshan?” Because there was a hot war over the coal resources up there. He said, “Well, it’ll take a long time to get there.” I said, “Well it’ll just take a few hours in a chopper, why don’t we go by chopper?” “He said, “We don’t have access to a chopper.” I said, “Okay, well, I’ve told you what you can help me with. So if you’re not going to help me, I’ll just get on my way then.” And they said, “Sure.” And they said they’d send me a copy of the videos, which they never did, and they took me back to my guest house.

Now in the meantime, they had detained my driver who worked for me and with me when I was bureau chief at Associated Press. They held him for three or four days, they deprived him of sleep, they beat him up, they kept his car and his phone. People, as they had been following me after they had called me, they locked onto my phone, and they monitored my movements. They went to places that I had been. They detained people I’d met with and questioned them. They also harassed…the owners of the guest house where I was staying, business is bad enough anyway. I got on the plane the next day and left for Islamabad, not knowing where Nazar was because I hadn’t been able to contact him. And they tweeted, getting back to Bahiss, the Foreign Ministry spokesman, he tweeted that I had left the country of my own accord after confessing that I made up my reports, the implication of the tweet being that they treated me very well, and we’d all left on good terms. But, you know, I was the baddie and had confessed to it.

I went to Pakistan, as soon as I got off the plan in Islamabad, I sent a tweet that I had prepared to say that I was out of the country, that I was safe, that I had been detained, and that two takes Taliban had made me tweet twice and do two video takes for my confessions and that it was all false. Two days later, the spokesman for the Taliban who is called Zabiullah Mujahid—that’s been the moniker for many people who are spokesman for the Taliban over the years—tweeted that I was a spy, that I had entered the country illegally, that I had masqueraded as a journalist and gone into

hiding, that I had been hunted down and expelled from the country and would never be allowed to return. Now while that's a bit of a joke, because it's clearly not true and it contradicts the previous Taliban tweet about me, by calling me a spy, they also gave themselves carte blanche to call anybody I had been associated with a spy, and that's very, very dangerous, and it really means that I was effectively PNG [persona non grata]. You know, I never wanted to become the story, that's not the sort of journalism that I do. I don't write the word 'I' or 'me' in any of the stories that I do. But they made me the story, and they made me a liability for anybody who I know or had met or would want to see in the future.

And so I spent the next month talking to the world's media about what had happened to me. And the story evolved, of course, as it became clear what had happened to Nazar, my driver, what had happened to other people that I had come in contact with and the Taliban changing their own story about me. And I went there, as I said, to see what Afghanistan was like under the Taliban after one year, and they really showed me what they like because while I could deflect—you know, I've been doing this sort of stuff for a long time—while I could deflect the way they were treating me, if I was a twentysomething Afghan journalist who was taken in or an Afghan anybody taken in off the street, shouted at, intimidated, threatened with jail, I would know that there was a great likelihood that my family not only would not know what had happened to me, why hadn't come home for dinner, where I was, but they might not see me for six months, and I might be very, very badly treated over the course of that time.

So, I saw how crude and violent their tactics are. And it's very clear that what is essentially a minority government, a very unpopular, unwanted government, de facto authority, is holding on to power through fear and, as Mao said, "Power comes out of the barrel of a gun," and that's what the Taliban have. And really, I kind of think in a competitive journalistic way that I got the story of the anniversary. And there have been other foreign journalists who have been detained and treated much worse than I was. My friend Anas Mallick, who works for the Indian TV network *WION* was held overnight. His fixer and driver were held for much longer. Anas came out of prison after having been blindfolded and beaten up with broken ribs. His fixer had a broken arm. They were really badly treated. A young American guy called Ivo Shira, a filmmaker, was detained after being accused of taking video footage of the house where the al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri was killed in July, and he was kept for months on end and has only recently been released. So I was really very lucky, I think.

SG: I'm just trying to recompose myself as I am sure all of our listeners are too because your story had me on the edge of my seat. You're very brave, Lynne, for what you had to deal with, what you had to encounter, and your experience does serve as a composite of what has now become Afghanistan under the dystopian Taliban. As we gather our thoughts, this would be an appropriate time to conclude the first of our three part special with Lynne O'Donnell. Stay tuned for the second part where I talk with Lynne about the dire situation Afghanistan is currently in.

Lynne O'Donnell Part 1: Detained by the Taliban

Lynne O'Donnell is a columnist at Foreign Policy and an Australian journalist and author. She was the Afghanistan bureau chief for Agence France-Presse and the Associated Press between 2009 and 2017. She has previously been the winner of an Amnesty International Human Rights Press Award for her series of stories on Afghan women.

Episode 34 - Lynne O'Donnell Part 2: An Afghan Dystopia, March 2023

Key Reflections

- **The drivers of the Taliban and the Haqqani Network are power and money in Afghanistan and Pakistan. They engage in diversified commercial and criminal activities and are heavily invested in the agricultural industry, mining, pine nuts, and real estate.**
- **Taliban factions are some of the biggest drug dealing cartels in the world and control heroin and methamphetamine production and supply globally.**
- **China is interested in Afghanistan's natural resources including lithium, uranium, and copper. Beijing has sought to enhance its relations with the Taliban.**
- **The IS-KP attacks in Afghanistan, including against Chinese nationals, bear the hallmarks of the Haqqani Network. ISK-KP serves as a convenient proxy for the Taliban. The situation is very murky.**
- **Taliban ideology controls Afghanistan and unifies the factions in taking away the rights of women through the misogynistic Ministry of Vice and Virtue. The Taliban exploits the West's human rights concerns as a distraction from their other nefarious activities.**
- **The Haqqani Network remains close to al-Qaeda. The Taliban have made Afghanistan a safe haven for terrorist groups and once again transformed South Asia into the most dangerous part of the world.**

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

LOD: Lynne O'Donnell

SG: Welcome to the NATO DEEP Dive podcast, I'm your host Dr Sajjan Gohel and this is the second episode of our three-part special about Afghanistan and the Taliban with the journalist Lynne O'Donnell.

Building on what was discussed in part one, when Lynne was detained by the Taliban, in this episode, we talk about what life is really like in Afghanistan under the Taliban and who the key decision-makers are.

There's so many aspects I want to unpack in this because you've addressed the fact that the Taliban are virulently, not only misogynistic, but they are also very homophobic, that they have violently threatened people, and in some cases, have used violence, as you've outlined, intimidation, coercion. Perhaps the interesting dynamic that is different from this Taliban to the previous entity in the 1990s is that they seem to be very tech savvy, very media savvy, that they want to use the media for as the oxygen of publicity. In the way that they somehow tried to create that perception of getting you to, quote, 'confess and apologise' just shows that media optics matter to them. The fact that they actually thought that they could achieve something from that is what surprises me about maybe their limitations in understanding how the media works.

The thing that I wanted to touch upon right now is that you spoke about Abdul Qahar Balkhi, you spoke about being detained by the General Directorate of Intelligence. It's interesting that the Director General, Abdul Haq Wasiq, is like Balkhi, tied to the Taliban faction known as the Haqqani Network, which seems to be the most powerful group within Afghanistan, in the sense that they control a lot of the key ministries including the interior ministry, which is led by the leader of the Haqqani Network, Sirajuddin Haqqani, how important are they? And what do you think that their agenda is when it comes to Afghanistan? Because they seem to want to have a public image, with some of their people appearing on *Twitter* and social media, but at the same time, this is also a proscribed terrorist group, which you were mentioning earlier.

LOD: Well, the Taliban as a group is not sanctioned by the UNSC as a terrorist group. Their leaders are sanctioned as terrorists, and that's the difference. Haqqani is a sanctioned terrorist group as is the TTP, the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan, the Pakistani Taliban. I think that the agenda is power and money. What else is there? Religion has been a very convenient beard for the Taliban for very many years, but we can't and shouldn't forget that the Taliban is the biggest drug dealing cartel in the world, and has been for a long time, controls global heroin production and supply, and that also means that it is embedded in organised crime worldwide.

They've been moving into the production of methamphetamine for many years. Meth is a lot cheaper to produce, and the return is a lot higher, but there's very little material and research done on that. They are hugely embedded in the real estate markets of the region: Turkey, Doha, Karachi, Malaysia. A lot of money flows from the Taliban to the rest of the world in very many ways. Siraj is wealthy in his own right. He controls territory in provinces that border Pakistan that produce agricultural products that are traded to China. For instance, he makes millions of dollars a year out of pine nuts. Chinese love pine nuts and the Chinese, I suspect, are repackaging Afghan pine nuts and reselling them to the world as Chinese products.

The control of the minerals and mining sector, a lot of that has been controlled by the Taliban for a very long time and when we see fighting between Taliban groups, I think that's factions fighting for control of assets. The Chinese also want a big slab of that lithium, uranium, copper, you name it. I am of the belief that the functionalization of the Taliban when it comes to ideology has been exaggerated and exploited very well by the Taliban themselves. We've seen in recent weeks a long list of people from the United Nations and NGO organisations that have been worried about the treatment of women and have been particularly galvanised in the last month or so by the ban on university education for women and women being able to work in the charity sector. And they come away from meetings with the Taliban saying, 'oh, they say that it's just these people who, who don't want women to go to school or work, but we want to and things will be clarified and change soon and you'll see it'll all be fine.'

But I don't believe that's the case. I think that logically the side-lining of women from public life is not going to be something that the Taliban generally will oppose. I think that the factional differences are over power and money only.

SG: Power and money tend to be the obsession that the Taliban have, which doesn't always get enough attention. Because they are, as you mentioned, very entrepreneurial, but mostly with very nefarious practices. You spoke about the fact that the Taliban and the Haqqanis are now dabbling in methamphetamines, that seems to be a very growing narcotic from the region which is getting dispersed across the world. The meth I believe is produced from the ephedra shrub.

LOD: Which grows wild in Afghanistan. So, how do you keep your costs down? You don't need the inputs that poppy does.

SG: Exactly. And I believe that it's also weather resistant and it's a perfect item to grow for nefarious purposes. The aspect of minerals is also very significant because in Badakhshan province, for example, and other northern provinces of Afghanistan, the country has many natural resources, but they haven't been extracted, they haven't been fully developed. You mentioned China, China seems very interested in Afghanistan, but at the same time, they're perhaps encountering some of the same challenges that the West did over the last two decades. How does that relationship between China and the Taliban work, because on paper, it doesn't actually make any sense whatsoever. Have they been able to meet to some extent and have an arrangement or is this a relationship that is ultimately doomed to fail?

LOD: 'Doomed to fail,' I'm not so sure. The Chinese have been very good to the Taliban for a very long time, that relationship goes back decades. And you might remember that in the months before the August 2021 fall of the Republic, the Chinese government red carpeted Taliban leaders in Beijing, they made it very clear whose side they were on. And they've also been very vocal in calling for, for instance, the United States to release the foreign reserves of Afghanistan and really I think that they would like to see the United States recognise the Taliban and certainly engage with them more.

But at the same time, on balance, the United States has put $2 billion worth of humanitarian and development aid into Afghanistan since the Taliban took over and I think the Chinese are probably still in five or six figures and certainly not that much. But what the Chinese do want, and have made it very clear that they want, is access to minerals and mining. They've had the Mes Aynak copper mine near Kabul tied up for a long time. I think that they probably could, if they wanted to, start working on that now that security is a little bit better.

The Chinese are very risk averse. That attack in December on their hotel in Kabul would have very much put the wind up with them and angered them that the Taliban were not providing them with the security that they expect. I mean, there's two ways of looking at that, I mean the Taliban have a very good cover in blaming IS-KP for everything that happens security wise, but a lot of those IS-KP attacks bear Haqqani hallmarks for sure. So, it's not outside the bounds of imagination that the Longan hotel attack in December was carried out by the Haqqanis to convince the Chinese that the Taliban need more weaponry to keep them safe. I don't rule anything out. But then again, that Mes Aynak copper deposit is supposedly the second biggest high quality copper mine in the world. The Chinese are the biggest users and biggest purchasers of copper and having that in the background provides them with a hedge on price.

So, I never take anything that the Chinese do—I was a correspondent based in China for more than a decade—I never take anything that the Chinese government does or says at face value, and their dealings with the Taliban are pragmatic and mercenary. They want to be able to stretch their Belt and Road infrastructure network through Afghanistan, so they can get the goods that they produce in their eastern seaboard factories to European markets through Central Asia much faster than and cheaper than they could by boat. And they are already, as far as I understand, very well embedded in the in the minerals sector, visiting uranium mines down south for instance, and

they have a lot of personnel up north, assaying the gold quality, and they're buying the coal that is coming out of those northern mines and being shipped cheaply into Pakistan. They're putting that into ships out of Pakistan to China, as far as I can understand, I don't know in what quantities.

And so, I don't think that—there was a headline deal a couple of weeks ago on an oil field, up north near the Uzbekistan border, near Hairatan, where we know that there are oil fields. But they already had that deal with the Republic—the Taliban did publicise the fact that they had cancelled that earlier contract—they've just reinstituted the old contract, but whether they get any money out of it or not, is another thing. China needs oil and so holding on to contracting ownership if you like, of oil fields, as well as copper fields, is a way of making sure that it's there when they need it. And I think that it's pragmatic. The Taliban need all the friends that they can get. China, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Russia, they've been there, but the Chinese are the ones who really have the potential and are saying that they will put the money in, and they may well be paying Haqqani and paying other figures in the in the de facto authorities to stay on their side. I mean, they've got money. I wouldn't put it beyond them to just be paying everybody off because like we said, it's all about money and power.

SG: Every comment you make makes me want to ask you a dozen questions connected to that. One aspect that you mentioned that really stood out was, you spoke about how IS-KP, IS-K, the ISIS affiliate, they have the hallmarks of the Haqqani Network. That is something that I have noticed, both in terms of strategy and in tactics. Yet some people still want to draw a separation. There's often this perception in some quarters that IS-KP are the enemy of the Taliban. And I think often when people make those remarks, they don't understand the shades of grey in Afghanistan. They don't understand how murky these different entities are, because it does look like, to me, Lynne, that the Haqqanis have infiltrated IS-KP, and they use them almost as a proxy in their own agenda to undermine other Taliban factions, but also to get more concessions from other entities, including China.

LOD: Yes, I agree with you. I think that once the Taliban took over, I noticed it almost immediately, everything was blamed on ISIS, IS-K, very conveniently. And I remember I was being interviewed on a radio programme about it, and I said. "What, now the Taliban are in control, they're not liars anymore? And we believe everything that they say?" I am firmly of the belief that that August 2021 attack at the airport, the Kabul airport, in the middle of the pandemonium around evacuation was a Haqqani attack. I have no doubt about it. I think some of the highest profile attacks that we have seen on Hazara communities, on Sikh and Hindu communities, have been Haqqani and that it is quite possible that they are using IS-K as a proxy. It was also suggested to me a year or so ago that they traded opportunities for claiming responsibility, "Who's going to get the most out of claiming responsibility for this one?"

We see reports you know, on *Bakhtar*, which is now the Taliban mouthpiece, or even *TOLOnews* which is also very pro-Taliban these days in what it reports, "The Taliban say that they've killed seven IS-K operatives in 'blah de blah' part of the country." It's like, how do we know? They might just be some blokes they didn't like, another Taliban faction, somebody who was in control of a lapis lazuli mine that this faction wanted to take over. There is no truth coming out of Afghanistan about anything. And so, I'm quite with you. It's very convenient to draw those lines, but the murkiness is the reality. But like you say, I think it's all of a mesh, it's all murky, and everybody's using everyone else. And the rest of us out here, the patsies. The pushback that I get when I try and report this stuff is really just a reflection of how well-absorbed the new line has been, you know, "Taliban kind of good now" I suspect.

SG: Yes, and everybody wants, I guess, a black-and-white narrative because it's just easier to report on. But for us, yourself, for me, those of us who have been and spent time in Afghanistan, we understand the nuances, which are so important, especially with some of the challenges that lie ahead. One other thing that I wanted to track back on because it's such an important dynamic is the Taliban misogyny, which has been institutionalised. They closed down the Ministry of Women's Affairs, and the very building that belonged to protect women's rights has now been repurposed perversely into the Taliban Ministry of Vice and Virtue, which effectively is the propagation of misogyny. There's this other perception that there are some Taliban factions that want to keep women's rights or restore them, there are others that are against it. Again, where do we draw these distinctions? Is that the fact that there are differences within the Taliban over the mistreatment of women, or are they ultimately all singing from the same sheet?

LOD: I think that this is also a complex issue. I don't think it's as easily drawn as has been made out…that the whole movement has been taken hostage by a dozen people and Hibatullah Akhundzada, the supreme leader's, pronouncements are just a reflection of one small part of powerful Taliban figures. I don't think that for a minute. I think that this is the ideology. We saw it in the north. Before I went to that valley that I mentioned before in the highlands that had been taken over by the Taliban for four days and the women had been terrorised with threats of forced marriage, there had been rumours but no confirmation that this was going on in areas that the Taliban were taking over. You'll remember how they did it: they closed off the border points, and then they started taking districts around provincial capitals. And it wasn't until the very latest stages that they moved into the provincial capitals, and then they started falling, and that's when we decided if the capital has fallen, the province has fallen. That domino effect didn't come until the last couple of weeks. In the meantime, in those districts, what they had been doing was pretty much setting the example of what was to come, but there hadn't been any confirmation because they were also closing down media organisations as they took over, of what they were doing.

And so…they're just revisiting 1996 to 2001. And as you say, they're doing it with a much more sophisticated view of how to use media nationally and internationally. But…this is ideology, this is their ideology. There's no surprises in any of this. And I think that anybody who tries to say that it's only a few people who are powerful who really want women to stop working, stay home, not get educated, just be pregnancy vessels for the guys, is delusional. This is Taliban ideology, and the Taliban control the country. So of course the whole country is going to fall in. And it's been very, very cleverly used. You talked about their understanding of how media works before. You know, I was the resident correspondent and bureau chief for news agencies in Afghanistan for a long time. And I used to tell ISAF (International Security Assistance Force), as it was then, the NATO mission all the time…something happens, and within minutes, I've got texts and emails from the Taliban saying what it's about and how many were killed and how it happened and blah, blah. And it takes you *days*, they are way ahead of the diplomatic missions and the military effort in their use of media. They understood it very, very well from a very long time ago.

