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Fireside Chat with [Linda Thomas-Greenfield](#)

[Linda Thomas-Greenfield](#), Representative of the United States to the United Nations, U.S.

Permanent Mission to the United Nations

Moderator: [Andrea Mitchell](#), Chief Washington Correspondent and Chief Foreign Affairs Correspondent, NBC News

Andrea Mitchell

Let me ask you about some news of the day and how it fits into a larger context, because a private second class Travis King is now in North Korean custody. He bolted across the border of the DMZ after attaching himself to a traveling group commercial traveling group at the airport in South Korea when he was being escorted by the military to go home after he had gotten into some legal difficulties. He'd already experienced his punishment there and was heading home and I know this is a pentagon issue, but it is also an issue for the State Department. As as we've been reporting all day, the US communicated that this was willful, unauthorized, and to Pyongyang, immediately got confirmation of that communication but has heard nothing since that we know of, and this is part of a larger problem. For the past two years, more than two years the administration has tried to reach out to the North Koreans on all of the nuclear missile issues after multiple violations of UN resolutions, as Pyongyang has just escalated its program to the point where it is reaching the precipice. So how do we break through communications before it's too late?

Linda Thomas-Greenfield

Well, first and foremost, the DPRK has broken numerous Security Council resolutions since there've been over 20 tests in 2023 alone. And as you know that we have made an effort to engage diplomatically with this government. President Biden made that offer on day one. And that offer is still on the table, that we're willing to engage with them at the diplomatic table. They have not accepted but it's not for lack of trying on our side. In the Security Council, we have brought DPRK to the table to consultations and open meetings over and over and over again. We've been blocked consistently by the Chinese from issuing any product to have the Security Council condemn their actions. But we've been very, very clear that if there's a nuclear test, we will put a resolution on the table. We have over 100 countries that have signed on to be co sponsors. And we will put pressure on China to engage. They engaged with us in the past when we got the resolutions passed before and they have to come back to the table with us because the DPRK is not just a threat to the United States. It's not just a threat to the Republic of Korea and to Japan. They are a threat to the world. And I've said many times to my Chinese counterpart, they are a threat to China.

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Andrea Mitchell

Is China in some ways, embracing this because they see us on the backfoot they don't see it as an immediate threat to them. They would rather see instability in the peninsula.

Linda Thomas-Greenfield

I can't speak for the Chinese but I can say that they have encouraged and empowered the DPRK by not allowing the Council to take action and they really have to move away from that position. Because they are a threat the DPRK is a threat to international peace and security.

Andrea Mitchell

I want to talk to you more about the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, which I know is a top priority for you and for the secretary. But most immediately, one of those goals is to end world hunger by 2030 and now Russia has just cut off the grain exports from Ukraine through the Black Sea. And this will increase world food prices exacerbate famine in the global south and arguably around the world. So is there any way that you see communications that you have at the UN or that we have with Moscow getting Putin to back down on this blockade?

Linda Thomas-Greenfield

You know, the UN has led the negotiations with with the Russians on this with the support of the Government of Turkey. And they are still engaging in those negotiations. They're still pushing. And I even saw that President Erdogan said he was still hopeful that they can get to a place where the Russians will go back into the deal. Millions of people are going to suffer and this is just one more example of a callousness and the cruelty of Putin. He pulled out of this deal, and then he vetoed the resolution. You and I traveled to the border of Turkey and Syria. And you saw how important that border crossing was to feeding millions of people on the Syrian side of the border and the Russians vetoed that at the same time that they pull out of this grain deal. So they don't care about people. And we have to continue to condemn them, keep the pressure on them and find a way forward with or without them.

Andrea Mitchell

That area of Syria with millions of refugees who are being bombed by Russia, Russia as a proxy for Damascus. That area was devastated by the earthquake in February and subsequent aftershocks. So those people have had multiple hits. They're in that refugee camp because of the bombing by the regime. So how can you break through, having seen this firsthand you go every year and now the last quarter there were four quarters. Now the last one has been vetoed.

Linda Thomas-Greenfield

They not only vetoed the last resolution, they put on the table a resolution that was totally unacceptable to all 14 members of the Security Council. 13 of us opposed it. The Chinese abstained, and only Russia voted against this resolution. And then they put their resolution on the table where 13 of us opposed it. China voted with Russia on Russia's resolution which would have allowed for basic recognition of this regime's attacks and cruelty on his own people. They want the international community to pay for

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reconstruction and recovery in areas that were bombed and destroyed by this by this regime and we could not accept that even with their dangling a six month extension in front of us. So we're still in the process of negotiating and putting pressure on Russia. The UN is meeting with Assad to see if we can find a way forward. I don't think the Assad regime wants to take the responsibility for feeding the people that are even on under their control. So I think it's important for them to see us find a path forward.

