

Roger D. Carstens
Special Presidential Envoy
Hostage Affairs

Thom Shanker, Moderator
Paul Beckett, Co-Host
Defense Writers Group
Project for Media and National Security
George Washington School of Media and Public Affairs

4 April 2024

Moderator: Greetings, and welcome to a very special Defense Writers Group with Roger D. Carstens, the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs.

Some of you are here for the first time. Our ground rules are as always, this is on the record. You can record for accuracy of quotes but there's no rebroadcast of audio or video.

I'll ask the first question. Three of you have emailed me already to get on the list, but we have lots of time to go around the table.

First, I do want to call on my special co-host today, Paul Beckett of the Wall Street Journal.

Mr. Beckett: Thank you, Thom. Thank you, Roger. We appreciate you being here. Thanks to all of you for coming.

The Journal, obviously this is an area, hostage-taking of foreign governments has been very much a focus of ours in the last year, since our colleague Evan Gershkovich was unlawfully detained in Russia.

The press freedom implications of that I think have been pretty well explored over the last year. It prompted a lot of other news organizations to withdraw their reporters, but it's also clear that with this practice on the rise around the world by various by various regimes that it is also increasingly a national security issue for the United States. So we are very

Professional Word Processing & Transcribing
(801) 556-7255

Carstens - 4/4/24

honored for all of you taking the time today to come and hear one of the government's foremost specialists on the topic talk to us, and if you do write from it, please me know -- PaulBeckett@WSJ.com because I would love to help amplify your stories in any way that we can. I really appreciate it. Thank you. Thank you all for coming.

Moderator: Thanks.

Mr. Ambassador, truly an honor to have you here. Since taking over three years ago I've tried to expand the topic area from just straight military, and as Paul said, this is a national security issue.

My first question is a two-parter. What a surprise. At the more strategic level, talk a little bit about the changing political nature of wrongful detention. How is it entering, as Paul described it, the level of a national security threat? Since you're the expert on that.

Secondly, and also obvious, can you give us the latest update on a couple of the cases that we all care about, Evan and Paul.

SPEHA Carstens: First off, Thom, thanks for bringing me in. It's good to talk to you all. I know you don't believe that, but I think it's important what you do. We actually appreciate the oversight and don't mind talking to journalists. If you don't believe me you can go and research all the interviews we've given. We don't run away from it. We actually embrace it. So even when you're asking the hard questions and holding us accountable I think we're pretty comfortable with that. It doesn't mean I'm not going to cringe or go like this when you ask your questions, but I'm grateful to be here.

Also Thom and I go way back, so it's good to see you again and grateful for this invitation. And Paul, I want to say thank you.

To my mind when we look at what we call the hostage recovery

Carstens - 4/4/24

enterprise, it used to really be just the US government. It used to be my office, an office that's headquartered over in the FBI called the Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell. It's not owned by the FBI but it sits in the FBI. Think if about 30 or 40 people that comprise an interagency task force responsible for sharing information about getting only hostages back. The third group is the Hostage Response Group at the White House, a convening authority.

That used to be what we thought of as the hostage recovery enterprise. To my mind it's much bigger than that. It's NGOs, it's congressmen and senators, it's their staffs, and I think it's the media. That doesn't mean that we necessarily plot and scheme and partner, but it does mean that I appreciate the amplification of these stories, whether it's Evan or whether it might have been those who were held in Iran or those that are currently held in other locations. So I appreciate this chance to talk and look forward to these questions.

In terms of I would say the national security threat at a higher level, I'm going to talk out of both sides of my mouth.

In June of 2022 President Biden issued an executive order that declared wrongful detention as a national security threat, and he was right in doing so because if someone takes an American citizen and arbitrarily detains them, essentially takes them wrongfully, they can actually use that person as a bargaining chip against the United States, and obviously that could put us in a bad position. At times we don't know what they're going to ask, at times they may not even know what to ask, but if a country especially someone we might consider a strategic competitor takes one of our citizens, we're going to have an issue with that and we have to be smart about it and be wise about how to either safeguard it or deter it and deal with it going forward.

Having said that, this is I guess a technique and a tactic that's been used pretty much since the beginning of time. If you ever go back and, if you haven't read them I'm not going to

Carstens - 4/4/24

ask you to, but to read like Herodotus or Xenophon or Thucydides or the Iliad or the Bible, I mean they're just like every few chapters someone else, either a nation state or a tribe is taking someone as hostage or holding them wrongfully and using them as a bargaining chip.

If you were to take a look and do an analysis of I'd say the last 60 or 70 years, you'll find that every administration since the Eisenhower administration -- I haven't gone further than that -- has had to wrestle with this topic. And pretty much every administration has done what we might consider to be a prisoner swap. Either a spy swap or something that resembles a spy swap in which people to the left and right are added on to the architecture of the spy for spy swap. So everyone's been wrestling with this.

I think based on how the United States performed during the conflict in Syria, which by the way was poorly -- we had to actually get more serious about this, and President Obama required us to do a Hostage Recovery Enterprise Review to determine whether we had the right structure, whether we had the right policies, whether we were doing things that made sense. The result of that review was absolutely not. We were not prepared, not doing the right things, had no architecture and were stiff-arming the families when they came to try to get information on what was going on with their loved ones. As a result in 2015 President Obama created this enterprise by issuing the executive order and that laid down I guess I'd say the architecture, the groundwork for what we're still doing today.

About the same time they put out a Presidential Policy Directive -- PPD-30. That kind of added some umph and it took what the President put in the executive order and actually gave us some routes to actually try to achieve that.

By the way, I'm all over the map on this one. I'm a stream of consciousness, so please forgive me.

Professional Word Processing & Transcribing
(801) 556-7255

Carstens - 4/4/24

In [2020] Congress kindly gave us the Levinson Act, they passed the Robert A. Levinson Act which not only codified what it is that we do in the government to bring people home but also gave us some more tools. Now we're given a sanctioning tool that we're able to use in conjunction with other allies, or members of the interagency. And we were given the task of coming up with a deterrent strategy. Something that will one day, if done properly, make this problem eventually go away.