Now what they're doing is using the fact that Western headlines will be about the latest, awful treatment of women, and not about the expansion of methamphetamine exports to whatever country in the world it is. They will tell visiting officials and heads of charities who come to talk about women what they want to hear, because nobody is going in and saying, well, there are two Americans and two Canadians in prison, can we talk about that please? Or can we talk about the way Hazaras are being forced out of their homes in this particular province, or about…whatever other atrocity you want to name, there's a whole laundry list of them. But they're very assiduously and

cleverly using the Western obsession with what appears to be their obsession with women's rights to draw a veil, if you like, over everything else that they do. They're very, very clever. It is a terrible, terrible thing that they are doing to women, but it's working for them ideologically, and in terms of deflecting everything else that they do.

SG: I find it very upsetting what's happening, as I think everybody is, about the mistreatment of women because one of the great success stories in Afghanistan, which doesn't get a lot of attention, was women's empowerment, where you see women playing prominent roles over the last 20 years in various administrations, in universities, as judges, in the media. Afghan women are an extremely important contributor to Afghan society, to the economy, and now their voices have been completely shut, and they live in this very dark, Orwellian world that the Taliban has created. The thing I noticed, Lynne, when it comes to terrorism, extremism, and I think in many ways it appears, or it's relevant for Afghanistan I mean, is that if you see the reduction and decrease of women's rights, you see the increase of radicalisation and extremism. We saw that in Afghanistan in the 1990s, where misogyny became the order of the day, al-Qaeda created and set itself up in Afghanistan. In the last year and a half, the Taliban have returned. We've seen that al-Qaeda figures have come back to the country, most notoriously of course was the al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, who interestingly enough I'm actually writing a book on. Surprise, surprise, he was found in a villa in the centre of Kabul. Do you think—I guess this is a two part question, are you surprised about the relationship that the Taliban have maintained with al-Qaeda even though they promised the world that they wouldn't harbour them? And are you concerned that Afghanistan could once again become a cesspool for extremists from around the world like it had been in the past?

LOD: I have been writing about the Taliban's relationship with and to al-Qaeda for many, many years, and [that] was one of the themes of my reporting before the end of the war, I did a paper for NATO on it in 2020. And I warned about allowing the Taliban, which we did, we allowed the Taliban to take over, that this would lead to Afghanistan becoming a safe haven for jihadist organisations that have fought with them and alongside them for 20 years, and that's what's happened. So I'm not worried about it happening, like becoming…something like that. It is that. And there are and have been for a long time about two dozen jihadist organisations affiliated with the Afghan Taliban. Sirajuddin Haqqani is very close to, if not one of the leaders of al-Qaeda. His Haqqani group is a close affiliate of al-Qaeda. The placement around the borders of affiliated terrorism, terrorist organisations, and jihadist groups is causing great concern amongst the Central Asian states. The Taliban have transformed South Asia into the most dangerous part of the world in my view.

SG: Well, that's very chilling to hear. I don't think it should surprise many people, especially those that watch Afghanistan.

Lynne O'Donnell bio

See Episode 33

Episode 35 - Lynne O'Donnell Part 3: The Future of AfPak, March 2023

Key Reflections

- **Toxic ethnic politics in Afghanistan could potentially lead to the federalisation or the breakup of Afghanistan as a single country.**
- **The many Afghan opposition groups to the Taliban lack cohesion. These groups, operating in different countries around the world, need to come together, form a single entity, and come up with ideas for governance the way an opposition government should.**
- **The Taliban's model of governance is not sustainable. Using force on the population will not work when that population is hungry and impoverished. This raises the potential for a popular uprising against Taliban rule by the people of Afghanistan.**
- **Pakistan's support of the Taliban in Afghanistan has now come back to bite it, as the country faces threats from the Taliban's Pakistani offshoot known as the TTP, who receives support from the Afghan Taliban.**
- **High-ranking Taliban members and their families who live abroad should be named, sanctioned, and have their passports removed.**
- **Foreign governments should not recognise the Taliban, and international NGOs should be more transparent about the challenges they are facing from the Taliban government in Afghanistan, rather than feeling forced to pander to them.**

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

LOD: Lynne O'Donnell

SG: Welcome to the NATO DEEP Dive podcast, I'm your host Dr Sajjan Gohel and this is the third and final part of our series about Afghanistan and the Taliban with the Foreign Policy magazine columnist Lynne O'Donnell.

After previously discussing what life is like in Afghanistan under the Taliban and who the key decision-makers are, in this episode, we talk about the future security challenges that will emanate from both Afghanistan and Pakistan which could impact directly on the West once more.

We know that the one movement that is trying to stand up to the Taliban is the National Resistance Front, you have spoken to members of the NRF. Are they a legitimate force that can actually make inroads against the Taliban and is one of the challenges they face that they are seen as too Tajik and [do not have] enough Pashtun representation?

LOD: I try to steer clear of the ethnic politics, because I think that that's a really toxic road to go down. I have talked to Ahmad Massoud a few times and to people around him and to people who support him. I find that the NRF as a movement, like very many of the other groups that have set themselves up or would like to set themselves up as Taliban opposition groups, lack ideas, they lack cohesive ideas. And, you know, one of the reasons that I don't really go into the ethnic politics of things is because it bores me.

For instance, I set up a group in Pakistan, an organisation, like an umbrella, to help Afghan journalists who are stranded in Pakistan, and there are many hundreds of them and their situation is pretty desperate. And yet they divide themselves into Hazara, Tajik and Pashtun. And I'm like, 'come on, guys, think of yourselves as journalists and that's your tribe, and others in your tribe, in our tribe, will help you if we can.' But no, they want this differentiation, which I fear may ultimately lead to the federalization or the breakup of the country. But I think you know what I would like to see happen is that the different groups talk to each other. I've talked to former generals of the Afghan forces who are actively fighting the Taliban across certain parts of the country, who have never been contacted by NRF leaders. They're all trying to do the same thing, but they're doing it for themselves.

I would like to see some more cohesion. I would like to see the different groups that have set themselves up in Europe or in Turkey or Tajikistan or wherever, I'd like to see them form one group, as an opposition group. Come up with a name that suits everybody, 'the Afghan opposition,' or whatever, and try and get some support. Not for an armed resistance, because it's too early, nobody is interested in funnelling to anti-Taliban groups yet, we've got Ukraine going on, Africa is being lost to similar extremist groups, and it's too soon to expect any country, especially the United States or any of the NATO members to really want to get involved militarily in Afghanistan again. But in the meantime, what they could be doing is supporting the development of a cohesive opposition to the Taliban, so that you're creating the ground for political dialogue.

Because the Taliban, I said this in the interviews that I was giving after I came out of Taliban detention last year, they're not sustainable. Holding guns on hungry people is not sustainable because pretty soon when they get to starving, they've got nothing to lose, and your guns are not going to stop people rising up against you. And the excesses are going to start annoying the people who are putting money in that you are stealing from people who are hungry, which is what they're doing. I think the creation and the encouragement of a cohesive political opposition would be a step forward that we haven't seen yet. But it also means that the people who would be this political opposition have to start working together.

You've got the warlords around Dostum in Turkey, and then you've got Ahmad Massoud, really trading on the charisma of his late father and people around the former foreign minister, Haneef Atmar in in Germany, I just think until they start working together and come up with some ideas for governance, the way an opposition should, then it's just going to be [in a state of] attrition like it is in the Panjshir at the moment, it's just the Taliban with the firepower, killing people who don't like them.

SG: Yes, and as you said, the ethnic fault lines tend to be a very toxic issue, it's what's created so many of the problems that have mired Afghanistan into the problems that it's now experiencing. As we get to the final part of our discussion, one aspect to address is the so-called elephant in the room, we've talked about it briefly, but perhaps now to focus on it and that is Pakistan. Pakistan was accused of supporting the Taliban. There have been accusations that they enabled the Taliban to return to power. That relationship was of course very strong in the 1990s. Post-9/11 Pakistan became the hub for a lot of the Taliban fighters, including the Haqqani Network, but yet the relationship seems to currently have problems. There seem to be some challenges that Pakistan is facing with the Taliban. Is that a correct analysis or, again, are there dynamics that perhaps are not getting enough attention?

LOD: I think that the general level of buyer's remorse, amongst those countries that supported the Taliban return, is probably most acute in Pakistan, because it's closest to the problem and yes, they bankrolled the Taliban's return, they encouraged it, they were right there on the battlefield alongside the Taliban in those final months, and ensured that what happened. So, yeah, I think Pakistan is largely responsible for the situation that prevails. But the backlash is really—there would be a lot of Afghans who would say this is what they deserve. I don't think anybody deserves what happened in Peshawar the other day, that terrible suicide attack at the mosque that killed more than 100 policemen.

But I do think that Pakistan now finds an uncontrollable Taliban on its border. It finds a Taliban that is rewarding its friends for their support and amongst them are the TTP. I think that the TTP and the Afghan Taliban are one and the same, the only difference is territory. I think that the TTP is posing an existential threat to the Pakistani state and with their economy the way it is, with the social problems that the country has, dire poverty that is getting worse by the day, no jobs, no prospects, no hope for people across the country. If they don't get a handle on this situation very, very soon, then Pakistan is going to go the same way as Afghanistan. I think that's a very, very real prospect.

SG: Yes, and one of the challenges that Pakistan now faces is that the military establishment had often spoken about and created the perception within Pakistan that if the Taliban returns to power in Afghanistan, it will actually mean the end of the TTP and that Pakistan's border with Afghanistan would be more secure. Now, the irony is that the complete opposite has happened, that the TTP have become stronger, they are able to carry out attacks across Pakistan, they actually seem to be growing in strength across the board, you mentioned the horrific attack that took place in Peshawar at a mosque just now. Do you see Pakistan imploding in a similar way that Afghanistan has? And how does that play domestically in terms of say, the now opposition leader Imran Khan, who plays a lot of populist politics as well and that he's often seen as a friend of the Taliban? Do all of these dynamics cause further challenges for Pakistan?

LOD: I think…there's a lot of a lot to unpack in that, isn't there? Let's start with Imran Khan. I think that Imran Khan is not the solution. He is, like you say, he plays populist, but he plays religion as populist, and that's dangerous in itself. In recent months, there have been huge demonstrations across the northwest in towns and cities and valleys all across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa against the remilitarisation, calling on the government to make sure that the TTP does not return and terrorise them the way they did in the early part of this century. People want jobs, they want their kids, girls and boys, to go to school. Women want to be able to run their own businesses. They don't want the TTP back, and their pleas, their public pleas, for the government and the military to ensure that they are safe from terrorism are very, very real and very loud.

I think the military has backed itself into a corner. It's become…it's very complex. Pakistan's military is too obsessed with its own enrichment and survival now. They did relax on the Taliban taking over in Afghanistan. They've been so focused on India since the creation of the Pakistani state that they thought that they were clever enough to be able to, as Hillary Clinton said, keep the snakes in next-door's backyard. They have not taken their eye off the ball, they never had their eye on the ball in the first place. If you're focusing on a threat far away, like India, without looking at what's happening to your own people on your own turf, then I think that this has become inevitable—it was inevitable that the Taliban in Afghanistan would offer safe haven to their Pakistani brethren,

and every jihadist organisation on the planet has been emboldened by the Taliban's victory, aided by Pakistan. So they haven't been paying attention, you know, by saying that India is the threat, they've allowed the real threat to come home, and now they are threatened. And really, if elections do take place in Pakistan later this year, and Imran wins, which he may well do because there's such disenchantment with the establishment in Pakistan, then I just hope that he gets some good, solid secular advice on how to get his country back on track, socially, politically, economically, and security wise, because really it's like starting from scratch—not even, it's like starting from where you never wanted to be, and sometimes I think if you just sort of disbanded the country and started again, you'd have a better chance of making it work. But at the moment, what's the population, 320 million? Probably 300 million of those are not doing very well, especially as the rupee keeps falling against the dollar, and there's capital flight and basic state bankruptcy looming. It's not a good situation.

SG: It's all very disconcerting what is transpiring. As a final question, Lynne, what can be done to help the people in the region, especially in Afghanistan, when it comes to, say, women's rights, supporting independent media, trying to create or maintain what semblance of civil society there is? Or is it that there is nothing that can be done? I mean, very often, we keep hearing people say, "Recognise the Taliban." I'm not personally convinced that's the solution. I don't know if that will actually achieve what people want to achieve. But where do you stand on these issues?

LOD: Well I'm with you on diplomatic recognition. I'm also a little bit sceptical about some people saying that this is what the Taliban desperately want. The United States State Department people like to say that. I'm not so sure. They're doing okay without it. I think there need to be consequences for the excesses and the abuses, and so far there haven't been. There's a lot of thoughts and prayers, it always used to be, you know, "Our thoughts and prayers go out to the victims and their families of this enormous terrorist attack perpetrated by people that we're actually having talks with in Doha." It's like, oh give me a break, you know? That's the same thing that's going on. I think what we need to see is serious sanctions, sanctioning not only the Hassan Bahisses of this world, but their families as well. Their families should be deported from countries like New Zealand, Australia, America, Denmark, wherever they are, and they should all be forced to live in Afghanistan. Their kids should not be allowed to go to school in the West, their wives shouldn't be allowed to work and walk down the street freely in nice little towns like Hamilton. And their passports should be cancelled. There should be very serious application of Magnitsky-style laws against human rights perpetrators. For a while it seemed that Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International and UNAMA itself, who do good work on collating abuses, were all competing to do the worst, you know, "how bad is it?" but they didn't name anybody. What I want to see is human rights abusers named and sanctioned personally so they can't travel, their assets are frozen, their families are deported, their passports are cancelled, they can't get on planes to go anywhere. And this would really humiliate them and really let them know that there are consequences to actions that are not acceptable by any entity that calls itself a government. But that's not what we're seeing. What we're seeing is, "Please, Mr. Taliban, let women go to school. Oh, okay then. Here's another billion dollars."

It's time for consequences and accountability. Where's that money really going? I did some reporting recently on Taliban pilfering of international aid. And one of the senior people who works for the United Nations was asked about it on BBC Radio, and he called the report "calumny." Basically, he was calling me a liar. I have letters from the United Nations to the Taliban de facto authorities complaining about the pilfering of international aid for purposes that are not meant for. I have the documented evidence. Why can't the United Nations come out and speak publicly about that sort of abuse of trust by the Taliban? The last week or so, I've been assailed once again by the World

Food Programme over their apparent willingness to abide by the Taliban's edict against having women work for NGOs. Now they put a lot of effort into telling my bosses that my reporting is inaccurate, when all I did every time that they pushed back against me was provide more backup for the report. Why doesn't the WFP come out and say, "We really feel pressured to continue our work, but on a men only basis, because we feel that blah, blah, blah," whatever their thinking is behind it, or actually say to their implementing partners like Care International, the Norwegian Refugee Council, or Save the Children or whoever, why don't they say to them, "We're not going to be able to do…We feel the need, if we want to stay in the country, to go along with the Taliban edicts, but you please find other implementing partners and do it the way you can?" Why aren't they just upfront about it? Why don't they just say what the situation is for them, instead of pandering to the Taliban? I think the time for consequences, not recognition, but consequences in return for engagement has come, because nothing else has worked.

SG: Time for consequences, it's a sobering aspect for everyone to reflect on and to think about. Lynne, you've been very gracious with your time across these episodes, and I'm very grateful. I also want to just acknowledge all the hard work you've done in writing about this and reporting, holding the Taliban accountable, giving a voice to a lot of people in Afghanistan that feel lost and helpless. Please keep doing what you're doing. And, again, I just want to say thank you so much for joining us on NATO *DEEP Dive* and hope to speak to you again in the future.

LOD: Thank you. Thank you for having me and for your time. I really appreciate it.

Lynne O'Donnell bio

See Episode 33

Episode 36 - Todd Helmus and the Disinformation Battlefield, March 2023

Key Reflections

- **The Ukrainian military is succeeding in the information battlefield by utilising social media to directly challenge Russian propaganda and disinformation.**
- **Social media influencers in the battlefield space can support military contingencies through sharing information about humanitarian operations or enemy attacks that have been successfully countered. Doing so helps to create credibility.**
- **There are four types of technologies that power social media disinformation campaigns: text command platforms that create relatively believable text; text-to-image generators; deepfake videos consisting of virtual face transplants through software; and synthetically generated images and avatars that are assembled in any language and background.**
- **There are concerns that as artificial intelligence (AI) advances, both domestic and foreign state actors could use deepfake material to derail particular politicians or parties when it comes to election campaigns.**
- **Technology can potentially discern whether something is fake or not. However, with high-end deepfake videos, it is becoming harder to detect with the naked eye. Synthetically generated content is easier to discern—for now. On social media feeds, many could get misled by artificially generated images.**
- **The big tech industry actors could regulate themselves, but this won't prevent others from letting AI proliferate.**

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

TH: Todd Helmus

SG: Welcome to the NATO *DEEP Dive* podcast, I'm your host Dr. Sajjan Gohel and in this episode I speak with Dr. Todd Helmus, a Senior Behavioural Scientist with RAND.

In our discussion we talk about the importance of controlling the narrative during conflicts as well as the growing concerns about how artificial intelligence is being used for disinformation, propaganda and deepfakes as well as the role of state actors.

Todd Helmus, warm welcome to NATO *DEEP Dive.*

TH: Thank you for having me.

SG: Let's look at the situation in Ukraine. Ukraine has had success in the information battlefield. Russia, which was once considered to be the preeminent force when it came to propaganda disinformation, has found itself being directly challenged. What are the reasons underlying Ukraine's

success in terms of leveraging online influences?

TH: Well, thanks for that question. I just put a piece together on *War On The Rocks* on that topic. I really find the most interesting piece about what's happening in Ukraine is the degree to which Ukraine is leveraging just regular people. I'm not even sure if they're purposely leveraging this or not. But regular folks, in the army and out of the army, are taking to social media to share their experiences and it just so happens that these experiences really work in Ukraine's favour. They're highlighting, talking about, the attacks that Russia is launching against civilian centres. There's a great influencer named Margo Gontar, who is a journalist, she basically live-tweets air raid siren alerts in Kyiv, and you really get a palpable feel of what's happening there just by following her on her feed.

And there are a lot of other civilians out there sharing their viewpoints, similar viewpoints to that, but also other perspectives. And then of course, you can't help but think about all of the coverage on what's happening in Ukraine, on the successful attacks that they're conducting against Russian forces. You almost get a skewed view of how successful Ukraine is getting, just by following social media and seeing the degree to which Ukraine is successfully targeting Russian tanks, successfully targeting Russian troops in Bakhmut, and other places. And some of that, of course, is done by the Ukraine Government, but a lot of it is also coming from soldiers who have their own Twitter accounts. We follow Twitter here, I'm sure in the region they do, they have other channels that they're following as well, but you really get a palpable feel of what's happening there because you have folks like Viking, there's a really interesting Instagram account named Viking, he's a Ukrainian pilot, you get a sense [of what it's like] when he's going on his missions and what it's like for him to fly his attack chopper into combat, and there's others as well, like *Kriegsforcher,* who is a Ukrainian Marine, he's got nearly 70,000 followers, I think he's on TikTok, but he's posting a lot of live feeds on attacks against Russian forces.