Andrea Mitchell

And another aspect of these, you know, very difficult relationships the Pentagon is telling us that they're almost daily, very close calls between Russian and American aircraft in what should be a deconfliction zone over Syria. How concerned are you in the United Nations of a disastrous occurrence?

Linda Thomas-Greenfield

You know, Russia has become a pariah state around the world. 143 countries have condemned their actions in Ukraine and they are on their back foot as we heard earlier and they are desperate. And I described them in the Security Council as a bully on the playground who, they can't get their way so they just keep threatening the world. And the world is suffering, food prices are going up. There are shortages and it's being impacted more in the global south than anywhere else in the world.

Andrea Mitchell

One of the impacts of the war and of COVID has been to really set back the goals of the sustainable development in 2015 it was to eliminate poverty and hunger and gender equality by 2030. And now how difficult is it to even think about about achieving those goals and what would be the new forecast?

Linda Thomas-Greenfield

It's a challenge. We're at the halfway mark, and we will be having a SDG Summit in September during high level week. And at the halfway mark, only 12%, 12 of the goals have had only 12% of the goals have been reached. And half of them we have not made very much progress on. So there's a desperation now to really ramp up our efforts and show the world that we are serious and we're committed to reaching these goals. One of the goals and we work on all of them, but one of the goals that's most important to me is the goal of ending hunger, and we will be president of the Security Council in August. And for my this is my third presidency where I have made hunger, the centerpiece and some have asked Why do you keep doing the same thing over and over? And the reason? The answer to that is we haven't ended it yet. And we're dealing with famine in the Horn of Africa, where we are very proud that we averted the famine last year. But what we're not saying is that hundreds of people still die. And we have to find a way we have the tools. We have the know how to end hunger. And I was delighted to have a conversation with Senator Coons and Senator Lindsey Graham, who had been working together to put forward a bill and a resolution that will address hunger by bringing the private sector in and do more work with the private sector to address issues of hunger worldwide.

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Andrea Mitchell

There's bipartisan support, as you just pointed out in Congress, is this one of the issues where the UN Security Council framework is just inadequate to the problem given the Russian veto in China.

Linda Thomas-Greenfield

You know, we've have a Security Council that was created 70 years ago, and it was created 70 years ago to deal with the issues of the world 70 years ago. Today, those issues have changed, and the construct of the world has changed most of the countries of Africa almost all of them were not independent, then. So President Biden announced and we've been addressing that issue over the course of the past year that we support reform of the Security Council. That will include additional permanent members from Africa, from Latin America, as well as additional elected members of the Security Council. And we have committed to that, and we've been coordinating and consulting across the globe. To see how we can we can move that agenda forward.

Andrea Mitchell

Ofcourse, the backdrop for a lot of these problems is the Ukraine war. I was just returning from Vilnius and covered the NATO Summit. And you spoke with Foreign Minister Kuleba afterwards. Obviously Ukraine was very distressed. By the way the communique was drafted. And, frankly, there was criticism of the US as living with some of its NATO allies on this issue. As not giving them a better timeframe for when they could accede after the war. No one's arguing during the war, but after the war of when they could accede to NATO.

Linda Thomas-Greenfield

We understand Ukraine's frustration but NATO has been united in how it has addressed Ukraine. And we expressed a strong commitment and plans that Ukraine will become a member of NATO and what that will require to get there is in process right now. There's a commitment to to the Ukrainians. And again, let me just say, when President Putin made the terrible mistake of invading Ukraine, he thought that NATO would be divided. NATO has never been stronger. And NATO has never been stronger in terms of its its policy of an open door and allowing Ukraine membership eventually into NATO.

Andrea Mitchell

How critical is this moment? The counter offensive, which President Zelensky has acknowledged is facing very tough Russian defenses and is slowing down. It's tough going to given the terrain right now.

Linda Thomas-Greenfield

You know, it's, again, you have to be extraordinarily proud of what the Ukrainians have been able to accomplish, because, again, I think Putin believed that he could go into Ukraine, and in two weeks, bring this country to its knees and it has not done that and then you're seeing internal fights happening. In Russia right now. So while the counter offensive is not moving as fast as president Zelensky wanted it to move. Russia also is not moving any faster in trying to capture more of Ukraine. So they are pushing back on the Russians, but it's because they have unified, strong support from Europe and from NATO.