But more importantly, it created the architecture and [lofted] it in so that our offices, essentially -- my office, SPEHA, and others can't really disappear if a new administration comes in. We have something that actually I would say is now starting to work well, is now starting to function, and I think we're on the verge of hopefully turning the corner and coming up with as much of a streamlined process as you possibly can in this arena to get things done.

Having said that, I'd say we're on SPEHA 3.0 hoping to get to 4.0 over the next year, and we're thinking hard about how we can keep evolving.

I've totally not just answered -- I don't think I answered your question, and I migrated all over the place. So if you want to rope me back in, that would be great.

Moderator: No, sir. A great strategic level view. Let's drop to operational and then to tactical. Give us an update on Evan, a friend of ours, colleague, with Paul and the others. Where does that stand today?

SPEHA Carstens: The United States made what we felt was a good offer for Evan and Paul Whelan back in November of last year. The Russians rejected that offer. I have to say while we were disappointed, it wasn't all that unexpected. They're pretty tough to negotiate with.

Since then we've been trying to cobble together something that we feel that the United States can bring together, that we feel

Carstens - 4/4/24

okay with laying on the table as a leverage, and we are trying to see if what we can find will actually meet the Russian requirement.

We're trying to bring together -- I probably didn't say it that way, so I'll restate it. We are trying to cobble together, bring together those things that the United States is able to offer and we are hoping that we can find something that will also interest the Russians to the point that they're willing to send Paul Whelan and Evan Gershkovich back to us.

It's actually not as easy as it sounds. I think it took many years. I think when I took the job I was naïve and I thought -- first off, I thought all these conversations would be held in smoke-filled back rooms. I thought nothing would be open to the press. I thought we'd be able to knock out deals that didn't have to deal with at times this horrific practice of person-to-person swaps. And I thought that if we came up with what we thought might be that thing, that release mechanism, it might be easier to bring to the table.

What you find is that it takes some time to actually gain alignment in Washington, DC and that's okay. You want to have that kind of interagency discussion about what you can put on the table. And it also takes some time to suss out what the other side wants. In dealing with a country like Russia, if they say they're interested in X, that's a starting point but you also have to go to the right and left side to a degree to see if X is really what they want, and frankly sometimes it helps them decide what they really want.

So the negotiating process tends to be a little longer than I might have thought before I took this job, and I will say much more excruciating.

Moderator: Thanks, Mr. Ambassador, very much.

We'll go through the three advance requests then we'll open the floor for the rest of the hour.

Carstens - 4/4/24

First, is Jeff Seldin of VOA.

DWG: Thank you very much for doing this.

First, I'm just wondering if there's any update or any information on the status of a wrongful determination for Alsu Kurmasheva.

Then bigger picture, you talked about a deterrence strategy. It seems like you've seen [inaudible] becoming again, not that it's new strategy, but big business. Hamas has employed it, Russia continues to employ it. Where are you on the deterrence strategy and how do you balance trying to get Americans back while at the same time trying to disincentivize adversaries like Russia or others from continuing to take American citizens, and every time they do there's enormous pressure for the US to give [it up] to bring them home.

SPEHA Carstens: Great questions, thank you. For the first one, on Alsu, we're very concerned. We've been looking at her case very closely. It's not yet been decided that she's wrongfully detained but it's something that we're still sussing out.

When someone's taken, especially in a country like Russia, a country that right now does not have a very good track record in terms of its relationship with our American citizens and media freedom. So when someone's taken overseas, especially Russia, we take a very hard look at it, and in doing so we're trying to bring together every little piece of information that we possibly can that can kind of help the Secretary possibly render a decision.

We've had cases, I can think of one case in particular, that it was another country, it was hard to gain information about what actually happened, and after about a year and a half, I think it was through a Top Secret reporting system, we got that one little piece of information and once that hit everyone's computer screens it seemed like everyone in the building was

Carstens - 4/4/24

like now, okay, this was it. Now this is wrongful, we all kind of get it. But you have to keep bringing that information in.

But maybe more to the point, and this might be something we can suss out later or talk about a little more.

When we take a look at a case like Evan's, it was so clear, so fast that we were able to go from Evan's arrest to a wrongful detention determination in about 11 days. And also with Danny Fenster's -- not equally as fast. The reason is because Evan had just recently been reaccredited as a journalist, his visa had been extended. He had been working in Russia. I was no-kidding a reporter from the Wall Street Journal. He was working on a story. And when he was arrested, it was curious to us that within 24 hours the FSB had put out a press release. The intelligence service had put out a press release announcing that he'd been detained. Between that and a few other things it was very clear to us right away, and we were able to take the facts of the case, overlay the criteria provided by Congress in the Levinson Act, and render that decision.

Other cases, like Alsu's are a little different. Not all cases are the same. And we're still doing the same thing. We're laying the facts out there and we're applying the Levinson Act criteria to the top of those facts and we're not quite there yet. I can't speak to whether it will become one or not, but that's going to remain to be seen as we keep gathering more information.

But I will share this, and forgive me if anyone's heard this before, but there is no case limit. If I were to gain ten cases tonight, that's not a big thing. The Secretary of State would just say Roger, hire one or two more people. So we don't fear taking cases. We don't stress out when we get a new case. We don't go back to the office like oh no, we have more work to do. Because, again, we've figured out the work streams and if the work becomes untenable we're just going to hire someone else. We don't fear adding extra cases. But what we want to do is make sure that we're using the process that Congress has asked

Carstens - 4/4/24

us to use in a way that's responsible and that requires us to really take a hard look at the facts.

On the second question on deterrence -- by the way, if I didn't answer that, come back at me. In fact did I answer that one okay, or do you want to scratch that a little more?