I feel like there's several really key benefits to this. One is there's a lot of research showing that people have inherent trust in what they call 'someone just like me.' A number of surveys have shown that people trust 'someone just like me,' more than governments, corporations, and things like that. So, we have a lot of trust in those who we can relate to and that's really the value of these individual accounts. They appear, by all purposes, to be normal folks in really tough situations, and by following them we build a relationship to who they are. And I think that relationship that you get through following someone on social media, makes their message really particularly powerful.

SG: That's very interesting. What lessons can NATO member nations learn from the experience of the Ukrainian army when it comes to the utilisation of social media and influencing operations?

TH: Well, I can't speak to NATO in general, I know here in the United States there's a lot of angst in the U.S. military, about soldiers going out on social media. And soldiers do go out on social media, the military doesn't prevent them from doing that. So, they're still doing it, but there's a lot of angst about it and a lot of angst about what they're tweeting and concerns that they might say or do something negative. And the real emphasis is on the fear, I think, of what the higher authorities feel about these individual soldiers who have grown up on social media and are just really used to, and accustomed to, sharing their views and perspectives, in a very visceral way with their audiences.

So, you can be scared of it and you can try and tamp it down or you can just leverage it. It's certainly, I think, what Ukraine is doing. As I write about, there is a very strong case, for least in the U.S., I'm sure in Europe, businesses leveraging their own employee base, and there's a lot of benefits to leveraging your own employee base to get out on social media. Because they work for you, there's some semblance, some level of trust and motivation to say good things. Because they work for you, you have a touch point with them, you can provide training and education to help them, not only be better at social media, but also know what the lines are; what are the things you should or should not talk about. And then, of course, you can follow these individuals and evaluate what types of impacts they have.

So, businesses do this. A number of fortune 500 businesses are engaged in what are called employee advocate programmes. And I just see a lot of unique comparisons between that and what Ukraine is doing. And what I argue is that the U.S. military should develop some sort of employee advocate programme. You can start small or big, but you basically identify savvy social media folks within the military, and then you provide them some training and oversight on what they're doing. Number one, you empower them. Say that you're really excited about their skills and their capabilities, and you want to see them share their perspective of being in the military. You can provide training that can help improve their capabilities and of course, as I mentioned, you can provide some education about things not to tweet about right, don't tweet about how you hate your commander, don't share sensitive information.

And I, especially here in the United States, we're really struggling to recruit new people in the military, there is a very significant deficit of folks coming into the military. There's a lot of potential power in soldiers, marines, airmen, and navy folk getting out on social media and talking to their own networks, about their experiences, which oftentimes are really exciting. There's a lot of doldrums in the military, but there's also a lot of exciting moments that are highly shareable content, that could provide highly shareable content. And if they could share that and the military could welcome that then I really think that we could do a lot to spread the message about what military life is like within the U.S., particularly within the age range of the folks that they want to recruit. And I think that could be very powerful.

SG: You use the word leverage a couple of times, I feel we've almost answered what I wanted to ask you next, but just wanted to see if there's a way to expand this very important discussion that we're having and that the military might also think about what a social media presence looks like during military contingencies. Are you able to expand on what that actually would entail?

TH: Yeah, so there's two levels to approach this. One is the soldiers and I'll just use the word soldiers referencing all service personnel, but there's one aspect of how you leverage your service personnel in this and then there's a second aspect of how you leverage other influencers in the battlespace. First on the service personnel side, number one, I should say you don't want everybody out there going into battle live-tweeting and being concerned about their 'likes' and engagement data while they're in the midst of a firefight obviously, you don't want that. You obviously don't want them giving away their positions. And so there's going to have to be rules in the road and it would probably, definitely, have to be more strictly regulated than what might be the case in garrison.

But, I could imagine providing a sort of a commander's intent to your employee advocates who, by the way, have been trained and educated and have some level of requisite trust in what they are able to do, but providing some commander's intent about the types of content that are permissible, not permissible, ensuring that there's strict rules about not giving away positions and things like that. But then letting them share their experiences. And this will obviously vary according to the types of operations, right. You don't want a high level special operations unit doing this in the midst of a highly intense operation. But I'm sure there are other scenarios where again, depending on the operation, you can see soldiers sharing information about humanitarian operations that they're doing, or sharing information about enemy attacks that they've successfully engaged in.

So all that would be very powerful and if you think about what is otherwise the case, particularly in the U.S., is that you would have combat cameramen who go out, and they're in select units, and they often take very, I don't know, in my view, they take very sort of posed pictures, they don't come across as authentic, as what might be the case if someone snaps something on their smartphone. So, I think that's really powerful and obviously to make that work, you need doctrine, to set the stage about what that would look like for different types of operations, and you need to integrate that into training. So, when a unit does their high level sort of inter-unit training events, then you would want to make sure that there are individuals in that who are authorised to post and share content to some sort of made up social media account. And then they would do that as part of the operation and the public affairs folks would help do the after action on that to see if that worked or not.

So, that's one piece. The second piece is that there are influencers out in the battlefield that are not Americans. I go back to thinking about Iraq or Afghanistan, maybe not in Afghanistan because social media presence wasn't so good. But imagine going back to a place like Iraq. And in this day and age where everyone has a cell phone and a social media account, identify those people that support your cause. These are folks who live in the country, who have a level of credibility with their compatriots, and so you want to identify folks that are sort of sympathetic to what you're trying to accomplish. And then again, you go through this process of building a relationship with them, training them, and educating them to be more influential, to use their capabilities even better, and then provide them, you're not going to tell them what to do because you really want this to be authentic, but you could empower them to go out and share these stories.

And the U.S. does this on some level. We evaluated a programme for example, in the Philippines, and Nigeria for that matter, where some folks from the State Department helped train local civil society people to be better communicators. And then with that training, they just went out and did a lot of interesting things. We weren't able to evaluate how effective that was, but these people were really excited to go out and do the things they were doing. These are folks that lived in Mindanao, Philippines, and they really disliked the whole terrorism problem that was happening there, and they wanted to be part of the solution, and the U.S. sort of provided a means for them to participate in that.

SG: You've provided a lot of important perspective to do with influence operations, with shaping the narrative, getting the information out there. One thing that we've also noticed, in this current age, has been the rise in technology, and in particular, deepfake threats, as part of artificial intelligence (AI) and forming disinformation campaigns. Can you provide an overview of the deepfake threat and the technology that has been used as associated with artificial intelligence driven technologies and also its contribution to disinformation campaigns?

TH: Well, yeah, this space is blowing up right now, as you're well-aware. And I'll just note, there are four different types of technologies that are at play here and there are different levels of maturity. First, we know that there's ChatGPT*,* which allows you, with a simple text command, to create relatively believable text. And it is very conceivable that adversaries will use programmes like ChatGPT to power their social media campaigns. Places like China where they might lack a lot of English language expertise, or at least where that could be a limitation in their ability to peddle propaganda content to the U.S., now really have an automated means of creating that content in a way that does not sound like it came from someone from China, it sounds like someone from the United States.

The second part is these text-to-generated images that are online right now. And so, almost any type of text command will generate images and a number of those might well be in the wheelhouse of what you're looking for. This just happened yesterday, we're sort of dealing with this in the U.S. right now, where, with all the frenzy about whether or not President Trump will get indicted in New York City, someone disseminated a series of deepfake images showing President Trump being arrested. Those images went like wildfire across the social media space. And my guess is almost anybody who's really interested in running a disinformation campaign or conveying any sort of real message on social media, it would probably behove them to go to one of these generator websites and generate images that can back up whatever claims they have. That technology is good to go right now, at a very high level of maturity. The pictures look believable, and so I imagine that we're going to see that explode in the next few weeks to months.

There's another value to it too, that it can power the images you put on your social media profile. So before, you had to use someone else's photograph on the fake social media accounts that you'd create, and those could oftentimes be reverse imaged to back to the original owner, which would show that it was a fake account, but now it's really easy just to create a fake profile image.

The third piece would be the deepfake videos. There's several ways you can create those. You can do face transplants, so you have an actor or some sort of video footage, and you can transplant a face of whoever you wanted to deepfake onto that. So that is one way to do it. That technology is not fully there yet. It takes several months of work, at least two months of hard work, to create those videos in ways that they will be highly believable. There's also another approach that you can use, a completely synthetic approach. China was just recently caught with a YouTube campaign featuring synthetically generated images that they used to create their anchor-man as part of these fake news programmes that they had. That was generated from a programme called Synthesia; they basically pedal software that allows companies to create training videos from scratch. You don't need an actor, you just need to go to synthesia.io, and they'll create an avatar in any language with any sort of background that you choose. Those images look pretty fake right now, but they are being powered by not only China but Venezuela is using them to disseminate some of their content.

Right now, the big value is that it's just cheaper to do that than having an actor do it. But that technology will get better, and you will easily be able to fake key personalities that you might choose. So those are just a few of the technologies that are out there to this end. Like I said, I think the text generation, the image generation, is there, good enough to be used right now. I think it's just a matter of time before adversaries really start to use these technologies in a coordinated systematic way to conduct their campaigns.

SG: You've laid out a lot of examples of how this technology can be utilised and manipulated, and I have to say it's very disconcerting as to just how sophisticated it's become, with each example being more disturbing than the next. Todd, what clues are there that people can look for that would give away that a video or a piece of tech is fake? Will this eventually become irrelevant because the technology then is so good that it's impossible to tell? Or are there small examples, forensic tools available that would be able to discern between what is genuine and what is fake?

TH: I think with the high-end deepfake videos, the face transplants that take several months to put together, my guess is those can be done and it'd be very hard to discern from just the naked eye that it was fake or not. The synthetically generated content videos right now, it's pretty easy to discern. They just don't look real. The head movements don't look real. The conversational tone doesn't sound real. But that's really only if you're trying to pay attention. I imagine there's a lot of people that don't pay attention to those cues, and they might be fooled. But it looks kind of fake. The text, especially the text that you could put into a social media feed, my guess is a lot of people will get fooled by that, and the image generations, people would definitely get fooled by it. I'd say the exception is the funny image showing President Trump running away from police officers. That image had him running a little too fast for a 70-some-year-old man. But other than that, the images are pretty good.

Now there are technological ways to discern whether something is fake or not. I really can't speak to the high-end technology of that, but it involves…part of the way that you create, for example, deepfake content is you think about having two competing computers, or they're called GANs (generative adversarial network) in this case. These two computers, one computer is charged with creating deepfake content, and the other is charged with detecting that deepfake content. And so these work in consort to develop these highly believable images because as the first iteration is created, then the other computer identifies what aspects of that look fake or need to be improved, and then the first computer goes ahead and makes those improvements.

So, detection oftentimes is really built into the creation of a lot of this content. And that makes it, I think, particularly challenging to create effective detectors right now. Facebook a couple years ago did a competition to identify and basically asked a lot of organisations to create detectors. And then they tested the effectiveness of those detectors. The best detectors, as of a couple of years ago, only detected about 65% of the fake video content. I've heard that the advances in creating content have probably outmoded advances in detecting content, so you might not even be that successful now. And as the videos get created even better and better, and look more perfect and have higher resolutions, the likelihood of effective detection will get lower and lower. And once you use the detector, then that detector is kind of outed, and then those who are creating the video content can create videos that that detector can't detect. And a classic example of this is like in 2019, it was discovered that in deepfake videos, the actors were not eye blinking at believable levels, so they weren't eye blinking at all. Within about 30 days, that fix was made, and then all the deepfakes started eye blinking in a relatively believable way. So, the battlefield is definitely in favour of creating the content more so than detecting the content.

SG: Let me ask you this, we have seen over the last few years concerns that hostile state actors have interfered in elections around the world. Is it only a matter of time before certain states use deepfake material to derail particular politicians or political parties when it comes to election campaigns?

TH: So my answer to that is it depends. And here I discriminate between foreign actors and domestic actors. Here in the United States, it's a highly partisan world we live in here. It is almost with guaranteed certainty that domestic actors will use the fake content to attack political actors, so that will almost certainly happen. I think the question is whether foreign actors will do this. And what it depends on is a couple things. It depends on what they're trying to target. Think about the worst case scenario where Russia launches a highly believable deepfake targeted at President Biden two days before the 2024 election. And that deepfake is so believable that it throws everybody off, and then all of a sudden he loses support, and now you have whoever is competing against him, maybe Trump or somebody else, win the election.

My guess is that's definitely a worst case scenario of a foreign actor upending a US election. But I also imagine that that would incur some level of cost for that foreign actor. My guess is whoever created the video will get outed, and then there'll be some sort of political, diplomatic price to be paid for doing so. I think the US could help shape the choices that adversaries make in the future by highlighting the different types of consequences that they may face by conducting such campaigns. And as we argue in our report, we need a wargame. We need to really wargame out the factors that different adversaries would consider in creating this type of content and wargame out the different types of deterrence strategies that could be put in place to prevent them from doing so.

SG: This whole thing seems nightmarish to some extent because it's almost living in a sci-fi world where effectively some of the movies that we have seen, that have gained prominence in our lives, are actually now becoming part of our real world. Is there no way to regulate this, or is this like the internet that it becomes basically a space which is ungoverned and where material will continue to expand and proliferate?

TH: I definitely agree. It's going to be a bit of a surreal world we're going to be wading into in the near-term as this type of technology proliferates. I really believe that any decent disinformant would be well-advised to create deepfake images that would go along with what else they're doing, so I really imagine we're going to see a really strong proliferation of that. I guess the question is, is there a regulation that could stop it? I mean, it might depend on the different sort of regulatory environments in different countries. Here in the United States, where there is freedom of speech, which is constitutionally guaranteed, it might make it difficult for US government laws and regulations to prevent people from creating this content because it will be seen as an extension of free speech. There are a couple of state laws on the books on this, but really I don't think those laws have been put to use yet. And whether or not they withstand constitutional scrutiny is a major question, and I would probably not bet on it.

So, can the tech industry regulate itself? That's a good question. I feel like the cat is out of the bag right now. This technology is out there. You just need some decent engineering experience to put together some of this technology with some of the code that's available right now. And it will get easier and easier to create over time. I think there might be value in regulation from the big actors like OpenAI, Google, and Meta. There's certainly a sort of war going on about their ability to create text generation capabilities and certainly text-to-video and text-to-image capabilities. Hopefully, they will engage in some level of self-regulation, either as a consortium or on their own. Think about just how the platforms have their own safety, their own departments that focus on trust and safety, so I would hope that those organisations would focus trust and safety initiatives on their

artificial intelligence capabilities. But that's not going to prevent a lot of other actors who don't care about this, who don't care about trust and safety or who want to leverage it to their own capability, from developing that capability. I feel the cat's out of the bag a little bit.

SG: The cat's out of the bag indeed. Final question, Todd, is where do you see the other concerns when it comes to technology? We've touched upon influencing campaigns, we've looked a lot at AI and deepfake. Is there another dimension when it comes to technology that we should also be paying attention to from a concern perspective?

TH: Maybe the other angle on this would be the ability of foreign actors to leverage artificial intelligence to engage in some kind of command and control of their own information operations. There's the technology that exists to create the discrete content, the videos, the images, the text. But I feel like the big concern will be when actors learn to put all that together and develop a technology that can synchronise that so that you could have basically autonomous propaganda campaigns running online, which could be conducted at scale. You don't need to have x number of people managing y number of social media accounts. You just need one computer to manage all your social media accounts and so you can just keep having more social media accounts. I don't think we're there yet for that. It's hard enough for humans to command and control even a small number of accounts without getting detected. But I think the capability will be there, that they will be able to do some of this autonomously.

SG: Well, I think this is all going to be very important for a lot of the decision-makers around the world as to how to handle, because it's very clear that this is something that is morphing, developing, being utilised a lot for nefarious purposes, and it's something that is going to require very urgent addressing in the near-term. Todd Helmus, let me thank you once again for joining us on NATO *DEEP Dive*. You've provided us with a lot of important perspective and food for thought.

TH: Well, thank you for having me. I've really enjoyed this conversation.

SG: It's been our pleasure.

Todd Helmus bio

Todd Helmus is a senior behavioural scientist at RAND and a professor of policy analysis at the Pardee RAND Graduate School., He specializes in the use of data and evidence--based strategies to understand and counter disinformation and extremism. He has also studied the disinformation threat posed by deepfakes, Russian-led propaganda campaigns targeting the United States and Europe, and the use of social media by violent extremist groups.

Episode 37 - Tim Marshall Part 1: The Future of Geography, April 2023

Key Reflections

- **We are moving from a multipolar to a bipolar world, with China on one side along with Russia as a junior partner.**
- **For Vladimir Putin, a thriving democratic Ukraine, geo-politically important, and close ties to former Eastern Bloc states like Poland, is a political challenge for the Kremlin.**
- **The withdrawal from Afghanistan led Russia and China to believe the West is in decline. Putin's invasion of Ukraine has rekindled a willingness in the West to stand together.**
- **China will support Russia diplomatically, tactically, and materially, but there will be limitations due to concerns about secondary sanctions from the U.S. China will push the West to consider Beijing's role for future negotiations between Ukraine and Russia.**
- **China has played a deft hand in bringing a truce between Iran and Saudi Arabia, demonstrating Beijing's desire to strategically position itself as the leading global problem solver.**
- **The Ukraine crisis features in China's strategic mindset surrounding its Taiwan policy and its tensions with India in the Himalayas. The Quad is evolving into a bloc to counter China's rise in the Indo-Pacific.**

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

TM: Tim Marshall

SG: Welcome to the NATO DEEP Dive podcast, I'm your host Dr. Sajjan Gohel and in this episode I speak with the journalist, author, and broadcaster Tim Marshall who specialises in foreign affairs and international diplomacy.

In our discussion we talk about the future of geography and geo-politics and how China and Russia are increasingly aligning and what this means for the West and the Indo-Pacific.

Tim Marshall, welcome back to NATO *DEEP Dive.*

TM: Great to be here and holding my breath.

SG: Well, you were, in fact, the very first guest for the inaugural episode and now you have the distinct honour of being the first person to make two appearances on this podcast.

TM: I hope you're not going to bore your listeners!

SG: No not at all! Well, when you were first on the podcast, that was back in November 2021, quite a few things have happened since then! What stood out from that discussion was that you coined the term 'The Dangerous Decade.' Since then, we've seen tensions mount between the West and China, and then also Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine. Are these examples of what you envisaged, if we start with Ukraine?