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Andrea Mitchell

In the past, you had a relationship with your Russian counterpart at the UN. More than 500 days into his war are those days over?

Linda Thomas-Greenfield

So Russia sits in the Security Council, and we all sit around the table so I have to sit around the table with the 15 members of the Security Council. And clearly Ukraine is a huge, huge barrier for a normal relationship with with the Russians for all of us sitting on on the Security Council. But we also have to deal with issues where we agree. We just voted on a resolution on Haiti and all 15 countries voted for it. And we've engaged at the working level with the Russians to get their agreement on that.

Andrea Mitchell

Can you engage at the working level with the Russians to free of Evan Gershkovich?

Linda Thomas-Greenfield

I've engaged directly with my counterpart on that.

Andrea Mitchell

is there any progress at all? He's wrongfully detained. He's not a spy. And he has no prospect of getting out. Are there backchannels?

Linda Thomas-Greenfield

The President has indicated that this is the highest priority for him. And every single member of his national security team. We work on this issue every single day and I have engaged directly with my Russian counterpart on this issue. His response is he will convey it to to Moscow, but I think they were hearing it from all of us and they know that it's an issue. And the President has made clear that we will not stop until we free Evan, but also free Paul Whelan.

Linda Thomas-Greenfield

And all Americans who are unlawfully detained and unfairly detained. And you may have seen in the Security Council when Russia was president of the Security Council, I invited Paul Whelan's sister and had her in the audience and I asked her to stand and look at Lavrov.

Andrea Mitchell

Paul Whelan and Marc Fogle?

Andrea Mitchell

That was quite a moment. You said last year when Russia used cluster munitions that they have no place on the battlefield? Is the US losing its moral high ground by now providing them to Ukraine?

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Linda Thomas-Greenfield

We have made clear that Ukraine is defending itself against a brutal aggressor and Russia used these these Munich munitions against Ukraine in an attack on Ukraine. And we have to remind ourselves every day that Ukraine is defending its democracy it's defending his sovereignty is defending his independence. And the President has been clear that we will do everything, we will stand by Ukraine. Until Until they defeat the Russians.

Andrea Mitchell

Do you have concerns about congressional support given some of the recent statements by Republicans and actually some some Democrats but mostly by Republicans in the House?

Linda Thomas-Greenfield

The President consulted with members of Congress. He consulted with our allies. And as he said it was a difficult decision, but it was the right decision.

Andrea Mitchell

Do you have concerns about the next supplemental, which is going to be necessary to continue the military aid?

Linda Thomas-Greenfield

I'm not, there is bipartisan support for that there are clearly individuals on the Hill who oppose it. But there is broad bipartisan support because we know that this is important. It's it's about the defense of the international order. And again, it's the charter, the UN Charter that we all signed on to, it's the values that underpin that charter that we're fighting for, and Ukraine is on the front lines of that, and we all have to support them as they defend our interests

Andrea Mitchell

as much as the Ukrainian war has with the efforts of the President and the administration brought NATO and Western allies together, it has deepened the divide between the west, the US and the global south. What do we do about the relationship with India, Brazil, South Africa, major countries?

Linda Thomas-Greenfield

You know, Andrea, I wouldn't say that it has deepened the divide. I think what it has led to is a much more intense conversation about what our priorities are and how we can promote those priorities across the globe. I heard the admiral say we can chew gum and walk at the same time. Secretary Blinken says we also have not forgotten the rest of the world we can grow. And so Russia's narrative is that we have turned against the global south. But the truth is we have not. We continue to engage with the global south. We continue to engage with our partners. As you heard with Kenya, we're still addressing issues of global peace and security, dealing with Sudan working on Haiti. We have not turned our backs on on the global south. But we have worked diligently to defend what even the global south has to be

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concerned about an aggressor crossing the border into a smaller neighbor, and it can happen to any of those countries, and we will be there for them as well.

Andrea Mitchell

Do you think that message is getting communicated?

Linda Thomas-Greenfield

I think it's getting across. But you know, Russia has an extraordinary propaganda machine, and they use it very, very effectively. And we all know that we have to up our game and that was one of the issues I discussed with Foreign Minister Kuleba. It's something that we discuss with our European colleagues. We didn't just discover Africa, as you heard. We have been there with the continent. Since the beginning, we are very close to this continent, and we do have to ramp up and amplify our messaging on our commitments and our priorities to addressing the issues that are important to them.