DWG: No, that's good.

SPEHA Carstens: Okay. On deterrence, we've been working on it for almost three years now. There was a meeting that I had with the Secretary of State. We went into a meeting and on the way out of that meeting he stopped me and said Roger, we've got to make sure that if we're considering doing the things that we often consider to bring people home, we've got to know that there's an end state, that we'll one day turn the corner and we will take using people as bargaining chips and put that as a diplomatic tool onto the dust bin of history. So he said start working on that strategy.

Now about the same time the Canadians have come to the same conclusion, wrestling with the two Michaels issue. They put out a declaration that's called the Declaration Against Arbitrary Intention in State to State Relations. Super long, but it was a document that pretty much I guess called out and brought to everyone's attention an awareness of arbitrary detention being used as a diplomatic tool and asked countries to come out against it.

At this point we have 75 signatories. Now one signatory is the European Union, but for the most part we have 74 countries that have signed onto this. Countries agree that this is a horrific practice that must be ended. But to our mind, we have to take the next step. We have to actually come up with concrete actions that nation states are willing to take. And as Secretary Blinken envisions it, if we do this right, we'll have a multilateral coalition of maybe 10, 20, 30 countries with the goal of one day a citizen that's arbitrarily taken from, fill in the blank -- it could be Kenya, could be Belgium, again any

Carstens - 4/4/24

country. And yet this coalition feels that that person's been arbitrarily detained, they can go to the offending country -- say Iran or Russia -- and start leveling tools that we've all been able to develop in a manner that raises the cost for that country of taking people and holding them arbitrarily.

So if we can do that, we're hoping that at a certain point the Iranians, the Russians, et cetera may come to the conclusion that it no longer benefits them to take citizens and hold them wrongfully, and instead if they want to achieve their aims they have to do other things, for example sitting down at a negotiating table and talking through what they want just like other countries.

We've been working on those tools. I think to my mind they have to span the whole realm of national power. It can't just be diplomacy. It has to be diplomacy, intelligence, military, economic, financial, legal, the information space. All the tools that we can perhaps bring together or the tools that have never been used in the service of trying to deter something like this, that's what we're analyzing and taking out and putting in. We want to get beyond just that sanctioning tool that's always put out when something, when we want to impact something or influence it. And it could be anything as simple as a diplomatic demarche that may be 5, 10, 30 countries lay on an offending country.

But right now we're still in the development phase. We've been at this roughly on the deterrence side for about three years. I think we've made some pretty good progress. I have two people in my office who do nothing but that. That's all they do. 24x7 they do nothing else but work on deterrence and working with other countries and trying to build out what these tools might look like.

I guess that maybe answers that question. We have something that is a horrific practice. We don't want to do this forever. And if we have to do something like when President Biden made the decision to trade Viktor Bout for Brittney Griner, we want

Carstens - 4/4/24

to assure him, the American people, members on Capitol Hill, et cetera, that one day we're going to figure that out and we're not going to have to do that again, but we're not quite there yet so we have to walk and chew gum at the same time. Start building out a deterrence strategy which may very well take another 10, 11, 12 years, while at the same time dealing with the problems before us.

Interestingly enough, my numbers are actually going down. So if you said oh, my gosh, you've been doing this, surely more countries are going to keep taking more and more Americans, but there was a time when my numbers were over 50 in terms of hostages and wrongful detainees. My numbers are now hovering in between 20 and 30. The hostages taken in Gaza, of course, increase those numbers. So not all the countries that are taking Americans quickly go out and restock the pond. We're getting people back and the evidence is still -- I'll say that, I don't think you can really draw a conclusion yet because I think we still have to keep reviewing the evidence over time. But right now we're seeing the numbers go down and hopefully they stay there. I think time will tell.

Moderator: Thank you, Mr. Ambassador.

The next advance questioner is Anne Flaherty of ABC News.

SPEHA Carstens: And please all me Roger. Ambassador is like really kind of still freaky for me, so I'm Roger, if you don't mind.

DWG: I'm hoping you can talk about the condition of the hostages taken by Hamas. Do we have any visibility on what kind of condition they're in? Has the Red Cross met with them? And is there any evidence that there might be some not within Hamas control?

SPEHA Carstens: This is one where -- I'll say every question that you've asked, the answer is, whether I were to speak on a classified level or unclassified level -- it's rather murky. I

Carstens - 4/4/24

think we're still trying to assess and gain some sort of concrete awareness -- awareness might not be the right word. We're trying to determine concretely what the status is of everyone, and I'd say the picture still remains unclear to all of us.

I think at this point we can say what I think is obvious to everyone, and that is of the 12 Americans that were taken, four are back. We've assessed three as being deceased. We're looking for, I believe five more are alive but I would say that the evidence that supports that, it's not hard core, concrete, we don't have proof of life, for example, which is something that we always seek. And yet I would say at least the indications make us feel that that's what we're looking at.

The reason I am being a little vague, anything that would possibly indicate what the status is of someone being held, unless it was a proof of life video that was turned over to ABC News, it most likely is going to be classified either at the Secret, maybe the Top Secret level, maybe at the Secret/Top Secret level compartmented, just because of the way you might garner the information.

What I probably couldn't do is get into any of the dirty details about gathering information or exact things that we might think is going on, but what I can say is that the situation still is a little vague, and that we at least right now feel comfortable of the numbers and disposition and status of the Americans that are held.

DWG: A steady stream of weapons going to Israel, hundreds of open contracts years in the making -- we understand that -- and that [inaudible] your effort. Does it help that we are funding the Israeli military?

SPEHA Carstens: My answer might disappoint you and it might sound like I'm trying to box myself in, but those are questions that are best left to Near Eastern Affairs or the White House. They're questions that I don't consider. And while that might

Carstens - 4/4/24

seem like we're -- I'm trying to come up with a phrase here. I'm not very articulate today. It's been a rough week. While it might seem like we're trying to run away from the issue what I can tell you is, and I'm going to jump into another country or two, our work with say Venezuela and our work with Russia over the last few years and our work with other places. Iran. We have found that if we can divorce ourself from some of the broader policy considerations we have a better chance of bringing Americans home.