TM: Very much so, at the risk of—I don't want to sound like, 'I told you so' obviously, we all get things right and we will get things wrong. But I just looked at the trajectory. And I'd written 10 years ago that we were in a form of Cold War with Russia, and I stand by that, in broad brush terms, because history does not repeat itself it rhymes. And so, this sort of form of Cold War looks a little bit like the previous one, but obviously is different but I think in shorthand, it's a useful phrase, especially for the layperson, like myself. So, it was inevitable, and I had written, as early as 2015, that having taken a bite out of Ukraine, Putin was not going to stop, he was going to come back for a bigger bite. Obviously, I didn't know how big or exactly when. And so, in that respect, it wasn't a surprise.

And ditto with China, I have been saying for about five years, I think we will move out of the multipolar world which we're well into now and probably by the next decade, we will be in a form of bipolar world, with blocks emerging and it's a Chinese-led with Russia as a junior partner. So, to come to the end of the answer. And then, after we spoke, I think it was after we spoke, but America—and NATO listeners will know there's a military term for this—they ran away from Afghanistan, as did we, in unedifying scenes. And it was clear to me that that would be followed by a test, because—a tactical retreat, of course, is what it really was—when your opponent looks like they're off balance, that's when you prod them in the chest and see if they fall over or whether they stand firm. And so, both of the big powers were going to test the Americans and the collective alliance that it leads. And so, the test came in Ukraine, and to Putin's amazement, they stood up. And then when Nancy Pelosi went to Taiwan, that gave the Chinese, not the excuse, the reason, the rationale, to also push hard, and so Tensions have risen in both arenas.

SG: You spoke about prodding your opponent in the chest and certainly there's been a lot of talk about the way the Afghanistan withdrawal took place, seemed to create the impression in the minds of individuals like Putin that perhaps the West is weakening. What do you believe were Putin's real reasons for the invasion of Ukraine?

TM: Sorry, Sajjan, as you know, it's multi-faceted, there are many reasons. There is, on the grand scale of things, his worldview, he's on record as saying that the Soviet Union was another name for the Russian Empire, something which I've long always thought, I never fell for that, 'the joys of Marxist-Leninism being spread around Eastern Europe,' and neither did the Eastern Europeans, which is why all of them are now in NATO or the EU. So, there is that grand worldview. There's also the challenge to Putin, domestically, if the Russian people can see that just next door in Ukraine, there is a fledgling and potentially flourishing democracy, and that's difficult for him politically. There are the natural resources that the ports on the Black Sea, Odessa, there's the grain, some of the minerals that Ukraine has.

And then a big factor, often the one overlooked is the geography. The fact that they lost the bottleneck, which is Poland. The North European plain is flat all the way from France to the Urals, its narrowest point is Poland. Russia has been invaded from that direction many times, most famously, Napoleon in 1812, and the Germans in 1914 and 1941. So, they always sought to plug that

gap. If they can't plug it, they fall back on the flat ground in front of them as the buffer zone, which is Belarus and Ukraine. And so, Belarus is nailed on, but when the biggest part of the buffer zone flips away from you, you act. And so, I think that was another one and quite a major rationale for Putin and it allows him to tell the Russian people, 'We're in danger, we're under threat, NATO's advancing on us,' and to have a willing audience amongst many Russians for that rationale and logic.

SG: This NATO dynamic is of course, pivotal because Putin has had this pathological obsession that somehow NATO is encroaching on Russia's borders and its sphere of influence, and he also probably thought that NATO was weak and divided, but what we've seen since his invasion is that, in many ways, the opposite has proven to be the case. NATO may have had its challenges with the Afghanistan withdrawal, but they seem to have consolidated with Ukraine and in fact expanded with the eventual additions of Finland and Sweden, which is only going to actually increase NATO's borders with Russia. Do you think he anticipated that?

TM: No, not for a second Sajjan. You probably read his essay the summer before the invasion, a 6,000-word essay about the weak West and the strong Slavs and Slavic nation of which Ukraine was a part and the brotherly coming together and all that. I don't think for a second he thought what has happened would happen and indeed, I would have been unsure because—and forgive me for saying running away in my opening remarks, it was just to be provocative—there were reasons to leave Afghanistan, but I repeat, that the manner of leaving was unedifying. So, I think that he and Xi both think of the West as in decline, and let's be fair, many of us have thought that the West may be in decline, and the EU throughout the years hasn't often shown the willingness to stand together and to be robust, and of course, many of them are NATO members.

So, I actually think we've surprised ourselves by how robust we've been, and I think it must be down to—well it's down to several things—but two in particular. One that we had at the helm, Biden, as opposed to Trump, because I'm not sure that Trump would have rounded up the posse in the way that Biden has done. And without American leadership, I don't think what has happened would have happened. That's the first thing.

But the second thing, and it's probably the bigger one, is just the sheer scale of what has happened. The sheer scale of hundreds of 1000s of troops crossing a border, smashing missiles into civilian areas of cities, biting great chunks out of territory, in 21st century Europe. I just think that that holiday from history, that Europe foolishly thought it was having after the end of the Cold War, this psychological shock, this realisation of the enormity of what had happened, I think that galvanised so many people. The Brits have been very stalwart and forthright, the Eastern Europeans who always had a much more sanguine view of Russia and Putin than I think most of the Western Europeans did, and the thing just came together, and everyone thought, 'this far and no further,' and a year on 13/14 months on, it's still holding.

SG: There are so many aspects that are concerning which you've already identified, and maybe it will also provide a window as to where this conflict is going. You've got the fact that the Wagner group, which is a paramilitary private company that Russia is basically utilising on the ground, they've been accused of committing gross human rights abuses. You've also got concerns over the nuclear energy installations in Ukraine, which Russia seems to be treating almost like confetti in the way targeted strikes have occurred. Putin doesn't seem to be too bothered by the fact that he's lost over a dozen generals and his recruitment of people has only had to be increased with conscription because they are running out of people, yet he still doesn't seem to care about the

loss of life. The West is not going to abandon Ukraine anytime soon. Where is this conflict heading?

TM: Probably protracted. Let me deal with the first thing about the loss of life. The First World War and the shock of the First World War did lead to so many advances and differences in fighting warfare. And most of the western countries actually, because of the incredible loss of life, they realised it wasn't really acceptable. The elite accepted it wasn't acceptable to sacrifice huge numbers of people in human waves. And we didn't do so much of that in the Second World War. But the Russians, who did it in the First World War, repeated it in the Second World War, [they] just threw human waves into the meat grinder with the idea that there's so many more of us than you. And it does appear that that is still the rationale. We know that their officers are incredibly unpopular amongst the rank and file, they don't have that backbone of the NCOs that most of the western militaries have, they just have this different approach. And yet again, they are just throwing human waves, with the idea that we'll shoot you in the back—or in the front—if you turn around and run away and retreat.

So, they're still in that rationale, which means that they can—as far as the Kremlin is concerned and the high command—they can do attrition. And there's so many clocks ticking. I mean, you know because you know military things, there's the clock of the weather, there's the clock of the ground conditions, there's the clock of patience and of resolve, there's the clock of the U.S. election.

So, all these different clocks are ticking. And again, you know as a student of history and warfare, that sides don't give up as long as they think there's a chance of victory, and so he still thinks there's a chance of victory. They haven't exhausted each other yet. Public opinion back home either hasn't turned or is not available to express itself. And so, that points towards a protracted [war], going into at least next year. I was writing in the autumn that the most optimistic thing was that in 12 months' time, as in this autumn, they could come to the table after both sides fail in the summer. That's still optimistic.

SG: Well, that definitely doesn't bode very well for where this is heading. You briefly touched upon China, and China gets mentioned a lot when it comes to its relationship with Russia. There's also been talk about China maybe even being a potential power broker in the Ukraine conflict.

TM: I think it will be eventually, sorry, carry on, Sajjan.

SG: Well, I was going to ask you to expand on that. Could Beijing play the role of intermediary and what ultimately will that look like? And would the West be even willing to let China get involved?

TM: It may not have a choice? Right, the context I think, is this and I accept I'm guessing and when it comes to peering into the mind of Putin and Xi, we're all guessing. I think that Xi, as the senior partner, was quite happy as things were going along in 2020. We were looking weaker, theoretically may be or have been in decline, and Russian and Chinese grey zone operations were doing a good job at undermining us from within, buying up institutions, influencing institutions, and from Xi's point of view you didn't need to go to war. So, again, this is a big debating point, did he know? I don't think so. When they met in the Olympics, just four weeks before the invasion, did

he greenlight it? I doubt it. Some people said he did. I think he's furious with what Putin did. Because he doesn't like instability, and he certainly doesn't like people biting chunks out of countries and then saying they're sovereign, because somebody might bite a piece out of China and call it Taiwan and say it's sovereign. So, you put all that together, and I don't think he's happy. But as a famous British Prime Minister once said, 'we are where we are.'

So, given we are where we are, he's not about to pull the rug from Putin. And in fact, as you know, these Chinese weapons have shown up on the frontlines, whether they are officially sent we can't prove, dual use equipment is being sent, but he won't send heavy weapons because he doesn't care that much, because it's not existential for Xi, and he doesn't want secondary sanctions because of the economy. But diplomatically he'll support Putin, and here and there, he'll support Putin, because also now that we are where we are, it doesn't do China that much harm to see the West bleeding, certainly treasure and weapons. So, he's not ready to step in yet.

But if we look to the future, what I got from the Moscow meeting recently, the big summit, as well as the trade deals with Xi on the world stage as a global leader, let's not look at it from the Italian perspective or the British perspective, let's look at it from Honduras, Nicaragua, Eritrea, well all of the Latin American countries, all the African countries, countries all over the world. They see a global leader bestriding the world. They see a power broker. And that's how he's positioned himself. And remember this came off the back of China bringing together the Saudis and the Iranians. They broke the diplomatic detente between them. It's China that has recently flipped Honduras, that's why I mentioned them, which is not going to recognise Taiwan anymore and is going to recognise China.

So, all those things came into play, and that's why, sorry I interrupted you earlier by saying, I think they will play a role. Lula in Brazil has already said this 12-point plan can go somewhere, Putin was polite enough to say he'll look at it. Now we all know that in its current iteration it is a non-starter, but Xi knows that as well. But he's put it out there that he's the potential problem solver. Biden is not speaking to both sides. China has got its diplomatic channels open to both sides, the foreign minister speaks to the Ukrainian foreign minister, and at some point, China can lean into this and be a broker. It can't be the broker, but it can't be a broker.

SG: To build on that, would Xi step in if it looked like Putin's status, power, as President of Russia was under serious threat?

TM: I think so. What he doesn't want is—they have a 4,000-kilometre-long border between them—he does not want massive instability in Russia, which could come if Russia, for example, lost Crimea and Putin ended up falling out of a window as people seem to do so often in Russia. It's something, I don't know if you've been tracking it, but the amount of top businesspeople that fall out of hotel windows in Russia is astonishing. They really should build some balconies with rails. So, he doesn't want that degree of instability. So, yes, I think so. I think he'd step in in a number of ways, he'd step in if he thinks that Russia is going to fall apart because of a catastrophic defeat, he'll step in if that means instability along the border, and he'll step in, I think, if Russia looks like it genuinely was moving towards using a nuclear weapon. That unlimited friendship, we've seen the limits to it so many times, not least when he categorically, openly, told Putin, 'You will not use nuclear weapons,' there was no sort of nudging or politeness. He told Putin, 'Don't use nuclear weapons.' So, I think he'd lean in then as well. He'll lean in when it suits him.

SG: Leaning in, could that also entail maybe eventually providing weapons and lethal support?

TM: You can't rule it out. I doubt it. I doubt it because of the secondary sanctions. As long as the Chinese economy—if the Chinese economy was roaring its way to massive success in being the dominant economy in the world, maybe. And he does know that we cannot sanction China that way we can sanction Russia because they're too integrated and too important. As an aside, this is another reason why Cold War 2.0 is different, the Russian economy didn't really matter in the previous iteration, the Chinese economy matters very much. But sending weapons would trigger secondary sanctions. And we do have levers, I don't if you—actually Sajjan, I know you'll have noticed because I don't think very much gets past you—but you'll have noticed that the Dutch, last month, have followed the Americans and will not be exporting super semiconductor chips to China, and they're 10 years ahead of China, and the Netherlands is a world leader in this tech, which China needs. So, there are these levers, and that's why I don't think they would send heavy weapons because it's not an existential matter for them, this European Civil War.

SG: Well, that's an important point and observation and the Dutch example that you mentioned is definitely very—

TM: I knew you wouldn't have missed that.

SG: Well, I think you and I often are treading on the same path of our research, so I think, what's the saying? Great minds think alike.

TM: You do the research, I read the headlines. And read your papers.

SG: Well, I know you do a lot of primary research Tim. So, I think you're being too modest there. If we focus more on China, itself. Beijing has played a deft hand in bringing a truce between Iran and Saudi Arabia. That took a lot of people by surprise, but then if you also look at what China was doing last year, in terms of being active in the Middle East, attending regional forums and summits, engaging with both countries, it wasn't entirely a surprise. But in terms of its impact, how significant is this role that China is playing, as an intermediary, between Iran and Saudi Arabia, bearing in mind that these are two countries that have had a very tense relationship? And what does that also mean for the Middle East?

TM: I don't think it's a seismic move, but I certainly think it's a significant one. And you're right. If you followed what was going on last year, when you saw that Xi went to Riyadh and the Crown Prince rolled out the red carpet and couldn't have been nicer to him, you realised that the Chinese, throughout the Middle East, are taking advantage of the lighter American footprint. Or to change analogies, if the Americans are moving out and a vacuum is created, the Chinese will seek to fill that vacuum. And then you saw, I think it was President Raisi, of Iran, then went to Moscow, and you realised something was up. And so yes, it wasn't a massive surprise, but it shows this, as I said earlier, this move by China to position itself and their leader as one of the great, global problem solvers and I think they've been quite successful in that and in that perception, of China as a solution, not a problem. Many of us regard them as a problem, a lot of the world doesn't, including

Honduras, hence, they switched sides.

SG: You mentioned Honduras. It's kind of interesting because what you're seeing is that there are less than two dozen countries that recognise [Taiwan].

TM: I think it's 14, because they haven't actually broken yet, but they will this month, probably next month. So, yeah, it'll be down to 13 countries that recognise Taiwan.

SG: And potentially that number will continue to ebb away. Where do we stand with China and the Indo Pacific, because tensions have ratcheted up with Taiwan and we are seeing that the Quad, which is the grouping with the United States, Australia, India, and Japan, they're becoming more consolidated. South Korea and Japan are building bridges. Where is this all heading in the Indo-Pacific and specifically with China?

TM: It's a stark example of the dividing lines that are being drawn all over the world. They're being drawn in Latin America with the investment and the political plays that China is making in Latin America, ditto Africa. And of course, the key is the new geopolitical centre of the world, the Indo-Pacific. And you can see that line drawn quite clearly. And there's tensions that will play out. But what China sees in front of it is that wall of the first island chain, which consists of American allies, people that are really tied to the Americans, the Japanese particularly are a treaty ally, the Philippines, you will have seen that the new agreement between the U.S. and Philippines, they're going to allow access to more bases in the Philippines; and this is about Taiwan, also an American friend. Then you come all the way down to places like Malaysia and then down to Australia.

When you put all of them together, they are far more powerful than the Chinese, immeasurably more powerful. China probably will not reach parity with just the American military for a minimum of 10 years and probably 20 and possibly more. When you put the Japanese who are, as you know, rearming at a real lick and then you put this Philippines deal, and then you put Taiwan in, it's just so much more powerful. So, this stark dividing line, of China and then what's in front of it, is being drawn ever thicker. And briefly to go back to this Philippines idea, if you look at the map you've got between the Philippines and Japan lies Taiwan.

If China controls Taiwan, both the strait between the Philippines and Taiwan will then be controlled by China, and the strait between Taiwan and Japan will be controlled by China. Now the Philippines and Japan don't want to lose their access and control of those straits. And hence, these new deals that are going on. And the Japanese high command is now liaising very closely with the Philippine High Command and the American High Command and they're meshing them together. And this has been a construction process that has been in training for the whole of this century. As the geopolitical framework of the century is being built. And I think we're really now seeing more than the scaffolding, we're seeing not a finished construction, but that line is growing ever thicker. Sorry, that was a very long answer and rather convoluted, I hope you've gotten the gist of it.

SG: Well, it was a very important answer as well, to the fact that you're providing the flesh on what looks like a substantive mechanism that is developing in the Indo-Pacific.

TM: You mentioned AUKUS earlier. Again, that's part of it. And also, we tend to look only at Taiwan, and we sometimes forget that China has territorial claims on islands that Japan claims, and China has territorial claims on islands that the Philippines claims, so it is a real flashpoint. And at the moment just as the Europeans are holding together, that whole area, the Friends of America are very much remaining friends of America. Under Duterte, the previous Filipino President, they were wavering, they were hedging their bets, that's finished. I think they've made their choice and that choice is to stick with the Americans for the time being.

SG: How much does the Ukraine crisis feature in the strategic mindset of the decision makers in Beijing when it comes to their policy on Taiwan?

TM: Am I allowed to ask you that question? And then I can critique your answer because you know that area better than I do, and perhaps we could talk about India, but carry on.

SG: Well, certainly, the perception that I have is that China has been looking at Ukraine in terms of their own regional challenges as well, because one was to see how the West was going to react and the second was also to see how the West has also increased its support for Taiwan, and also the regional dimensions that are a significant in terms of partnerships. So, I mentioned to you about the Quad, the South Korea-Japan Alliance, you've mentioned AUKUS, you've mentioned also the Philippines. You kind of see this realignment taking place or further alignment, I should say, which is probably going to take place anyway, but it seems to be at a greater pace than perhaps it would have been.

TM: I'd agree with all of it. And I think you can link it to Ukraine because they have absolutely watched the response. I would add to that, the psychological impact that has, that they're not as weak and effete as we thought they were. They're not necessarily in decline, although Beijing still very much pushes that line that they are in decline and China is continuing to rise and will be the dominant power. I'd add one more thing and that's the sanctions. They looked at these really serious sanctions, and I know the Russians have all these different ways of getting around some of the sanctions and their economy is a long way from collapsing, but they are really hurting and they know that although they could do X, Y, and Z and we won't sanction them, an invasion of Taiwan, they will be seriously sanctioned, the decoupling of their economy from the rich, advanced democracies. I don't mean the West, I mean the rich advanced democracies, because then you put in Japan, South Korea, India, they would kick in, and that would really hurt the Chinese. And so, I think that is actually when you then look at the sanctions on Russia and I think that is a restraining factor in their planning for Taiwan.