Andrea Mitchell

The UN has started focusing on artificial intelligence. There was a meeting in fact today and how it affects can threaten misinformation in the democratic processes. This issue is so hard for the United States regulators to even grapple with is a lot of lack of understanding. And it's evolving so quickly. How can a bureaucracy as cumbersome frankly, as the United Nations even come to grips with it?

Linda Thomas-Greenfield

They have to and they are working on on that and I was very pleased that the UK had this as their signature event today their foreign minister sat in the chair. We see this as a double edged sword. AI could be an extraordinary tool for the world for dealing with issues of hunger, for dealing with issues of health, for dealing with education across the world, but it also has a negative side. And those things have to be regulated. And it is only the UN that can regulate it for the world.

Andrea Mitchell

I want to ask you about Israel because of course President Herzog is in Washington met with the Secretary of State and the president he'll be addressing a joint meeting of Congress. And it was notable that he was invited by the Congressional leadership last fall actually, by the previous congressional leadership to come but that Prime Minister Netanyahu was not that was noted very much in Jerusalem as matter of fact by the Prime Minister, according to my reporting. So there was a conversation with the President yesterday. And it was not a formal invitation. But his suggestion that there would be a meeting sometime in the fall somewhere in the US it was not even suggested that it would be a White House meeting. US has always defended Israel at the United Nations because that becoming increasingly difficult, given this current coalition government's policies on settlements, which has made it increasingly difficult to even imagine geographically a Palestinian state.

Linda Thomas-Greenfield

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our position hasn't changed that we stand with Israel, we defend Israel's right to defend itself, but we also call on both sides not to take any measures that would interfere with the possibility of achieving a two state solution. And that message we give regularly to to both sides. I travel to the region I met with Palestinians I met with Israelis, President Herzog and and the former government and we have delivered those messages consistently over over many, many years. And we will continue to do everything possible to get us to a place where we can reach the possibilities for both Palestinians and Israelis to live in peace and and prosperity. But again, it it requires both sides to to cooperate and not take actions that might lead us in the direction of not achieving that.

Andrea Mitchell

There really haven't been negotiations, credible negotiations since 2014 by my count. Is there a leadership vacuum on both sides?

Linda Thomas-Greenfield

The leadership is there. The leadership I think what we need to see is a commitment by both sides. The leadership on both sides to find a peaceful way forward.

Andrea Mitchell

I wanted to ask you about confirmation process in the Senate, military and diplomatic. You've got one senator holding up 300 approximately 300 military confirmations, including the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of marine commandant, and you have another senator holding up within 60 Senate confirmations of State Department positions, including 35 career ambassadors. Is this a national security problem?

Linda Thomas-Greenfield

It is a national security problem. We need our top leadership in the field we need both our military as well as our diplomatic tools at their sharpest and at the highest levels. And many governments look at the fact that we we don't have ambassadors there as a reflection of the lack of interest in their countries. We have to have our ambassadors in place. One of those 60 Ambassadors one of the 35 Is Ambassador Shea, who is our ambassador in Lebanon has coming to be my deputy permanent representative and she's had her hearing and we're just waiting for her to be confirmed. We can't continue to do diplomacy with our hands tied behind our backs. And so there has to be more pressure on members of Congress to find a path to release these ambassadors as well as their military officers from the purgatory that these two senators have placed them in.

Andrea Mitchell

Finally, there's the issue of course of reproductive health for people in the military service. And Senator Tuberville, who spoke again, I believe with Secretary Austin today. What is it that they don't seem to understand you, you know, you were a woman of childbearing age having children while you were young Foreign Service officer, and know what the difficulties were decades ago when you were involved in government service and serving overseas. What don't they understand about women's needs for reproductive health services because this is not just abortion?

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Linda Thomas-Greenfield

No it is about reproductive health. And we've seen a number of really horrific cases where women have needed reproductive support that would require them to have an abortion or the removal of cells, and they can't get that and it's a life or death situation for them. And the administration again has been very, very clear that this is an assault on women's rights to reproductive health.

Andrea Mitchell

Well, I know we've imposed on your time and on the altitude and all of the changes, but I just know that there was no better way to wrap up our opening session of the Aspen security forum than with Ambassador Linda Thomas Greenfield. Thank you so very much.