So if you want to bring people home from Iran, the natural inclination is like oh, meeting in Vienna, let's snap link into the nuclear deal and see where we go. Our opinion is let's not snap link in because the nuclear deal may not progress. I don't want to be -- I don't think we want to be tied to a broader geopolitical issue that may or may not be fixed.

So I think in terms of us trying to avoid getting too tightly I guess lashed to a policy question or consideration that's actually paid off in trying to bring people home. I think we could probably replicate that in at least my office's approach to how we think about Israel.

Having said that, I think as you can see by the news that you report, the negotiations are being conducted at the highest levels, as opposed to my office conducting it. We have the Secretary of State, the President and CIA Director Burns. So our nation's, if anything, showing the seriousness with which we take this crisis and therefore any questions that might relate to like broader policy concerns are best directed towards them.

Moderator: Thank, Roger.

Next question from the table is Dmitry Kirsanov of TASS.

DWG: Thank you so much for doing this.

First a brief point of clarification, if I may, on something you said at the top. Is it the natural description to say, is it

Carstens - 4/4/24

fair to say that the US is essentially preparing a new offer to swap Paul Whelan and Evan Gershkovich? I'm trying to cobble together.

SPEHA Carstens: We are in the process of trying to put together what might look like our next offer. That's in progress. We're always trying to find out what the next proposal might look like. What we don't want to do is offer a proposal that's rejected in November and then sit on our hands for the next many months. It's our duty to figure out what it's going to take to get this done and see if we, number one, again, if the United States can bring together that proposal; and number two, to find something that the Russians will accept.

DWG: And the question is, one, [inaudible], that President Putin spoke extensively about Evan Gershkovich in his interview with Tucker Carlson in February. So he's [inaudible] that it was his desire to get Mr. Gershkovich return to the United States. So my question is, is the US willing to work along the lines suggested by President Putin to get this case resolved?

SPEHA Carstens: I think the answer, I'm trying to think of a good way to put this.

Actually, rephrase that last sentence if you wouldn't mind, not rephrase it. Are we willing to -- the answer is, we want to find a way to bring Evan back, but along the lines of --

DWG: He was pretty specific in his remarks. So my question is, are you willing to work along those lines? Or are you saying this is an [off topic]. We would like to do something else -- X, Y, Z.

SPEHA Carstens: I think what President Putin said in the Tucker Carlson interview is of value, just on face value, because he is giving us a view into what might be possible to release Evan. At the same time, we have to keep in mind that not everything he said may be accurate, even when he's proposing to an extent what it might look like to bring Evan home. So even though he might

Carstens - 4/4/24

say that, that becomes an extra data point for us. It doesn't necessarily become the Russian offer. Even though he's the president with, to my mind, the ultimate authority, we have a channel that we've been using for the last I guess many months, ever since we brought Trevor Reed home, and that's the channel where official offers will be levied and responses will be received. And that's kind of the world where we play in.

So even though the president of Russia may say in an interview that a successful deal might look like this, that and the other, we have to at least take that kind of seriously and use that as information to be considered. But at the same time we still have to go back and get, number one, again, pull together a proposal that we're willing to offer; and number two, recognize that even though he's the president, those are data points to be considered but may not actually be what in the end state actually gets the job done.

Moderator: A question from the table.

DWG: Rachel Oswald of CQ Roll Call.

Can you go back to Alsu and her case? Just because I think for a lot of us on the outside it looks like a wrongful detention case, and I won't say -- I'm kind of speaking out in my capacity as chair of the Press Freedom Committee, the National Press Club, and we've been working to have her declared wrongfully detained.

So I appreciate what you're saying about the open and shut nature of Evan's case and recognizing that with Alsu there was this issue of her going back to take care of her mother and other things and it wasn't so -- so I recognize that.

But also, she said she's not, she doesn't feel healthy. Her health isn't great right now. In the event that a deal is worked out with Russia to free Paul and Evan, many of us want Alsu in that, and we're worried that her not being declared wrongfully detained would cause her to not be included in that

Carstens - 4/4/24

deal and that's why there is such a push right now for that decision to be reached. Also because there would also be more consular services if she's declared wrongfully detained as well.

SPEHA Carstens: If I were in your shoes I would probably see the situation the same way and feel the same way. Being in my shoes where we at times have access to more information, or at times we realize there are gaps in our information that we have to fill so that we can fulfill the requirements by the Levinson Act, we're just not quite there yet. That doesn't mean that it won't happen, it doesn't mean it won't happen like next week, three weeks from now. But alternatively, it might not. It's just something we have to constantly keep reviewing the information and the facts to make that determination.

I don't want to go back to something I said, but I do feel it's important. We don't fear making the determination. If the facts of the case with the Levinson Act overlaid on top of it speak to wrongfulness, the Secretary will make that decision. He's not going to hold back on making that.

But I think what I'm hearing in your voice and I've heard from others is there seems to be a sense of urgency. You're bringing up that there might be concern that a deal might be struck before a determination is made and that might keep Alsu from being a part of that deal.

These are things that we're thinking about as well. We are wrestling with these topics. It's all out there before us. We're mindful of the time component and I would say, in fact you can write this down but it would be stupid to write it down I think, but I just told someone not more than about two hours ago that based on this job, I have no tattoos, but if I had one it would be to get Urgency tattooed across my body because that's what we feel in my office. There is a sense of urgency on every case that it's palpable.

If you get a chance, come into my office. I see a few folks that have been in there. There's energy in that office.