SG: When it comes to the planning for Taiwan, this is just a question that actually occurred to me as we've been discussing this, Taiwan is one of the most important countries when it comes to the semiconductor industry.

TM: There's a joke there's a joke Sajjan, that the Taiwanese tell, which is that when the Chinese attack, head for the semiconductor factory, it's the only place they won't hit.

SG: Well, you'd hope so, because the world depends on those semiconductors. Does that drive the strategic thinking in Beijing, do you think?

TM: I think it's a factor. I think they're more concerned in building up their own capacity. They have lots of semiconductor factories, and they're desperate to get the tech that the Taiwanese and the Dutch [have], Belgium is pretty good at this and to a lesser extent, the Americans. It's funny, the Americans are very good at this stuff, but the real high-quality chips, the Americans are also not quite as advanced as one or two other countries. That's what China really wants. It really wants to build up its own domestic industry, but to do that, it needs the knowledge. And the Americans have successfully persuaded the Dutch and others—well, and then they made their own minds up about this—'why are we going to help the Chinese to catch us up because they're a decade behind?' when, in fact, lots and lots of these superchips will be used for their weaponry? It's not necessarily in our interests.

So, yes, of course, it's a factor. Of course, they'd love to have the Taiwanese semiconductors, but I don't think they would gamble on invading the island predicated just on that. My confidence, such as it is, that they're not going to invade anytime soon takes dents every now and again, because I've been again saying for years, I don't see why Xi would gamble everything on an invasion. And here's another connection back to Ukraine: they have seen how brilliant NATO's weaponry is, in military terms, and how effective it is and how ineffective the Russian military is, and that might also give them pause for thought because they're not sure, because they haven't been tested, about their own stuff. So, why would you gamble everything because if you invade and lose and get driven back, which is possible, depending on whether the Americans would fight or not. Your credibility is gone. We could even end up with a communist party being overthrown or a military [takeover], all sorts of things would flow from it. Why are you going to gamble everything on that? But as I said, my confidence is dented from time to time because I was at a thing recently and there was a four-star American general who told me I was wrong, and he reckons they'll do it by 2025.

SG: Well, I'll put my reputation on the line right now and say that I actually agree with you, Tim.

TM: Well, let's hope we're right, for many reasons.

SG: Well, it's good in some ways, perhaps problematic in other ways, because it may not be the actual beginning of where there is a crisis with China. I think the Himalayas is definitely very vulnerable.

TM: I'm glad you mentioned that. There's also more than one way to skin a cat for example, I mean, the Kinmen islands, which are controlled by Taiwan, but are what? 20 miles off the coast of China, they could probably go for that without triggering a massive war or they could go for the blockade. There are all sorts of things. I'm interested that you think that the Himalayas is actually more dangerous, because I'm wondering whether the China-India, not confrontation, glowering at each other, in some ways, is not actually greater in the ocean than it is along the fault line of the Line of Actual Control up in the Himalayas. You think the Himalayas is where it could go 'bang?'

SG: Yes, in fact, you could look at three particular fault lines along what's called the Line of Actual Control between India and China. We saw three years ago that in the Galwan Valley, both India and China engaged in hand-to-hand combat.

TM: That was brutal, wasn't it?

SG: It was brutal. The Chinese were using weapons with barbed wire, and you had fatalities on both sides and the only small saving grace is that both sides had agreed prior to this standoff that they wouldn't use actual firearms. But you can imagine how that would have turned out. What you're seeing is that increasingly there are these incursions that are taking place.

TM: Yeah, I've looked at the maps and it seems to be pretty obvious that one side is moving east to west and that would be China into India.

SG: Well, it's interesting because the U.S. has also become more engaged in that and there's been some interesting research coming out about the U.S. actually providing India with real time intelligence on Chinese troop movements. So, that angle is there. In fact, I will just acknowledge that one of our producers here, Marcus Andreopoulos, who's actually written on this very issue to do with that.

TM: You know that they fought a very brief, mostly artillery war a few decades ago. And I know that both sides are building proper paved metal roads so they can transport kit there much more quickly and positioning heavier kit, but it's still one of the most hostile terrains in the world, at an incredibly high altitude, with a limited amount of troops. And as was shown three years ago, with this incredible agreement, you can batter each other with clubs but just don't pull a trigger, they are both aware of what's at stake. So, why do you think that it can actually spark a full-scale war between them?

SM: Because it doesn't seem to be stopping in terms of Chinese troop movement. It's only increasing and it's happening almost in sequences of every few years, then it's becoming almost every year, and then it's actually becoming every few months, and you're looking at the volume of it and all it's going to take is one mistake, one dynamic, and then it could spiral and it could increase. Now it's interesting, because India is holding the presidency of the G20 for 2023. And since the Galwan Valley standoff a few years ago, there's not been a bilateral meeting between the two leaders of India and China. That may arise this year, and it'll be interesting to see what occurs. What I do think is kind of curious, is that China's actions with India have only resulted in pushing India further into the alliance with the United States, with Australia, Japan, and other Western nations. So, one has to wonder what the strategic calculus of that has actually been because prior to that, India was a very slow and reluctant member of the Quad and that has changed 180 degrees since the Galwan Valley standoff that took place.

TM: There's another aspect to it, which is just speculative, but China must be aware that if it did attack Taiwan, that'd be a very interesting time for India to actually decide it might want to pop back up across them, or not across, [but] into the parts of the Line of Actual Control which international laws say is theirs, because China would not want to be facing a war on two fronts. I mean, that's just speculative on my behalf.

SG: But it's an interesting notion.

TM: You mentioned Americans providing real time intelligence. India's got lots of its own satellites, why does it need the Americans? I didn't I wasn't aware of this.

SG: Well, India has, to a degree, its own technology and ability to monitor, but it is not at the level of scale that the United States has.

TM: And the level of detail, the square metre detail, do they not have the same military aspect?

SG: Yes, it's not comparable. There have been these various bilateral agreements that India and the United States have signed that are meant to increase the defence cooperation, sharing of intelligence and you're beginning to see the results of that. And another interesting dynamic is the fact that they are now engaging in training exercises, both countries' militaries right on the border with China. So, you're seeing a lot of things occurring now that were not necessarily present before. But to go back to one of the points you mentioned earlier, that doesn't rule out a standoff in the Indian Ocean, because that is certainly another dynamic that we're seeing, and again, you're seeing the Quad nations improve their coordination, through their respective navies, so you're seeing so many different dimensions coming into play.

TM: The Chinese fleet now is permanently in the Indian Ocean, I believe, part of it, obviously.

SG: Well, this has been a very important discussion, and I think it's a good time to pause part one with Tim Marshall.

Tim Marshall bio

Tim Marshall is a critically acclaimed author and journalist who specialises in foreign affairs. His books include The Future of Geography: How Power and Politics in Space Will Change Our World and the New York Times' best-selling Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Tell You Everything You Need to Know About Global Politics, among many others. He is the former diplomatic and foreign affairs editor at Sky News.

Episode 38 - Tim Marshall Part 2: The Politics of Space, April 2023

Key Reflections

- **Astropolitics refers to politics in space. Over time, what happens in space will shape human history as much as mountains, rivers, and seas have on Earth.**
- **Countries that adhere to the non-binding Artemis Accords are actively seeking to return humans to the Moon by 2025, with the ultimate goal of expanding space exploration to Mars and beyond.**
- **The UAE and Japan are both heavily invested in space exploration and dual-use technological development.**
- **China is seeking technological supremacy in space, aided by junior partner Russia. This can be thought of as a Space Race 2.0, which is primarily driven by economics and obtaining rare earth materials and metals embedded within the Moon.**
- **State sovereignty in space will become more contentious when political and military ties start to fray between countries. Scientific links could help bridge some divides.**
- **There will need to be cooperation between governments and private companies in space when it comes to exploration and financial imperatives.**

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

TM: Tim Marshall

SG: Welcome to the NATO DEEP Dive podcast, I'm your host Dr Sajjan Gohel and this is the second episode of our two-part discussion with the journalist, author, and broadcaster Tim Marshall.

In our conversation we look at Astropolitics, the politics in space. Potentially, what happens in space could shape human history the same way the geography of mountains, rivers, and seas have on Earth.

So, Tim, we're going to talk to you about your new upcoming book, which is *The Future of Geography: How Power and Politics in Space Will Change Our World*. Can we describe this as the final part of your geography trilogy series? And how and when did you conceive the idea for this book?

TM: Yeah, I think that's fair. I mean, obviously, it is marketing to call it *The Future of Geography*, so that it is a reminder of *Prisoners of Geography* and *The Power of Geography* and then yeah, this is part three in a trilogy of four as *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* would have it. The genesis in the beginning of it was when I was writing *The Power of Geography*, and I looked at Iran and Saudi Arabia and the UK, Turkey, the Sahel—and the previous book had had ten chapters, I thought, well okay, this needs ten chapters, and I was looking around for a tenth and thought, actually, you know, space—think of space as a geographic area with which we have a border. And so, I wrote the last chapter of that book about space, and I got to the end of it, and I thought, there is so much here, there's a book in this—a book that is hopefully timely because we're no longer talking about

the future and "out there." And I suppose that in a core, it's about astropolitics. There's more in it than that; there's looking backwards took all the scientific and philosophical advances that got us to where we are. But it's simply that we need to understand now that international relations now encompass outer space. They are not separate. And that all the power plays that are going on here are going on there as well now, and the blocs that we discussed in Part One that are emerging, whether it's the American-led bloc or the Chinese-led bloc, or there will be probably a burgeoning Non-Aligned 2.0—that is also being repeated in space. So, you have the Artemis Accords, led by the Americans. And then on the other side, you have the Chinese space prowess with their junior partner, Russia, and a few others. So, it's just time we stopped thinking about it as a separate place. And finally, I would also say the military aspect of it, again, the military people know you do not fight a modern war without thinking about what your assets are in space, notably, the satellites.

SG: There's so many aspects to unpack in what you've been talking about. One thing, probably just for clarification, what is astropolitics?

TM: Astropolitics is politics in space. It is international relations in space. And it's a good word because we know geopolitics, so it's a good buzzword, "astropolitics." There have been many thinkers and writers of it for many years. I particularly like a chap called Everett Dolman. He's a professor at, I think, the US War College. And for me, he is the doyen of astropolitical thinkers. And, again, geopolitical thinkers are aware of Mackinder and the heartland theory, and Dolman—whom I should thank because he gave me a lot of help, because he's a proper expert, in writing *The Future of Geography*—has come up with a sort of 21st century astropolitical version of the heartland theory, which is that he who dominates low Earth orbit dominates Earth. And behind that is the idea that if you did control the whole low Earth orbit, you would control all of the satellites, therefore you would see everything and nobody else would see anything, and that would give you control of the earth. And secondly, you would then be the only ones with access because you go through that space to get further out into space, to the Moon, etc., so you would control space travel. Now, obviously, no one country is going to dominate low Earth orbit or geosynchronous orbit or indeed the Moon. But just as on this planet, if your rival looks as if they might be moving there, you don't give them free rein. And that's why international relations is now being played out there, both in who's got the satellites, what can they do, which are the threats, potential threats, and perhaps we could talk about the technology and dual-use. And then, further on from that, who will be on the Moon to get access to its precious metals? And the answer to that is the Artemis Accords countries, led by the States, and the Chinese and the Russians.

SG: Well, that certainly sounds like a very fascinating Space Race 2.0. I definitely do want to address that in a moment. I guess this is a big picture question then…

TM: Good. That's the only thing I can do!

SG: What happens in space, will that shape human history as much as, say, the mountains, rivers and seas have on Earth, which your previous two books in many ways addressed?

TM: That's a very good question. Yes, I think so, but I mean, that's really long, long-term, because I do believe we are destined to live on other planets as a species, starting with the Moon. I mean, the Americans and the Chinese both say they will build Moon bases in the 2030s. And I think they

will. And so that obviously has a massive effect on us as a people. But also, those mountains and geographies and the oceans, we're already looking down at them from our satellites and learning so much. Our weather predictions, our modelling of climate change, are all predicated on what we learn from seeing from space. At a micro-level, there are, let's say in Ghana, individual farmers, with an individual plot of land, perhaps half an acre, and the technology allows them to say, "In this part of that half acre at this time of year is the optimum time for you to be doing x, y and z." So, it's already shaping how we do that. And although this is not as much of an impact, but also the geography of Earth is very much connected insofar as…. You launch a rocket from west to east. Why? Because the earth turns west to east. And so obviously, you get a bit of a slingshot. That's why you go in that direction. That's geography. You launch as close to the equator as you can get, because the earth goes faster at the equator, so you're getting even more speed, and that's why the Americans launch from Florida, and the Russians launch in Kazakhstan, etc. So, all this geography is interrelated, which is why I thought it was legitimate to call it *The Future of Geography* —as well as marketing.

SG: Marketing aside, it's definitely a very legitimate dynamic. Probably just for the benefit of our listeners, I'll just quickly explain what the Artemis Accords are, because it is so important. So this is a non-binding, multilateral arrangement between the United States and other governments, some in Europe, some in Latin America, some in Asia, that are participating in what's known as the Artemis program, which is an American-led effort to return humans to the Moon by 2025, with the ultimate goal of expanding space exploration to Mars and beyond. So, it is a very ambitious programme if you think about that. Who do you see, Tim, as being the key players in space? You mentioned the United States and China, so those are there. You describe Russia as a junior partner of China. Are there other countries that have specific skill sets that actually will be key to this?

TM: Yeah, I mean, it is the big three, China, USA, and then Russia—and they're falling behind for many reasons, but you know, they have the incredible legacy of the Soyuz programme, and they are a world leader. On from that, the UAE has sent a probe to Mars. I mean, that's impressive. And the UAE is a player, and they've actually just teamed up with the Israelis recently, which is another knock-on effect of the Abraham Accords. And they have big plans, those two countries, to work together. The Japanese, as befits an incredibly tidy nation—I don't know if you've been to Japan, but there's no litter—they are world leaders, well outer space leaders now, in space debris collection. And they are developing all sorts of satellites, which for example will throw a net over space debris, because it's a big problem space debris, and they have satellites that have claws that reach out and grab, and the Japanese are brilliant at that. Satellites…lots of countries, to be honest with you, are now pretty good at satellites, including micro-satellites, they've got satellites the size of a Rubik's Cube now, so of course you can get them up there a lot cheaper, and many more of them.

But I'm glad I mentioned the Japanese and the satellites that can grab things because that leads onto another thing which relates back to the Artemis Accords. If you have a satellite that can do that, in order to get rid of space debris, including old satellites, grab them, throw them into the atmosphere to be burnt up or throw them out into outer space…it can grab another satellite, it can grab my satellite, my satellite that is part of my nuclear early warning system. And we don't have the laws. So the Artemis Accords have got all sorts of clauses in them, and what the Americans and the signatories are trying to do is establish the new norms and essential de facto laws of outer space, because the existing laws are no good—they were written 50-60 years ago, most of them are not ratified, they don't take into account things like lasers, they don't say how close one satellite can be to another. So, I can park my satellite right next to yours and at any moment reach out and grab it. And if that's my early warning system, well, as you approach, I'm getting nervous. So, we don't have the laws, and we very quickly need some internationally agreed proper 21st century

laws. And I'll give you an example. The Artemis Accords has a clause in it that talks about safety zones. Now this is eminently sensible. If I land on the moon and get out my shovel and spade and start digging for all the stuff that's there that we need for 21st century technology, I don't want you landing so close that you throw up dust or knock my spacecraft over or whatever. So, I have a safety zone, and I shall define how much it is, five square kilometres, whatever it is. But by what law do I prevent another country from landing as close as it wants to me? Especially once I found all the rare earth materials and spent millions finding them, "Oh, well, we'll go there as well." It's the Klondike Gold Rush potential. So, we don't have anything. And the problem with the safety zone is that it needs enforcing. So now I'm going to potentially have to put some defensive mechanisms around there in my sphere of interest, which is another word for a safety zone, I think. And yes, there are laws about not putting weapons of mass destruction in, but now I'm just going to put a few lasers there. So yeah, I know it sounds sci-fi, but we're there now. This isn't the distant future. And we so need some laws.

SG: Where is Superman when you need him? I'm just reminded by the fourth movie when, I think it was called *The Quest for Peace* or something, he somehow took out all the nuclear missiles around the world.

TM: Please, come back Superman.

SG: It was very interesting what you were saying, Tim, on so many different aspects. The one thing that I thought was really curious was the cultural dimension that can come into play in space. You mentioned Japan. I have been there many times, and you're absolutely right, it is a very organised and clean country. And, for example, in the World Cup in Qatar, you saw Japanese supporters cleaning up rubbish after the matches. It's interesting that what you're describing that what they want to do in space is get rid of all the space junk. So, in many ways they are bringing their cultural dimension to space.

TM: Yeah…I mean, I don't buy this but…there's a film called *The Wandering Earth*, big blockbuster Chinese sci-fi film, it's pretty good, Chinese director Chinese actors, and it's an interesting dynamic in that all those usual Hollywood films, where it's the Americans who are leading the way and yeah, it's all good, we've got some Russian and Chinese help, but we're in charge, and they flipped that, and it's the Chinese. The basic premise is, the Sun is expanding, we need to get out of here. And the director says, "If the Americans made this film, it would be about thousands of American-made rockets taking hundreds of thousands of people off the planet, because that's how they view things. We view taking care of the earth, this is the Chinese way." So, in this film, one side of the earth has gone dark, and it's got rocket boosters on it, and is actually propelling the wandering Earth across the solar system to reach a new sun. And he says that's a cultural thing, that the Chinese tried to look after the planet. Okay, fair enough. It's also that this venture is led by China with America as the junior partner…. Oh, and by the way, the Politburo in Beijing fully backed this. There was a press conference in the foreign ministry when it was released. And it was just a normal press conference about China-Indonesia relations or whatever it was, and apropos to nothing, the foreign ministry spokeswoman just said, "Oh, by the way, have you seen *The Wandering Earth*? It's brilliant, you should really go and see it," because it fits with the Chinese narrative, A) of their technological supremacy, which they will achieve, and B) their care for the world. So…you just reminded me when you talked about these cultural differences, because, yes, just like the previous Space Race, this one is also about proving to the world your technical prowess, and therefore your system is best, which the Americans won last time. The biggest difference this time, though, is that that really was to prove you were superior—your culture, your technology.