Professional Word Processing & Transcribing
(801) 556-7255

Carstens - 4/4/24

But the idea that every day that someone's in a jail is a day that they could receive TV. Every day they're in jail is a day that they could have a run-in with another prisoner. Every day is a day they could suffer a mental fracture that might be something they never recover from. So we treat every case as urgent, even if the case hasn't come to ours. So we are not passively but we are actively taking a look at all these cases to include Alsu's to try to find those indicators of wrongfulness.

You can imagine that if -- I don't want to go in that direction. I'm trying to hit something else you asked about.

If we're able to come up with a deal that the United States can offer and the Russians are willing to accept, it's always conceivable that we will ask for a broader deal to bring people back that may not be wrongfully detained but might be subject to a humanitarian release request. There are people out there that are suffering in prison, cases that may never be mine, but we realize at times there's a health component or there's another component that makes it worthy of trying to cobble together a deal that includes a humanitarian police request on the side.

So we're going to look at all of this. I don't have a good answer for you today but I do want to assure you that this is something that is getting reviewed constantly.

By the way, the tall young gentleman with the red hair is the case officer for EUR. He works for me. He handles the Russia cases. He usually goes home at 7 or 8 every night. Why? Because of what it's taking for these cases. It's an active process for us.

Moderator: Nick Schiffrin, PBS NewsHour; then Chris Gordon, Air and Space Magazine.

DWG: Thanks for doing this. Two quick questions I think you can answer, then a third that you probably won't be willing to.

Carstens - 4/4/24

Is the US willing to declare a dual national unlawful detained?

SPEHA Carstens: Absolutely.

DWG: You and I will say for the transcript Jeff as well at the table, we're both on the, I believe it's called Permanently Designated Staff List, recently by Russia. Essentially a sanction or a do not travel. Do you believe Russia's sending a message by putting you on that list to say that they are not interested in any kind of swap agreement?

SPEHA Carstens: I don't think so. I don't think that designation will have much meaning or play in this. And even if they were trying to send a message, in the larger scheme of things it's such a small thing in terms of the tensions that already exist between our two countries, and even though the United States has not been getting along with Russia for the last two plus years, we've still found a way to bring Trevor Reed home, Brittney Griner home, and still have these discussions. So even though they might draw out a designation like that, I don't think it has any impact on anything that we're doing right now.

DWG: Great.

The Whelan, Gershkovich and I'll mention Navalny in a question that you probably won't be willing to go. So you had a phrase earlier where you were saying cobble together what the US is able to offer. The German government in the days before Navalny was assassinated or died, I should say, was willing to swap Navalny, was willing to go in for that deal that the Russians had been asking for Krasikov who is in Germany custody. Have you been looking for equivalents of Krasikov in other European countries that the Russians would say that's a swap we're willing to make? And have you found one?

SPEHA Carstens: I'll kind of split the difference, and this is a good time for me to get some more coffee. [Laughter].

Carstens - 4/4/24

Moderator: I've known Roger a long time. He's a Special Forces officer. He runs toward the sound of fire, not away from it.

SPEHA Carstens: Thank you, Thom.

The job is kind of hard because I think my natural inclination from, and maybe who I am or time in the military, what have you makes me really want to ensure that you believe the words coming out of my mouth, and that's always hard when you can't tell everyone the full story. There's a reason why we really try to build strong relationships with family members of those being detained, because over time -- when you first tell someone we're doing everything we possibly can to bring your loved ones back, they don't believe it. Of course not. You're the government. If anything, they think you might be lying to cover up the fact that you're doing nothing. And over time when they get to see what we do and start to get a sense of how we operate, eventually you win people over.

That's harder to do here So when I say we're working hard every day to try to do something, if I were in your shoes I'd be a little skeptical. If I were to wave a wand and say you're now working on an internship in my office for three months, you'd walk out going oh my gosh, the amount of stuff.

So I'd say that overall I think people would be stunned at the amount of time, creativity and effort that we put in to try and define the ways to bring Americans back. And yet I go to bed every night knowing that I have failed somewhere between 20 and 30 people. I've not found a way to bring them back yet. And Evan Gershkovich and Paul Whelan are two of the people that I've not found that way. So in a way I'm letting them down and their family members, and we take that burden very seriously. It's not something that's light. And it does feel weird to be sitting here relaxed, have a cup of coffee, got a nice suit on, well not a nice suit, a cheap suit. I'm going to go back and do some work. But you know, you would rather, if there's something I could be doing differently to bring them back, we'd be doing

Carstens - 4/4/24

it.

That gets into part of my answer. We are working exceedingly hard and creatively to cobble together that offer that we can pull together and that the Russians would be able to accept to bring Evan Gershkovich, Paul Whelan home. And yet it's hard to get into the details because it doesn't help them.

I'm not going to explain this well. Sometimes I talk in a halting way because I realize you're going to like cut this up. I should just talk and get out of my own head.

Here's what haunts me. I have a fear that I'm going to say something in one of these events -- I don't care if they fire me. That happens all the time, people say the wrong thing, pack your bags and move out. What I worry about is I say the wrong thing and that's what pissed the Russians off, or that's what's putting negotiations on the back burner, or that's what caused another country that was thinking about partnering with us not to partner. And that's why when I think we think about these engagements, we number one, can't say certain things because I could go to jail because I violated the law by revealing classified information.

But number two, even when it's not classified, in my mind I have to think is this going to get me closer or push me further away from bringing Evan and Paul back? And usually talking about the details at this stage, it's just not something that takes me closer to my objective.

So there are certain times that it's better to keep our cards close to our chest, make sure that the conversations are quieter, that they're not disclosed, and I think we're here. I think we'd be having a different conversation if we had met in maybe June or July of last year because I think you're still in the Wild, Wild West. It's rough and ready. You're still trying to scratch out the contours of what a deal might look like. As you progress a little bit, and since we've already put an offer down last November, things have progressed to the point where to

Carstens - 4/4/24

my mind it just is not helpful to the effort to bring the guys home if we throw the details out on the table.

But what I will say is we are, we're looking at about everything because you'd expect me to. If I'm just worried about what -- and I'll be facetious. If I'm worried about what only the Department of Commerce or the Department of Education can put into my effort, then I've narrowed it. If I'm wider and say what can the whole US government bring, what can partners and allies bring to bear, what kind of efforts can I line up with non-profits, NGOs, other organizations, what can I line up with any other entity that might give us that, that's how we look at the problem.

When we take a case -- I know I'm talking too much. When we take a case, we'll bring down about 10 or 12 people into a Top Secret SCIF and we will just [inaudible]. We'll have the experts on that area, the decision-making profiles of the people that we're going to be dealing with, people that have had successful negotiations with these folks, we'll bring them in from the CIA, Department of Treasury, Department of Defense, the White House, and we'll sit there on a big white wall and just start writing up specified tasks, implied tasks, limits, constraints, risks, risk mitigation, and eventually you start to shape out course of action one, which is an offer or maybe even a strategy. Course of action two, course of action three. And by the end of that day we have something that we feel like okay, it's not perfect but we can start moving out on this azimuth. And by the way, the interagency helped us create it and we can start progressing.

Maybe just a long way of saying that we are throwing a lot of energy across the entire interagency and when we look at the broad picture, as I look at that blank wall, about who we might reach out to, we of course will think about reaching out to partner countries and allies because they may actually at some point be part of the solution.

But in terms of the specifics of this case, it's best to keep

Carstens - 4/4/24

cards close to the chest at this point just because I don't want to say anything that endangers our efforts.

Moderator: Chris Gordon, Air and Space Forces Magazine.

DWG: To follow up on the hostages in Gaza, what exactly is your role in the American mediation of the ceasefire talks between Israel and Hamas? Even though this is happening at a high level, what's your role in advising it and how so?

SPEHA Carstens: This is one where as I said, the lead negotiating role's been taken by senior members of the White House and the leadership team. So the people that are going over to the Middle East to have these meetings, the President, Secretary of State, Director of the CIA and other people that work for them at the highest levels, they're the ones that have the negotiating lead on this, and that's fine. My office, we have an unofficial motto and that is we don't care who comes up with the plan, we don't care who negotiates, and we certainly don't care who gets the credit as long as the job's getting done.

And this is one where the United States has put its best foot forward. Director Burns was the US Ambassador to Jordan a few years back. So he knows the area, he knows the people. He has the relationships that are very helpful. The President and Secretary of State have shown that they are personally invested in trying to find solutions. The Secretary, as you've seen, has made numerous trips over there, put a lot of miles on the aircraft to try to come up with a solution here.

So in this case, we are in a supportive role. Whatever the White House or other entities that are actually meeting with the Egyptians, the Qataris, the Israelis, we are going to support whatever efforts they have.

What we have been doing is working with our counterparts in Israel. And when I say that, it's not the negotiating team, it's Gal Hirsch's team, essentially the SPEHA counterpart, and we've

Carstens - 4/4/24

also been meeting with the families.

For example, when Gaza first kicked off on the 10th of October, I sent my deputy Steve Dillon to Tel Aviv and he stayed there for 104 days. In that 104 days he worked with Gal Hirsch, my counterpart. They were just bringing together what might look like a SPEHA like effort, and I think Steve was there to bounce good ideas off of, maybe advise at times when asked, always with a sense of humility, and offer any support that we could possibly offer in dealing with the situation as they were wrestling with it.

Additionally, we had American citizens that were taken into Gaza, so Steve spent time meeting with the families of those that were taken. My office has done the same. Since a lot of the families have come over to the United States, we've made ourselves entirely available to them.

I went to Israel the last part of November, early part of December and met with Gal, other members of the Israeli government, but more importantly, I met with the Hostage Forum that has a presence in not only Israel but also the United States, and met with the families of those American citizens being held. But I also met with American families that had no American nexus. I think they just wanted to get a sense of whether someone from outside Israel cared about what they were going through. And my time's theirs. I would daresay I've met with over 40 of the families that have no nexus to the United States and I think that's important. We want to hear their stories. We want to know what they're going through. And we want to be able to provide some emotional support. And as Secretary Blinken said, even if we were somehow able to get the Americans out of Gaza, we're not going anywhere. We're going to stay there until everyone's out of Gaza. So this is an effort that we're committed to until all the hostages come back.

I don't know if I answered the question, so let me know if I got off target there.

Carstens - 4/4/24

DWG: These talks are happening at a high level, but your office physically, how much input are you having? How much dialogue are you having --

SPEHA Carstens: Not much. And we're okay with that. The people that the President's chosen to negotiate are the best our nation can offer, so I think we're in a good position in terms of who's conducting negotiation and we're in support in any way, shape or form that's needed.

Now I will say it's different from other negotiations. There are negotiations that we've had that my office is sitting at the table with the other side trying to hash out how we're going to solve the problem, but Gaza's not one, but I think my office is certainly okay with that. We're in full support of what the President's trying to achieve with the negotiators that he's sent forward.

Moderator: We're at the ten minute mark. [Inaudible].

DWG: [Inaudible] a question from the Wall Street Journal about Evan?

Moderator: Sure.

Here, here, and then the Wall Street Journal gets the closing question.

DWG: Thanks so much. I'm Josh Keating from Vox.

Last week [inaudible] in Afghanistan acknowledged detaining two Americans, one of whom has been publicly reported, Ryan Corbett. I was wondering, one, if you could give us any update on those talks; and two, what the particular challenges are given the US non-recognition of the Taliban government in terms of trying to negotiate under those circumstances.

SPEHA Carstens: I think on the status, as I think about it, it really takes me into the same realm as we were just discussing

Carstens - 4/4/24

with Russia. There are times when the discussions, to my mind, are sensitive and I don't want to throw details out there because it may not help me do my job in getting the people back.