That is an aspect of the current space race, but the real driver is economics. The real driver is getting the rare earth materials, the metals, potentially the helium-3 off the ice in the Moon. That's the driver. But just as the flag has always followed the trade here, the flag will follow the trade out there as well.

SG: Well, let's talk about those precious metals now and also the dual-use technology that you were talking about. This all sounds like we're heading into tensions and problems down the road, especially when it comes to resources that can strengthen a country and give a country strategic advantage. And then you have this notion of the Space Race 2.0 occurring. How do you see this unfolding?

TM: With some cooperation. Not all the links have been cut, although the International Space Station is going to be put out of service, and we are not cooperating with the Russians once that happens, in space. And I'm afraid that the Wolf Amendment, I think it was called, bans NASA from cooperating with China, which I think is a mistake. They're worried about them stealing intellectual property and stuff. So, we're already seeing those tensions. The direct-ascent anti-satellite, ASATs they're called…India, China, Russia, and America have all tested firing a missile from the earth at a satellite— and one of their own satellites, I hasten to add—and blowing it into a thousand pieces, so the Japanese can come along and try to clear it up. So those tensions are there because that creates more space debris, and the Chinese one when they did it created, I think, more debris in that one explosion than the whole history of space exploration. So those tensions are there.

Another…this is not theory, this is fact. Russian invasion of Ukraine—obviously many of the munitions are guided by the satellites, but they knocked out part of the Ukrainian internet. Elon Musk and SpaceX flew in several thousand Starlink terminals and distributed them around the parts of Ukraine where the internet had gone off. Within a few days, they had the internet back up and running. Lovely, thank you very much. But those terminals were also used by the Ukrainian military to target Russian soldiers and kill them. So, it's an open question: does that make Starlink a military target for the Russians? It's been used to kill Russian soldiers. Now, they tried to dazzle it; that technology is also here, you can dazzle and blind satellites from the earth. So, all those things are adding to the tension. But these can all be done through bilateral talks, and we can solve this.

I think the bigger problem is the one I alluded to earlier. Toyota have spent hundreds of millions developing a new space buggy, a rover for the Moon. These are going to be sealed, you'll be able to take your suit off inside them, it's not like the 60s or 70s versions. So, they've spent all that, and let's say there was another Japanese company that is developing mining equipment. Let's say they partner with somebody else. And they've gone to the Moon, and they've spent hundreds of millions of dollars finding the best place in the South Pole to mine. And let's say they go with the Brits because we have lots of cooperation with them, and we start. And then three or four years later, another country, let's say Russia, rocks up and lands near them and starts mining, but they've declared their safety zone. And given that those two countries have spent those hundreds of millions of dollars developing that, does Russia have any right to come in and just take advantage of all that? Well, morally, no, but legally? So that's that sort of future scenario, which I don't see why it wouldn't happen, given that we're going after these resources because it's your tungsten, your helium-3, which theoretically you can use for nuclear energy, and everything else that we need, the lithium—it's all supposed to be there. And given that we need that, and there's a finite amount here, it's first-come, first-served because it's a finite amount there. So, we need to start thinking and talking about this now and getting in the rules and regulations now, not when an event happens in 10, 15 years' time.

SG: Well, that leads me to my next question actually, which is how does state sovereignty in space work? Can it work, and is it possible to have multilateralism in space? Or is it as you just said, first-come, first-served?

TM: Well, we've proved that it is possible, haven't we, with notably the International Space Station, and also there's wonderful things like the Apollo docking with the Soyuz and the handshake in space and all that. And the Wolf Amendment that I mentioned that forbids cooperation with China from NASA. Every now and again, there are little loopholes…from memory, I think when the Chinese landed a spacecraft on the far side of the Moon, I think the Americans and NASA helped them with some of the logistics of getting it down there, and then they both shared data with the world. So, there are these openings. And we really need them because they are links between us—that when the political and military links start to fray, if you can keep the scientific links, you have these bridges you can go across. So, there is that aspect of it. But yeah, we both mentioned law now. I just don't think that the laws are there. There is the Moon Treaty; it says no one nation will appropriate the Moon. Yes, they will. And the Outer Space Treaty. So, we need new ones. I mean, there's so many of them, there's different aspects, and this one's more—if you regard murder as fun, which I don't—but this is more sort of fun speculative. At the moment on the space station, if in the Japanese module, a new experiment is carried out and something new is invented, it is considered legally to have taken place in Japan, and therefore is Japanese intellectual property. If a Japanese astronaut would unfortunately kill another Japanese astronaut in that module, Japanese law applies. If it happens in the airlock, and they kill an American, it's less clear. What happens if one astronaut kills another one during a spacewalk outside of the space station? I know this is all fun stuff to talk about, especially for lawyers, but yet we don't have that sort of law. And I thought it was very interesting, and people don't follow this stuff because it's too not here and now. I think it was last year, the Canadian parliament amended its laws and said that Canadian law will extend to the surface of the Moon, because it's trying to be ahead of the game, that—I'm pretty sure they're a signatory to the Artemis [Accords]—if something happens in one of their modules in the Moon, in the lunar base, they want to be ready that their law can take care of that. But as far as I know, they're the only ones so far.

SG: Yes, and I do believe that Canada is part of the Artemis Accords. I guess the angle that then comes into play here is that—you touched upon it when it came to private companies and their satellite technology—do you see an effective cooperation between governments and private companies in space, or are companies going to almost be competition to countries when it comes to space exploration and their own financial ambitions?

TM: I think they inevitably will be interlinked because politics gets involved. For example, SpaceX, they are ahead of NASA, certainly in the reusable technology. It is Elon Musk's SpaceX that has pioneered a rocket being able to go up and in the first stage come back down and land. I mean, it's incredible. Therefore, that massively reduces your costs. It means so many more people can now have entry to space. Nigeria makes its own mini-satellites and can get lots of them up on a SpaceX rocket for example, Falcon 9, I think it is. But if SpaceX does something that the American government fundamentally disagreed with, well, it is launching from American soil, and there are laws and regulations, just as there are laws and regulations for an airplane taking off from American soil. And so, there is inevitably these connections between them. His [Elon Musk's] Mars Shot 2050, a million people, that simply was not going to happen, but he said, "By 2050, I want a million people on Mars," including himself for his birthday. Again, you're going to need NASA's help. So, I just think it's inevitable that there will be the connection. And when it comes to China, of course, as

you know, there is no company that is actually separate from the state, not in reality. All Chinese companies report to the Communist Party. So, there's no separation really there. So, it's inevitable that there will be, as I said, the flag following the trade. And the example we have down here is the East India Company; it had its own private army and went out there and eventually it became so important to the British state that it was pretty much amalgamated into the British state, the soldiers, and they were one and the same. I just think that sort of behaviour, that pattern will be repeated, I suspect.

SG: A couple of final questions to throw at you, Tim. So, aside from our mutual obsession with football, both you and I love maps, cartography. People can't see it right now, but you're talking to me from your office with lots of maps in the background. Will you have some in your book of some kind?

TM: Yes, they're pretty basic. There's a map of the different orbits: low Earth orbit, geosynchronous orbit, where the moon is. There's another one of the Lagrange points. These are L1, L2, L3, L4, L5. These are places where two bodies hanging in space, the gravity between them, there's a sweet spot, the Lagrange point, where you can place a spacecraft, and it'll stay there without needing fuel. So theoretically, you could park all your rare earth metals and know that when you got back after a year, they'd still be there, that sort of thing, so there's a map of that. I think there's a map of who has launched sites around the world, but mostly it's like pictures of the space shuttle, Musk's, the Chinese space station they're building. It's things like that. I wish there could be more maps, but A) it's expensive, B) they're not in colour because that's even more expensive. One day perhaps we'll do a big space map. I mean, it's hard to map space, isn't it, because there's no up and down, and there's no real left and right or east and west, you know, it just is. But it's a work in progress.

SG: It's still going to be very important to get a kind of idea, and, I think, forgive the pun, you've mapped it out.

TM: Yeah, I am keen, but again, it's hard to depict this. Actually, perhaps we should have put in the Van Allen radiation belts, which is like two donuts around the world. But I am keen…to talk about that it does have its own geography, such as low Earth orbit, geosynchronous. These are areas that you want. You don't care about the Van Allen belt, other than go through it as quickly as possible because it's full of radiation or avoid it altogether. There's a geography to the Moon in that the poles are where the water is, which is almost certainly where we will have the first bases. And I thought it was important to let us understand that we're not just talking about this featureless expanse. It has its own geography.

SG: Very much so. I think I've actually thought of a fourth idea for your geography series, but I'll tell you that offline, so no one steals it.

TM: I did say it's a trilogy in four parts.

SG: Well, Tim, as always, it is so fascinating to talk to you. I'm very fortunate to have known you for a number of years, and your experience and wealth of knowledge is incomparable to anyone else.

TM: Yes, in its paucity. Now, listen, you were kind enough to say earlier about my primary research and all the rest of it…I am a generalist. I hopefully have some ability in putting relatively complex ideas across in an understandable way. But I get the information from real experts. But, you know, a generalist, it's not such a terrible thing to be.

SG: Again, very humble as always. And just to remind everyone, Tim's new book is *The Future of Geography: How Power and Politics in Space Will Change Our World*. And it's certainly going to be one of the most important books in 2023 and no doubt will be read around the world like his previous ones have. I've lost count of the number of times I've been in airports, in conferences, and someone has a copy of one of your books. So, this will probably now add to the growing list of that.

TM: Music to my ears. Thank you, Sajjan.

SG: Thank you, Tim, for joining us on NATO *DEEP Dive* and once again, hope to have you back again.

Tim Marshall bio

See Episode 37

Episode 39 - Paul Ash and the Christchurch Call, May 2023

Key Reflections

- **The Christchurch Call was established in the aftermath of the 2019 Christchurch terrorist attack in New Zealand. It is a collaboration between governments, tech companies, and civil society to ensure that terrorists and violent extremists cannot use social media to amplify their attacks.**
- **The social media amplification of the Christchurch shooting was unprecedented, going from 200 viewers of the livestream to millions being exposed to reuploads of the video after the event.**
- **The Christchurch Call demonstrates the importance of a whole of society approach to countering terrorism and violent extremism online. Governments, tech companies, nor civil society would be able to solve this issue by themselves.**
- **NATO members and partner nations were pivotal in the establishment of the Christchurch Call, with the initiative launched at the Tech For Good summit hosted in France, eight weeks after the attack.**
- **Leaders of the Christchurch Call community do not want to be static and focus solely on past events, instead they are looking at ways to innovate and respond to the ever-changing nature of the online environment.**
- **Whilst the Christchurch Call focuses primarily on countering terrorism and violent extremism online, there is a connective tissue between this issue and other adjacent ones, all of which involve the exploitation of online platforms.**

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

PA: Paul Ash

SG: Welcome to the NATO DEEP Dive podcast, I'm your host Dr. Sajjan Gohel and in this episode I speak with Paul Ash, the New Zealand Special Representative on Cyber and Digital as well as the Christchurch Call and Cyber Coordinator in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. In our discussion we talk about the Christchurch Call which was established in the aftermath of the 2019 Christchurch terrorist attack in New Zealand. It represented a pioneering collaborative effort between governments, tech companies, and civil society to try and prevent terrorists from using social media to amplify their attacks.

Paul Ash, a warm welcome to NATO *DEEP Dive*.

PA: Thanks, Sajjan, great to be having the opportunity to talk with you and to have a conversation about the Christchurch Call on this day.

SG: We're very much looking forward to having that conversation. I think perhaps it would be an interesting way to start this podcast, in many ways to demonstrate the interoperability of cultur-

al ties, with when we actually first met which was in Australia in November of 2022, during U.S. Thanksgiving. I think it's fair to say that there was a mutual appreciation society that was formed when we both heard each other give presentations at the Five Eyes conference. Your presentation really stood out for me because you spoke about, not just your role, but you also spoke with a huge amount of passion in helping to formulate what became known as the Christchurch Call. What I found staggering is how few people actually know what it's about, despite the fact that it's had global ramifications and actually does play a role throughout the world. I guess the starting point is, for our listeners, what is the Christchurch Call and how did you come to be connected with it?

PA: Thanks, Sajjan. The Christchurch Call had its genesis in the terrorist attack in Christchurch on 15 March 2019. And on that day, a terrorist walked in—a Friday—walked into two mosques, at lunchtime, as the congregants were at prayer, murdered 51 people in those two mosques, severely injured another 48 people, and live streamed the whole thing, and was able to livestream an attack that went on for 17 minutes on Facebook. And as soon as it was live streamed, it was copied, pushed out to some of the recesses of the mainstream internet, and then pushed back onto platforms quite relentlessly over the next 24 to 48 hours, as major social media platforms grappled with identifying the content and taking it down. That continued thereafter, for some time, as platforms and governments started to think very, very carefully about the problem that had been created and really struggled with the technology and linkages and networks to deal with it.

And the harm that that caused, the immediate proximate event was obvious, a repugnant terrorist act, the amplification of that, online, went global. And it did that in a way that has not been seen on the internet before or since. The number of copies that had to be taken down in that first 24 hours; Facebook took down 1.5 million copies of the video in that time, over that first 48 hours, the weekend after the attack. YouTube had someone trying to upload the video every second. And the scale of that was not something we'd seen before. And in a sense, it took an event that was tragic in Christchurch and amplified it globally, and the harm that we saw caused by that from people that had that come through their social media feeds, inadvertently found themselves watching it. Really it was a turning point for governments and the tech sector and for anyone in civil society in trying to think about how to deal with it. I'm assuming, Sajjan, you may well have seen it come through your feed over that time. I've regularly bumped into people who've been subjected to what is a really traumatic event.

Off the back of that, we had to think pretty carefully about how we responded. And I was working at the time in the department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, as the director of national security policy, I have a background in cyber policy and online policy. And we worked with our prime minister on what became the Christchurch Call, which was an effort to work collaboratively with the tech sector and with other governments and with civil society on finding solutions to the problem. First the presenting problem of livestream and of the technical means to deal with it, and then continuing to go a bit deeper into some of the underlying causes of the kinds of actions we saw in Christchurch and actually subsequently saw in a number of copycat attempts over the next year or two. So, that's the sort of genesis, it's driven out of an event that really was unprecedented in New Zealand, it was a turning point for us, and something that was unprecedented globally in terms of its impact online.

SG: I'm just reflecting on some of the numbers, the statistics, that you identified as to the awful, horrific video that was being live streamed during the assault that was being carried out in Christchurch on the mosques. My understanding is that when it was actually being streamed live, there

were under 200 people that were actually watching the carnage as it was unfolding. And the video was viewed around 4,000 times before it was actually removed. The challenge, though, was the fact that maybe a limited number of people saw it live, but afterwards, effectively billions had access to it, because that's how quickly things spiral. Talk to me, Paul, about the challenges and the obstacles that you first faced when it came to formulating what would become the Christchurch Call, and maybe the challenges of getting buy in from social media companies.

PA: The numbers you've described are actually quite confronting when you think about how quickly it went from 200 viewers to 4,000, to millions and millions. What we saw was some fairly careful planning by the terrorist himself, in terms of setting up a network and a grouping of people that could be expected to take that content, pull it off the platforms that it was on, and then start to push it back on again onto mainstream social media platforms. And that MO was, at the time, very, very successful. It took the major companies by surprise; it was well enough organised that there were probably two or 300 people actively doing that. And they had, I think, developed a reasonably good understanding of the way the algorithmic processes in the companies worked and how to actually get around those and ensure that the material could be promulgated widely and go viral very quickly.

That required, I think, from our side that we thought in new ways about how to deal with this. And to your question around the challenges we faced, the first one was, what do the appropriate policy responses to something like this look like? They range from regulatory responses, some of which were put in place by New Zealand and other countries after the attacks. We did that in a slower time than some others. But that's a function of governments, it's quite important. Right the way through to voluntary measures that we could perhaps implement more quickly with the tech firms, drawing on their technical knowledge of the issues involved.

And the first thing we ended up in was somewhat of a policy debate, here in New Zealand, about how to respond to this issue. We engaged with a number of the tech firms, they came reasonably quickly to want to have a conversation and to their credit, a number of them, once they had worked out what was happening, also worked operationally to ensure that there was good collaboration across our government and a number of others in dealing with some of the immediate impacts and the law enforcement related parts of the content being distributed.

Sitting underneath that policy conundrum was that we found that we had a range of tools that we could use, but none of them were perfectly suited for what we were grappling with. We have an office of film, video, and literature classification here in New Zealand, known as the Classifications Office, and they were able to very quickly classify the material as objectionable, under New Zealand legislation, and ensure that it was prohibited to distribute, possess, copy the material. And that was a very effective first line of defence, but it wasn't a long-term solution, that's actually dealing with the problem after it's been created. So, as we worked that one through, we talked at length with some of the firms involved, we talked with civil society groups, we talked with a number of other governments. And about two weeks after the event, I engaged with a number of other states, particularly France and Germany, but all of our closest partners as well, almost all of them are either NATO members or allies and partners, and worked through how we might pull together a set of commitments, that we could work with the social media firms on to try and look at ways to solve the problem. The Christchurch Call was the result of that.

Our first conversations with the tech firms, I think, were probably more awkward than any of us

would have liked. We weren't used to working with them in this way and they weren't used to working with us. And similarly with civil society groups, who ranged from

survivor and victims' rights groups, right the way through to advocates for civil liberties and freedom of expression. And we've been very careful to continue to work with that spectrum. And I guess the key thing that we have discovered over that time, is the importance of being even handed and clear in what we're trying to achieve, without necessarily being prescriptive about how we're going to get there. And in that way, building trust across the different participants, and drawing on the strengths that governments can bring, industry can bring, and civil society can bring to a conversation about how to address some of these issues.

So, one of the key things you've identified, I think, is that question of building trust and it was something that we worked very hard on. We were pleased to see folk from the firms coming in the other direction, trying to do the same thing, and folk from civil society. And sitting at the core of that, I guess, was the sense that nobody wanted to see this sort of content on anybody's platforms. There are some exceptions to that, some small platforms that I don't think will ever be able to engage in a really constructive dialogue with because they prefer not to. But there was a sense of common cause there and a need to try and find shared solutions. And it took a while to get there, but I think one of the great strengths of the Christchurch Call was a real commitment across the Call community to keep working in that way.

SG: So, very much it's a whole of society approach that involves government, tech industry, and civil society groups, as well. You mentioned various countries that helped and collaborated. So, one country I was curious about was France. France seemed to be very important in that, is there a reason why France became so engaged in helping to work with New Zealand for the Christchurch Call?