In terms of being able to do business with the Taliban despite our recognition policy, we have found ways to bring people back. Mark Frerichs came back a while back and we found a way to conduct those negotiations in a way that made sense.

So I think just because we don't recognize someone or not doesn't really impact the actual decision to negotiate or the conduct of negotiations.

Since I've been in this job for four years, we've spent some time talking to other countries where we either don't have an embassy or we may not have recognized them because they're the people that keep taking our citizens and we can't let the recognition policy get in the way of our ability to bring people home. So we're finding ways to work with that and work around it.

DWG: Is that a case where sort of recognition issues or more [inaudible] is something that's part of the negotiation for the hostages?

SPEHA Carstens: This gets into what I was discussing in trying to detach ourselves from the broader policy discussions because that is an important discussion that I think not only the United States but other countries are wrestling with. What should the recognition policy be. I think we've been pretty clear at this point where we stand, but I for one do not want to, I say snap link -- I don't want to tie myself to some of the broader policy issues just because we don't know how and when those broader policies will be resolved. So it's better to, if possible, sidle off to the greatest extent we can the wrongful detainee/hostage discussions.

DWG: Robbie Gramer of Foreign Policy magazine.

Carstens - 4/4/24

Can you talk about the working relationship and rapport you have with your Russian counterparts at the working level and day to day? Do you feel they're for the most part honest brokers? Do they have the cache and authority to actually talk about negotiations? Is it a different crew of negotiators on the other side for each individual person? Just give us some mechanics on that.

And second, on the deterrence piece, do you honestly believe that there's any end point, there's a credible form of deterrence for hostage-taking? Like you said, this goes back to Thucydides and Herodotus. When you think of things like hard deterrence, the opposite end of the spectrum is Canadian declarations and demarches. That doesn't seem like a really good deterrent for a government like Iran and Russia.

So can you talk about like whether you actually believe this is a form of deterrence that will --

SPEHA Carstens: Sure. On the first question, getting into the specifics of the channel and the people that we're negotiating with, I've got to leave that on the table too. It's something that, it would be too specific, and it might be something where someone reads it, if they open up TASS tomorrow and they see what you've written, they may be oh my gosh, and they may not feel good about what might have been said about this, that or the other. So I'd rather leave that on the table.

But here's what I can say. It's a channel that we've used to bring home Trevor Reed and Brittney Griner, and it's the channel which we've used to make an offer last November. So the channel works. That might be the answer, whether it's empowered or not, and we feel like we have a channel that we can use to offer or make offers and receive responses. So it doesn't get into details but I can at least give you a little tidbit there.

In terms of deterrence, I actually do believe in it and a lot of it comes from spending hours at night, frankly, like a bottle of wine, ,just sitting there talking and sketching out on the wall

Carstens - 4/4/24

what it might look like. At a certain point you can build a credible story, a narrative about what deterrence might look like. I'd tell it to you but it would bore you and it would cost you another hour of your life. I'm busy, you're busy. But you can actually build out a story of what deterrence could look like in about seven, eight or nine years if everyone's able to bring some of these tools together.

The hard part is going to be, I think, in ensuring that nations can come up with a common definition of what it means to be arbitrarily detained; that they can agree that someone has been arbitrarily detained; that we have that mechanism, and that once done they can come together and agree on which tools to levy. In other words, who does what in order to counter what another nation state has done like an Iran or a Russia. But it will probably happen long after I've left this job or been fired. But I can see a time seven, eight, nine years from now where we can actually stop wrongful detentions or make it so painful that if someone takes someone the mathematics aren't going to add up like they used to now.

The harder part is going to be hostage taking. I think we can come up with a way that eventually puts wrongful detention on the dust bin of history. Hostage taking is going to be another problem altogether.

So my office will probably always exist, but if we do the wrongful detention side properly, maybe I can downsize in about ten years and we can just keep the team that purely works on hostages.

Moderator: Great answer.

Final question, honor to the Wall Street Journal.

DWG: Brett Forrest with the Wall Street Journal. Thank you for adding this.

Roger, I know we've been through this a few times today but I

Carstens - 4/4/24

just want to make sure that we're taking advantage of, making the most of being here with you today.

Are there any other factual details that you can share about your negotiations with the Russians regarding Evan?

SPEHA Carstens: The quick answer is no, but let me just think if there's anything I can add to provide color here.

You know that one crazy TV show where you can call someone and get a lifeline -- Fletcher, what can I say that's not going to put you and I in jail?

Fletcher: Probably nothing.

SPEHA Carstens: I guess there's nothing.

DWG: We've talked about different people that Russia might be interested in, but in the past we've seen the US engineer swaps for among other things financial considerations, right? And we know that some countries have taken Americans most likely with the view to use them to reduce sanctions, et cetera. Are those options something you've looked at regarding Evan's case?

SPEHA Carstens: I'm not going to say Evan's case, so allow me to go broad if I may.

We take a look at that in every case, and the reason is you can imagine what the response is when you go up to the National Security Council and say that you're thinking about swapping this person for an American who's been wrongfully detained. It's always a very tough conversation and you realize that you're going to have to spend time aligning it. If there's a way we can get out of it by simply rolling back a sanction, that would be easy, but we'd be like hitting that early.

Also when you go to these meetings, when it gets up to very high levels, you have to show our math. You might have a senior leader say okay, you're asking us to swap this person who was

Carstens - 4/4/24

found guilty in the US justice system and sentenced to this amount of time in jail, a serious criminal, and you want to trade this person that's absolutely guilty for this innocent American over here. And what they'll usually ask is okay, did you guys even consider this? And my answer pretty much always has got to be yes, sir, we tried that in March of 2021. Okay. But did you guys even think about this? Sir, we tried that from February of 2020 to June of 2022. Okay. And then it goes on to the next person. I'm talking about Department of Defense, Attorney General, et cetera. You're going to have to show your math. And woe is you, woe is the person who when they come up with their brilliant idea and you're like wow, we actually didn't think of that. That meeting's over. It's like okay, why don't you guys get your act together and come back.

So we try everything, and we have test-driven numerous solutions with not just the Russians but other countries as well. And every case is different. So it's not just a broad hey, we tried everything on all these cases. If it's a specific case, we have to take a look at that specifically and come up with everything that might possibly work, and then actually test drive it to see if it actually will work, because I'll be a hero if I can solve some of these problems without having to do something as excruciating as suggesting a swap. But there's almost nothing that we do that's not just hard.

The bad guys, this would be my dream, that someone, that the Russians take someone and I finally meet with them and it's like okay, what's it going to take to get our American back, and they say well, we hear that you're going to name a post office in Missoula, Montana next week. We're going to ask that you name it the Stalin Post Office. I'd be like done. That would be awesome.

Instead, it's something brutally hard. They want the merchant of death, or they want this hard thing. So it's never been easy. The things that they want are the things that are very hard to give and I would say I am so thrilled when we bring Americans home, I get to watch them come on the plane, I get to

Carstens - 4/4/24

watch them get off on American soil, they fall into the arms of their loved ones. It's a beautiful moment. But then I go back that night and when I'm getting ready to go to bed in a way you feel a little discomfited because of what your country had to do to bring them back. They always feel like that. And at the same time, I'm grateful that the President's made these decisions because it's important to bring people home and it's important to let people know that your blue passport has meaning. That if another country gets you, and wrongfully details you, or a terrorist group takes you hostage, your country is going to work overtime to bring you home.

DWG: Just one final question.

So the accepted wisdom when it comes to this case is that he will be convicted in court, right? And then he will be sent out to a penal colony. And then only at that time would Russia seriously consider making a swap. We saw that with the Griner case, the Reed case. But we've also seen Russia act differently, particularly with the gentleman in Kaliningrad who was not adjudicated and was sent home.

So the question is, in your conversations with your opposite numbers over there, have you been led to believe that it's possible to get Evan back before all that takes place? Can we see him sooner?

SPEHA Carstens: In my effort not to make news I can answer that in a way that makes news and answer it in a way that doesn't make news.

At a certain point a trial takes place, and then anywhere from 9 to 14 months later the trial ends, they're found guilty, they're given a disproportionate sentence, and then they're off to the far reaches of Russia and then we can start making, we can bargain.

Two things. Number one, the Russians have the power and the ability to interrupt that process at any time and we recognize

Carstens - 4/4/24

that. Number two, it's not in our interest to wait.

So if we can get Evan back tomorrow, then we're getting him back tomorrow. We're going to definitely make an effort. We're not going to wait for that process to take place. Even if his court case were to start on the first of July, we are going to try to find ways to interrupt that process and bring him home sooner rather than later.

In my perfect world, and I think I said this in another interview, I'd like to do that before that. If there's a way to interrupt this pre-trial detention that he's currently under, that to me is like the sweet spot. Let's not wait. Let's bring Paul and Evan home now.

Moderator: Whether we call you Roger or Mr. Ambassador or Colonel Carstens, as reporters, recovering journalists and citizens, thank you for what you're doing. We want these people to come home.

The floor is yours for any final wrap-up comments.

SPEHA Carstens: First of all, thanks for having me here. It's great to meet you all. I hope I was able to give you something there that gives you a sense of what we're trying to do.

At the same time I just want to acknowledge that there must be an emptiness on your side in that I'm not always able to give you the answers that you want. It is easier when someone's first taken because again, you're in the Wild West days and you come and ask questions and we'll just throw information right out there. As the case progresses, and I see your nod because we've been talking about these things in Venezuela for years. As the cases progress there comes that point where you just aren't able to give the information. And why that bothers me professionally and personally, is I never want you or the public or the families or anyone else to think that we're using the statement "I can't talk about it right now" to hide the fact that we're not trying to move heaven and earth.

Carstens - 4/4/24

As you probably know, I spent years of my life in a hostage rescue unit in Special forces where I would have gladly laid down my life or put my life at risk to bring people home. Gladly. Not even a consideration. That's the ethos that I think my entire office tries to bring to bear, in that we are going to do anything we can to get them home. And honestly, if you take a look at the record under President Biden and Secretary Blinken with 46 Americans coming home, the administration is committed to getting this done.

So just because we may not be able to answer the questions in the detail that you want, and I feel back about that, I hope you leave with the sense that with the 46 Americans we have found a way to bring back that we are trying to move heaven and earth with a sense of urgency to make it happen because I cannot think of anything that's going to make me happier than to have that discussion with you when Evan eventually comes home. And he will come home. The question is when. But I am looking forward to that chat that you and I have on that day that he comes home.

I also look forward to fulfilling the commitment that I've given to the Whelan family, Elizabeth, face to face on many times. I've been to her house up in Chappaquiddick, Massachusetts a few times and I've sat down and said Elizabeth, we're going to find a way to get that done. The first time I told her that was about four years ago. And you can imagine what that feels like, going to bed every night. It's not like oh, I've got a job. It's more like I am failing Elizabeth Whelan and Paul and his parents every day I'm not getting the job done and that's a serious weight. And I don't want to get rid of that weight. I want that thing right square in my back as something that motivates me to get the job done every day.

Again, my apologies for not being able to give you the detail you want, and at the same time I hope you understand that I really have one task and that is to bring them home, and at times I'm not going to provide details if I think that might detract. But I'm definitely not trying to stiff-arm the great

Professional Word Processing & Transcribing
(801) 556-7255

Carstens - 4/4/24

work that you're doing. And I encourage you to keep doing it and I don't mind if you keep coming back at me. It's a process that I actually appreciate.

Moderator: Thank you for a thoughtful and thought-provoking discussion.

SPEHA Carstens: Thank you, sir. I'm very grateful.

#