PA: France has been a really strong and steadfast partner from very early on in this process. Our Prime Minister at the time, Jacinda Ardern, was obviously in close contact with a number of her colleagues and peers in France and Germany, Canada, Australia, the U.K., a whole range of different places. The French government had reached out and said, as many others did, what can we do to help? And when we sat down with the team in Paris, as we did with a number of other teams, it became apparent they were hosting Tech for Good Summit, eight weeks after the attacks in Christchurch, and we looked at that timing and worked with France on the basis of their invitation to tee up a meeting to launch the Christchurch Call at that time. That gave us a very, very short lead time to develop the 25 commitments from the Christchurch Call. Our French colleagues worked directly with us, as did colleagues from a number of other countries and from a number of tech firms and we first built on a really solid placeholder for civil society.

But we worked very closely with the team in Paris on developing the text, we stationed someone there in the lead up to the launch on 15 May 2019. And we ran a 24/7 operation between Wellington and Paris, and between the various places that those of us who were negotiating the text were travelling to at the time. So, I made my way up to the West Coast a couple of times during that period, working with tech firms, and we worked very closely, virtually right the way across those different time zones, to get the text done and ready by 15 of May and ready for the launch.

And again, that was quite a process of building trust between the participants and developing the 25 commitments in the Call over that period of time, and France was integral for that process, we

worked very, very closely with and we're very appreciative of the role they've played, it's probably the closest working relationship we've had with our French colleagues for quite a long time. And it's been really an extraordinary experience, just looking at the different capabilities and different ways we think about these things and putting them together, along with those other partners across a whole range of countries and tech firms and civil society groups to get the best outcome we can for the objectives of the call around eliminating terrorist and violent extremist content online.

SG: It really does put it into perspective, just how large and how mammoth sized the challenge was in this way, and the logistical dimensions that perhaps are not always fully appreciated. Where did you first find, 'okay,' that, 'this is working,' that the Christchurch Call is actually achieving the objectives. Was there a specific moment where you thought, 'okay, all this hard work is actually paying off, we're going in the direction that one had envisaged, and now it's actually happening in practice?'

PA: I think the first step was getting to the launch, and that eight weeks was a reasonably frenetic period of time. But once we settled on the text of the Call, which was completed just a few hours before the launch at the summit, we were able then to get it launched and focus in on some key work strengths. The first of those that I think we really saw ourselves getting traction on quickly was around crisis response and ensuring that between the companies involved, the countries involved, we actually had new crisis response protocols that we were working together on, developing and deploying both new technologies and new means of communicating. And over the course of the year, we saw several attempts of copycat attacks. And we saw those new protocols in place and working.

And perhaps, to then fast forward into last year, and the really tragic attack in Buffalo, New York, that was live streamed, we saw the ability of the tech sector to identify and bring that content down very, very quickly, in a way that hadn't been possible three years previous, when the Christchurch attacks had happened. Around the crisis response parts of the call, I think is the place where we've seen measurable progress that we can evaluate and come up with a quantitative outcome.

More broadly, we've seen real progress in working on regearing and relaunching an entity called the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT). When Christchurch happened, it already existed, but it was very much a virtual organisation, it didn't have staff, it didn't have its own identity. And so, we worked through a process between May 2019 and September of that year, when the Call community met again to work out how that could be reconstructed, how it could be resourced as an independent, non-governmental organisation or a not for profit, and how it could expand its work in the areas of research around violent extremism and terrorism online, its crisis response capabilities, and its support to smaller platforms. That relaunch was announced in September 2019, and reasonably shortly thereafter, but through the pandemic period, the chairs of the GIFCT, first Facebook as it was then Microsoft, and then Twitter, subsequently Google, have stewarded the development of that organisation and the growth of its capabilities, which has been a really important step forward.

I guess the last thing we would say, in terms of a sense of measurable progress, was actually that meeting in September 2019. King Abdullah of Jordan was kind enough to allow New Zealand and France to co-chair one of his Acaba Process meetings that became a Christchurch Call meeting at the UN. We had 31 more countries join the original 17 at that meeting, we had new tech firms, we

had the announcement of the new protocols and the launch with the restructured GIFCT. And we really had, I think, momentum and lift-off at that point. We had some very frank conversations with civil society groups at that point as well, where they asked for a greater role in the work of the Call, and I think were pleasantly surprised when we reciprocated and said, 'that makes good sense to us as well.' And we began building a core community at that time. And to me, I think that's one of the key achievements we still have now, that sense of community, we're building a really coherent, engaged group across those three sectors that continues to work together on this problem.

SG: Coherent, engaged group, indeed. And I'm very glad that you also mentioned Jordan, because it's a country that we've worked very closely with—the Jordanian Armed Forces—when it comes to developing CVE strategies, as well. So, they've been a very important ally in this issue. If you could talk to me more Paul, also about the role of algorithms, and in particular when it comes to the questions of regulation, oversight in the tech industry, or what is the best strategy to pursue in combating disinformation, radical content on social media, when it comes to those algorithms, which by design suggest related material to users that could actually lead to them getting radicalised. In many ways, it's almost a paradoxical challenge.

PA: It really is a paradoxical challenge. The first thing to acknowledge is that when we stood up the Christchurch Call, we were first looking at crisis response as a way of limiting the impact of the sorts of issues we saw at Christchurch. We were then—and this is embedded deeply in the commitments in the Call—focused on looking at some of the contributing causes, the things that led to that kind of activity, and ways that we could grapple with those that were consistent with international human rights law, and a free, open, and secure internet. Algorithmic amplification is one of those signature issues that we're having to really get our heads around and work on finding solutions to.

And the third thing we had to do was work out exactly what type of algorithms we're talking about. There are three broad groupings here, algorithmic processes that identify harmful content, and one of the issues there is false positives, false negatives, and there's work underway on that within the broader Christchurch core community. And with those who work in this area. The other two areas go more to the point you're describing, which is radicalization, and they are search and the algorithmic processes that identify particular types of content for a user and curate the priority that's given to particular types of content. And we saw some particular challenges with that, after some terrorist and violent extremist events, in particular, the murder of school teacher Samuel Paty in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, where one of the real challenges was that content being surfaced, both by search engines, but also by search functions that set inside social media platforms and recommended the attacker as someone to follow for a number of users, until firms got that under management and control.

The other is recommender algorithms and those basically would say, if you're watching the NATO *DEEP Dive* podcast, or listening to it, why don't you listen to this next, and we'll then move you on to something else. And in some instances, there's evidence suggesting that that does lead to amplification and increasingly harmful content. So, you might go from something that is controversial, but benign, and it's normally within the area of freedom of expression and find that certain users—because it's as much about the user as it is the algorithm—end up down a rabbit hole, as it's sometimes described. And there's a couple of questions there, first, actually an empirical understanding of what's happening in those situations. And second, thinking very carefully about the sorts of interventions that might, positively, ensure that users' journeys don't take them into that radicalization rabbit hole. And both of those need quite a bit of research. So, one of our four work

streams is exactly in this area: algorithmic outcomes, so understanding what the algorithms lead to, and positive interventions. That's been a very challenging area for governments, and for tech firms alike to try and understand. And it's one way civil societies input is really important because they can provide insights, and in a sense, a multi-stakeholder approach is potentially a more stable and robust approach than any one of those three groups trying to do this on their own.

Last year, in September, Prime Minister Ardern announced the launch of the Christchurch Initiative on Algorithmic Outcomes. This was a ground-breaking piece of work with Microsoft and the United States and New Zealand governments, working with a not for profit called Openmind, testing a proof of concept to acknowledge these privacy enhancing technologies that would enable researchers to work with algorithmic processes, and with use of data, in a way that would enable them to research remotely in a trusted environment and draw some conclusions about what was happening. We're partway through that process at the moment, we're in the first step of two phases where it's tested on individual platforms before it then looks at the way a user's interaction on one platform might lead them to another one and then how algorithmic processes work in that environment. And to date, the first phase seems to be going well, we're not too far off being able to transition from phase one to phase two and looking to build some further platforms into that work and grow the initiative over time.

It's one of a number of similar initiatives, it would be remiss if I didn't note that a number of the firms that are in the Christchurch Call have also established research access programmes in recent times, and are looking to find ways to increase the transparency around the way that algorithmic processes work. We see that as a positive outcome, it's one that—coming to my earlier point—does require a lot of trust to be built amongst the various partners working on it. It's one where there probably will need to be regulatory initiatives and indeed in things like the Digital Services Act and the EU, there are now regulatory frameworks for the assessment and audit of risk and algorithmic processes and the kinds of practical tools that have been built on the likes of the Initiative on Algorithmic Outcomes. And then, of course, we're seeing that some key universities at the moment should contribute to enabling those assistants to be carried out in a robust and safe way. But it is one of the hardest pieces of the puzzle, both because it needs to be done in a way that doesn't necessarily get to the core of proprietary technologies in a way that would damage that particular interest, while also making sure that they're deployed safely.

SG: These are all really, really important initiatives that are being conducted. And I think it kind of illustrates, and is, a very important reminder about how technology evolves, that it doesn't stand still. It's sophisticated, and the utility of it is constantly developing. One dynamic that existed, even during the time of the Christchurch attack, but seems to be developing as we speak, is video gaming chat groups, where people are communicating, they are disseminating information, even recruiting and plotting. Places that perhaps, prior to the pandemic—and social media entities—that were not necessarily looked at in the same way as your Facebooks, YouTubes, Twitters, etcetera. How hard is it, Paul, to keep having buy-in from different companies that perhaps were not necessarily involved in the beginning of the Christchurch Call, but are now actually relevant, because of the technology that's involved? How does one keep adjusting those commitments, so that what was created, continues to keep people safe?

PA: That's a great question, Sajjan, and I think the leaders of the Christchurch Call community do not want the Call to be a static construct that looks at yesterday's problems and is not looking ahead. And indeed, when leaders met last year, they made the point that as we continue to innovate, as societies, as the functionality of those online environments changes, Call leaders really

want today's young people to enjoy the benefits of a global internet, without having to deal with, or be confronted by, violent extremist content or threats. And that's very much about building a positive future online and ensuring that our thriving community contributes to that. Call leaders, at their last summit, agreed to launch a new stream of work on how we can both anticipate the adoption of new technologies, and understand the challenges that they might pose, and develop new strategies to address them, and prepare the members of the Call community for managing the exploitation of those new systems by terrorist and violent extremist groups.

There's a couple of elements in that. One of them is working directly with young people and children to try and understand their experiences and how we can help support them and understand the issues that they might confront. The other is working with either new companies or new parts of the tech sector, and in particular, gaming is one of those, to think about how we can support them, as they build safety into their systems. And a couple of good examples of this would be the likes of Roblox, which joined the call last year, very much targeted at gaming, but working with a very young demographic, and had already seen, for instance, game creators recreating the Christchurch attack online, and putting it on their platform in the hope that people would play it. They've worked with the Call community, since joining, on safety issues, we found them very, very responsive to that conversation.

The same thing has happened with Microsoft, one of our earliest supporters of the Call, along with Google, Twitter, Amazon, and Facebook. The Minecraft product was something that was exploited, again, by some users in this way, and they've had to do pretty much the same things. So, the gaming sector was one that we really focused on as part of a new technology work stream, because it really is a gateway for many young people into those new immersive environments. The gaming sector is where a bunch of the extended reality, or augmented reality environments will first be driven out of, and it's one way it has been harder to build and safety tools today. But we haven't seen a shortage of interest from the companies, they get the problem. And again, a starting point for the Call is that nobody really wants this content on their systems.

SG: Absolutely. You mentioned one of the key words to a lot of the discussion that we're having, which is safety, and in connection to that, child safety online has become a real hot button issue in Europe. And recently, French President Emmanuel Macron helped create, or launch, the Children's Online Protection Laboratory to improve safety for minors across the world, and I gather that you actually were pivotal, you played a very important role in helping to establish that. Could you talk more about that? And, how it ties in as a partner concept to the Christchurch Call?

PA: Thanks, Sajjan. I think the Call has developed a unique model for coordinating action and bringing together effective communities, civil society, and tech experts, alongside governments, on the key issues of online safety and one of the key things there is, by harnessing the distinct capabilities of each of those sectors and building that community, with a shared ambition, we've started to see results. And the success of the call, I think, is reasonably well recognised, particularly amongst those participating in the work, such that last year a number of members of the community expressed some real interest in understanding how the Call might work on some related issues. That created a little bit of attention for the Call community because one of the things that helped us make progress in the Call was keeping its scope very, very carefully focused on terrorist and violent extremist content online. So, working with France, as they stood up the Children Online Protection laboratory, they used a very similar model to the Call and we were really supportive of them doing so through to the launch in November last year, at the Paris Peace Forum of the Laboratory Initiative. Again, like the Call, it brought together industry, civil society, and governments.

For the launch, I was very fortunate to be able to represent the New Zealand Prime Minister, at that launch, alongside President Macron, senior ministers, the president of Estonia and Argentina, and many of the key industry players also involved in the Christchurch Call. And really, the Online Protection Laboratory is an effort to do something quite similar to the Call work, for keeping young people safe online, particularly on issues of cyber bullying, or harassment. It's a useful case study in [how] our multi stakeholder approach can build effective coalitions to deal with a range of issues. And one of the things that leaders looked at, at the last call summit, was the number of other issues that are present at the moment, ranging from harassment, abuse, and hatred online, issues particularly those affecting youth or gender-based issues online, and toxic issues around disinformation.

And the Call itself will probably stay, I think, reasonably tightly focused on terrorist and violent extremist content online, but it does end up grappling with some of the issues that are common, or some technological and collaboration issues that are common to all of those present problems, particularly that around issues of data ethics, artificial intelligence, algorithmic use. And so, there's a workstream in the Call to look at, what we call, the adjacent issues, and how the models we've built in the Call might best be used to support work in those areas. And the key there is not to duplicate where work is already underway and settling well, and if I think about an area like child sexual exploitation online, there are already very, very strong collaborative mechanisms, the We Protect Global Alliance and the Technology Coalition would be would be two real standouts in that area—that are already working in that area, and we would not want to stand up things that either duplicate or compete with those, we'd want to make sure they were supported. But there are some other new emergent areas where I think the Call perhaps points towards a useful model that might be used.

SG: That's, again, something that is going to be so important in the months and the years as we progress. A final question, Paul, much of what we've discussed, it's been about terrorist groups, it's been about entities that in many ways, operate in the shadows. When it comes to hostile state actors that are seeking to misuse social media, spread disinformation, is that a different challenge? Is that a different conversation, when it comes to the role of social media companies, governments, civil society? Or other transferable dynamics in relationship to this?

PA: It's a great question. And I think when we've looked at the Christchurch Call, we've very much focused in on terrorist and violent extremist groups. There is a connective tissue between that issue and the issue of exploitation of online platforms, or online service providers, by state sponsored actors. And traditionally, perhaps, their activity has been in the more classical areas of cybersecurity, where we've seen cyber campaigns, malware, etcetera, distributed. My sense is that increasingly, we are starting to see some states using information in much the same way. And so, moving beyond malware that would affect code or hardware, we're seeing information that is designed to affect people and communities and the way they behave and the way they think about the institutions or constructs that their societies are built upon. That is a very, very challenging presenting problem. And if I think about the Christchurch Call, one of the key thresholds for participation by states in the Christchurch Call, is that they are committed to a free, open, and secure internet, and that all of their actions are consistent with international human rights law, in the work of the Call. That I think helps us differentiate, certainly, between the states that are able to do that—and all governments are struggling to respond to and think about how they work with a changing online environment to a greater or lesser degree—but it helps us work with the states that are constructively engaged in that process.

If I think across to the idea of state sponsored campaigns, I would probably put that in the category of adjacent issues. So, these are often campaigns that are well resourced, based on a good understanding of the way online platforms work and ways to exploit them. So, in that sense, there are some similarities between the way some of the more advanced terrorist groups or violent extremist groups have exploited the internet. Where the connective tissue kicks in, I think, is probably in some aspects of the algorithmic amplification. That is that, if you are using disinformation to affect societies, it's conceivable that that could spill over into violent extremist activity or inspire some users to violent extremism. But my sense is that it probably needs to sit in a stack alongside the other presenting issues of terrorist and violent extremist content, child sexual exploitation and abuse, protection of youth online, and there are a range of others, as a distinct stack of its own, with acknowledgment that both the community model we've built in the Christchurch Call and some of the understanding of the way algorithmic processes work, data ethics contributes, artificial intelligence processes work, actually enabling us to transfer some of those lessons and the things we learn, as we go through the work, into that stack on disinformation.

But it's a very difficult issue to crack. If you think about the content issues, and you think about this as a content challenge, you have a spectrum, at one end of which is child sexual exploitation material, taxonomically, it's very easy to identify what that is, with a small amount of material that is perhaps a little debatable. When you're in the terrorist and violent extremist content area, you have a much more grey area, but you still have content that is very clearly terrorist and violent extremist material. And you have a designations process that covers much of that. If you're in disinformation, you're in an area where almost all of the material is grey. And it is very, very difficult taxonomically to deal with in the same way that you would those other two categories. And I think that makes this presenting issue, of the use of the online environment by state actors, a really difficult one to grapple with, particularly for liberal democracies that are committed to rule of law, international human rights law, and try to maintain a free, open, and secure internet. But I think the Call gives us some models that might be useful for aspects of that.

SG: Absolutely, I think the Call gives us many models that can be utilised, and I think you very amply demonstrated the difference between democracies that are based on the rule of law, accountability, transparency, and those that operate in a different way, and present different challenges. Well, Paul, let me thank you, again, so much for spending time on this podcast to talk about the Christchurch Call, and so many of the different dynamics that are connected to the challenges of social media, the exploitation, the disinformation, the connections that terrorist groups wish to exploit and take advantage of. You've helped demystify a lot of this for our listeners, and I'm very grateful to you.

PA: Well, thanks so much for your time, Sajjan, it's been a pleasure. If you have any questions about the call, just hop on the website and connect with us there: christchurchcall.com

SG: Okay, well, we'll embed that link into the transcript that we're doing. So, thank you again, Paul Ash.

PA: Thanks so much, Sajjan.

Paul Ash bio

Paul Ash is the New Zealand Special Representative on Cyber and Digital as well as the Christchurch Call and Cyber Coordinator in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC). Prior to that he led the DPMC's National Security Policy Directorate from 2018-2019, providing policy leadership on national security, intelligence, risk and resilience, working with agencies in the national security sector.

Episode 40 - Mike Martin and Lessons From War, June 2023

Key Reflections

- **Wars are psychological, and Ukraine has maintained the psychological momentum against Russia on its side, whilst building and sustaining an alliance of support for Kyiv.**
- **There is an intelligence bias known as mirroring, where actors incorrectly assume their enemy thinks like they do. The Russians believed this about the Ukrainians, which contributed to Moscow's misunderstanding of Ukraine from the outset of the war.**
- **Issues such as morality, religion, and ideology are often perceived to be part of key narratives and fault lines driving violence in conflict but can actually serve to reduce conflict.**
- **Drones are developing greater importance both in terms of reconnaissance, but also when it comes to conducting actual operations. They are becoming smaller, whilst still retaining their effectiveness.**
- **Lessons learned from the war in Afghanistan can be applied to Russia's war in Ukraine, such as having a realistic and well-resourced strategy that is aligned with overarching goals.**
- **Private military companies like the Wagner Group have been utilised by the Kremlin as a quick way of generating military power.**

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

MM: Mike Martin

SG: Welcome to the NATO *DEEP Dive* podcast, I'm your host Dr. Sajjan Gohel and in this episode I speak with Mike Martin, who is a War Studies Senior Fellow at King's College London. In our discussion we talk about lessons that can be learnt from war, the use of technology, and what Russia's invasion of Ukraine could mean for future conflicts and geopolitics.

Mike Martin, welcome to NATO *DEEP Dive.*

SG: In your recent book, *How to Fight a War,* I found the illustrations and the graphics very interesting. You helped to break down strategies and conflict. Simple, effective. But what was your motivation for writing this book?

MM: The book actually stemmed out of my Twitter feed. So, I have a feed @threshedthoughts, where I commentate on geopolitics and conflict and when the Ukraine war kicked off, I actually happened to have COVID and be in bed. And so, what do you do when you have COVID? You sit on Twitter, don't you? It was a sort of mild bout. And it became really clear over the proceeding weeks that actually we don't really know how to fight wars. And Putin's made a catastrophic misjudgement, but when you think about it, the West made catastrophic misjudgements in Iraq and Afghanistan and we can look around the place and see lots of wars, in fact, most wars failed, what they set out to do.

And the second thing that became really clear from my Twitter feed, is that actually, the general public, but also commentators, journalists, politicians, who maybe should know a bit more about war, also don't know anything about war. And that led to a discussion between my publisher and I, and we decided that actually what was needed, hopefully, was a general, plain speaking, summary, if you like, of how to fight a war. And so that's what we wrote and we wrote it in the second person, so it's a bit like Machiavelli, *The Prince,* the idea is that the reader is the commander in chief and we are advising you on what you need to do, all the elements that you'd be putting together to fight a war.

SG: I certainly did notice traces of Machiavelli's *The Prince* in that book, and it's a very interesting read, indeed. We're talking about war and conflict. And the most blatant signs of this are Russia's invasion of Ukraine, where are we at when it comes to this conflict? Who is gaining the advantage? Who is making the most headway? Is this a stalemate? How long is this going to last for?

MM: So, I think we've got to start with the basis that all war is psychological and all of the tanks, the planes, all of the stuff, is merely there to affect the mindset of your enemy, and also to affect the mindsets of other observers of that conflict. And I think if we look at war in that way, we can say that Ukraine has so far kept the momentum on its side and the psychological momentum on its side. And also, has managed to build an alliance of people supporting it and keep that alliance in place. And Russia is largely ostracised, certainly from the rich nations of the world. I know not all the nations of the world are ostracising Russia, but certainly the majority of the rich nations. And even China, a close ally of Russia, is supportive, but to a very limited extent. So, I think if you view war like that, Ukraine is certainly acquitting itself much better than Russia is.

And the things that Ukraine has done on the battlefield, like stalling the Russians out to Kiev, in the first bit of the war, so that the Russians had to withdraw, then taking back Kharkiv in the north, and then Kherson again in the south, towards the end of 2022. All of these have painted a picture of a failing Russian attempt to achieve their goals. I think that's one of the most important things in war that you can gain and maintain momentum. And now, this year, in 2023, what we've seen is, starting at the end of January, the Russians kicked off their spring offensive, quote, unquote, and that's been fairly lacklustre. They've taken some small areas of territory in Bakhmut and some other places in Donbass, but too great costs, and it appears now as we record this in the beginning of April, that they're starting to culminate. And now all talk is turning to, 'great, where's the Ukrainian counter offensive, they can use all this armour that the West has given them,' and people again, talking about, 'great, the momentum is passed back to Ukraine and they're going to be kicking off,' and everyone's thinking about that. And so, the next few months really, I think, will decide what's going to happen in this war. I don't think—you mentioned stalemate—I don't think it's going to go on into 2024 because we have the U.S. presidential election there and if you look at some of the candidates or potential candidates in that, there's no way that Ukraine is going to escape unscathed without U.S. support being called into question, at least on the campaign trail. And so, I think the Ukrainians and the other allies want to finish this one way or the other in 2023 before the U.S. election kicks off.

SG: Another aspect of this, often there's this intelligence bias that is called mirroring and in many ways the Russians think that the Ukrainians think like they do, there is that cultural dynamic, they share a lot of similarities. There have also been marriages between both cultures across generations. Do you think that the Russians misunderstood Ukraine when the war began, in terms of how they thought the Ukrainians would end up fighting, partly because of the previous standoff in the Donbass region where Russian backed militias were given support and Ukraine wasn't able to re-

take them?

MM: Yeah, so I think there are definitely lots of biases and all the biases that come into strategy formation and intelligence are why strategies fail. Mirroring is one of the most important, where you look at your enemy and you see yourself in them. I think actually too—and that is happening now, so for instance, at the moment with this Ukrainian counterattack, the Russians are thinking the attacks are going to happen everywhere, but actually, of course it's not, they're going to concentrate their force somewhere. But because that's how the Russians act, they assume that the Ukrainians are going to act in that way.

I think at the beginning of the war, the two most important biases though, were overconfidence, so hubris definitely, overestimating the capabilities of the Russian Armed Forces and underestimating the capabilities of the Ukrainian forces. And also, I think, a kind of in-group—it's weird, isn't it? Because there's, yes, the Ukrainians are a separate group, but also, as you say, well, but they're also Russians and the Russians have never quite resolved whether the Ukrainians, psychologically, are in their in-group or in their out-group.

SG: One of the other aspects in this is that the war is being fought in the grey zone, especially when it comes to various different, interesting, aspects of modern warfare. Where do you think the importance has been when it comes to say, cyber warfare as well as also the use of proxies, such as the Wagner Group, which is gaining more and more attention and notoriety?

MM: So, my view generally on things like the grey zone and hybrid warfare is that these are just warfare. And these are terms that we invent to help us accrue funding from big bureaucracies. Of course, if you're fighting war you use all the levers of power. I think that, specifically to your point about cyber or information versus what you might call more traditional military power, I think, actually, this conflict has demonstrated very clearly that cyber information will only get you so far. And when it comes to the crunch, actually, when you need tanks, you need tanks. There's nothing that you can use to replace them. And I think it's been a very interesting lesson for lots of countries in Europe, particularly for the UK, right? Three months before the invasion, the then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson went in front of the Defence Select Committee and said, 'oh, the days of tank battles on the plains of Europe are over.' So, the lesson is, yes, you need cyber and information and all those other things, but they're wraparounds for your core capabilities, which are infantry, tanks, artillery, all those other ground capabilities.

Proxies, I think, are very interesting. We can see why Russia has brought them in because it's a quick way of generating military power. It's not a particularly skilled military power and it introduces its own problems. For example, the Wagner Group created a rift within the construction and then you've got competition between the military and the Wagner Group and the Chechens and all the rest of it. So, I think, in the same way that the West in Afghanistan tried to raise village militias and village defence militias and all the rest of it, often these things seem like a good idea at the time, but they are really hard to control and integrate into your wider command, and they can only ever produce very low quality troops anyway, so I'm not really sure if it's a thing apart. I see it more as a kind of a recruitment tool, and not a particularly successful one.

SG: Talk to me about the role of drones in conflict. They are developing greater importance in terms of reconnaissance, but also to carry out actual operations. Is this now the future of warfare?

MM: One very interesting trend with drones is that they're getting smaller. So, they came around at the turn of the millennium and led to the big Predators and Reapers and all the systems that we saw in use in Iraq and Afghanistan, predominantly, but also more widely in the war on terror. What we've seen in Ukraine is very interesting. So, first we've seen the Bayraktar, the Turkish drones, which cost single figures millions or $20 million, depending on which version you get, so, a tiny amount compared to what a Predator or a Reaper costs, so you can obviously have many, many more of those on the battlefield.

And we've also seen the use of commercial drones with slight adaptations, or even without adaptations. I can go on Amazon right now and order a Quadrocopter with a camera and I can use that for artillery spotting, for a few thousand dollars. With small modifications, I can use one of those to drop a grenade or something, and we're seeing that all the time, if you look on TikTok and Telegram you see all the time, slightly modified commercial drones being used to drop high explosives into Russian trench systems and all the rest of it. So, that to me is a really interesting trend, I guess you could call it the democratisation of them, because anyone can buy them and modify them. And also they're getting smaller and smaller and we're not that far off from having drones the size of a 5p piece or a dime if you're American, and all being networked together and controlled with a decentralised processor held with a little bit of the processor on each drone, so they can, with an algorithm that enables them to, swarm, we're not very far away from that being the case and its very, very, very difficult to defeat technologies like that. So, I think that's a really interesting trend in UAVs and drones.

SG: Yes, a very interesting trend indeed. You mentioned Afghanistan, and you actually served in Afghanistan with the British military with great distinction. So, I'm curious what lessons can be learned from the Afghan conflict that can be utilised for the Ukraine-Russia dimension? Or is it that they are just two very different, separate, issues?

MM: No, there's one central lesson from Iraq and Afghanistan, which is don't fight a war unless you have a strategy. And by strategy, I mean a realistic strategy and one that is resourced appropriately for the goals that you want to achieve. What the Western nations had in Iraq and Afghanistan were a set of goals, but no real idea how to connect their activities up to those goals—and at times, they weren't very well resourced, but there were times when huge resources were poured into those wars. The Iraq War, sorry, the Afghan War, was over $2 trillion, humongous amounts of money. And so, the problem wasn't necessarily resourcing as such, it was, 'how do we connect these activities that we're conducting to the overall goals that we're trying to achieve?' And if you kept plugging away that problem in Afghanistan, which obviously I know very well, you may have come to the conclusion that it wasn't possible. And therefore, at that point, you should then withdraw.

And so, this was the problem. It was because we didn't understand the countries enough, we were unable to connect our activities to our eventual goals. And that lack of understanding just meant that we didn't realise that we weren't making any progress. And so, the fundamental lesson is, have a strategy before you fight a war. And I think that if I look at Ukraine, I think the Ukrainians have got a strategy, certainly, very clear: evict all Russian soldiers from Ukrainian lands, using Western resources, and we pay the blood, and the West pays the treasure. And that's okay, as far as it goes, very simple, very clear, the whole nation can get behind it, the support, the trinity between the government, the forces, and the people is very strong, and they're very well agreed on

that strategy.

It's not so clear—and it's obviously more difficult—in an alliance where you have America, Europe, lots of different countries, but I feel that although we're in a much better position now, than we were at the beginning of the conflict, we've all agreed now that we agree with Ukraine's goals and we support Ukraine in evicting Russia from Ukrainian lands, although you do see some equivocation over things like Crimea, what's going to happen to Crimea? And then, of course, you see Macron's comments recently, over the last couple of days, although it appears maybe they've been mistranslated, but Macron, throughout the conflict, has always felt he's been able to make peace, he's gone to Putin and all the rest of it and he said that Putin shouldn't be humiliated.

And so, although there is a strategy, there is probably a difference of view within the Alliance about exactly where the bounds of that strategy are. But I think, it's clear that what's happened this year is that the alliance has decided that Ukraine is going to be given as much as possible this year to try and allow it to finish the job. Because, as we discussed, 2024 is the U.S. presidential election. I suspect if Ukraine hasn't made significant gains by the autumn of this year, then we're going to look at a shifting of those goals, I think we're going to see the conflict being closed down by the West.

SG: Well time will tell, I guess. When war occurs, things such as morality, religion, ideology, they often become the key narratives, talking points, potential motivations, as well as the fault lines in conflict. One thing I thought was interesting is in your book, *Why We Fight,* you've argued the opposite is true that actually rather than driving violence, that these things can actually help to reduce a conflict. Could you expand on this?

MM: Yeah, sure. Again, this grew out of my time in Afghanistan, where a very common refrain was that people were, in the case of suicide bombs, blowing themselves up because of twisted ideology, or the Taliban were driven by religious fundamentalism. And it seemed to me that ideas, be they ideologies like jihadism, or democracy, or whatever, or religions, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, whatever, and moral codes like Pashtunwali, all these ideas of good and bad, but it seemed that these were always cited as the causes of violence. My first degree was biology and so I found that quite confusing, because if people are going to risk their lives, and conflict is risky, or in the case of suicide bombers, end their lives, that's a profoundly anti-evolutionary activity, in the sense that it exerts a negative selection pressure. So, you've got to explain very clearly how one thing leads to the other, otherwise we have a bit of a problem.

And so, I looked into it and what became clear was, I couldn't make that link, but I could make a link to some evolutionary drivers that we have, namely towards status and belonging. So, at the level of the individual, this status, as in social status and belonging to a social group, have clear evolutionary advantages to the individual. And they have a slightly negative effect as well, which is that they drive you to go and fight in wars and that slightly increases your chance of death, but overall, the benefits that the average person gets from having those drives towards status and belonging, outweigh the average effects of the chances of you going to war and dying in that war. And so, it's an evolutionary argument for why we fight wars which, as I've explained at first, look like they shouldn't exist according to evolution.

And so, then I looked again back at ideology and morals and religion. And it seemed to me and

there's a lot more evidence in the book, it seemed to me that those three things were how we built bigger and bigger societies, from hunter gatherer bands, to tribes, to chiefdoms, to Ancient Empires, to the nation state, to the huge nation states that we have now, to the quasi-global culture we have. We've built bigger and bigger groupings throughout the last, say 12,000 years since we made the transition from hunter gatherer into living in villages. And what's enabled us to do that, is these ideas about how we order society, predominantly moral codes, religions, and ideologies. Now the thing about bigger societies, a la Steven Pinker, is that bigger groups tend to have lower levels of violence in them, by definition, social groups are non-violent places, with vastly reduced levels of violence. That's why we want to live in them, or that's one of the reasons why we want to live in them. And so, these frameworks, to me, seemed to actually be things that helped us build societies which reduced levels of violence rather than being things that drove us towards violence.

SG: You've got a huge and vast array of on the ground experience in various different places. So, one other part of the world that I'm very interested to get your take on, as kind of a final question in our discussion, is that in 2013, you, along with two friends, set off on a journey, an adventure, starting from Kinshasa, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, all the way to Juba, the capital of South Sudan. That's travelling effectively two and a half thousand miles of some of the toughest terrain on the planet. Aside from the bureaucracy, fire ants, non-existent roads and some of the challenges from locals that you are encountering, you managed to develop a very intimate look into one of the world's, perhaps often neglected parts of the world. And one of the most fragile states, the DRC. The DRC faces some of the most virulent insurgencies today and it really doesn't get a lot of attention. And to the surprise of many, this also includes the fact that there are ISIS affiliates in the region, such as the Islamic State of Central Africa Province and also the Allied Democratic Forces, which is a Ugandan-based group that also operates in the eastern DRC. I'm curious, you were in the DRC, are you now surprised when you see the growth of ISIS in the region? Or were there tell-tale signs about what was happening in the DRC that have actually now manifested themselves into what we're witnessing today?

MM: My experience of travelling in conflict zones, I've done it in Afghanistan, I've done it in Colombia, I've done it in DRC, in Somalia, and Myanmar, and all the rest of it. My experience is that the further away you are from a place, the worse the narrative will be about it. And as you get closer to it, and you obviously talk to people, you go a little bit closer, you get another bus to the next town, then you talk to people, the closer you get to it, the less of a problem it is because for them, it's just normal people. And so, you mentioned the ADF, I mean, just to give a really specific example, we actually had to cross a bit of the DRC in the Northeast that supposedly was under the control of the ADF. And obviously, we were concerned about that, we were just three of us in a Land Rover, but we did what we always do, we just kept talking to everyone. And when we got nearer and nearer, it became clear that there wasn't any ADF, this was a thing on a map drawn by researchers who, and obviously I'm not saying that this is the case everywhere, there had been ADF there previously, but what I'm saying is, once these things get drawn on maps, they tend to then not get taken off them.

I think there's a few other things that contribute to that kind of stuff. And again, these are not general comments, but these are comments about what I saw specifically in northeast Congo. So, we found quite a large UN presence up in that bit of the Congo, that wasn't really doing anything, and we stayed with the UN, and clustered around it, we also found lots of NGOs who were running various projects and art, and again, these are not general comments, but all of it seemed to us a bit like a self-licking lollipop, in that because there was a problem there, which was the ADF, and it was the NRA were meant to be in that bit of Congo as well, and it created a reason for those people to be there, doing something, and they were doing lots of good work, but the narrative of

those things, they were improving people's lives, but the narrative of those things enabled them to—faraway bureaucrats in wherever to go, 'Ah well, there's that problem there, therefore we need those solutions there. And again, for the third time and the fourth time, I just want to caveat, that I'm not saying that that's a general problem, but that it was something that we saw, specifically in that area.

So, am I surprised that there's an ISIS affiliate in that area? What does that mean, an ISIS affiliate? What is ISIS? It's not the Caliphate, like it was in 2015, and what does an affiliate mean? That some guy in the Congo has agreed to become part of the franchise, some guy and his group have agreed to become part of the franchise for the Caliphate, and what, are the Caliphate going to be sending them weapons? Maybe, I doubt it though, because they've got their own problems in the Middle East. So, I just wonder whether that actually means anything of any substance. Like it means something in that it's true and he's maybe declared his allegiance, but does it actually mean anything in terms of any substance? And so, that's what I would question, but in most of the places I've been, again, the closer I've got to the problems, the more that they seem to have disappeared or become less of a scale. Things are much scarier when you're further away.

SG: Interesting. Well, you've given us a lot of food for thought in this discussion. Let me thank you again, Mike Martin, for having the time to talk to us on NATO *DEEP Dive.*

MM: Thanks very much.

Mike Martin bio

Mike Martin is a Senior Visiting Research Fellow in the Department of War Studies and a former British Army officer. He is fluent in Pushtu and pioneered, designed and implemented the British Military's Cultural Advisor programme, which took Pushtu-speaking British officers and trained them to build relationships with local notables. He is also the author of How to Fight a War.