The Crossley Center and Consulate-General of Japan in Denver sponsored a program in March 2022 to discuss and analyze diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific. The Beijing Winter Olympics accord of Feb. 4 between Russia’s President Vladimir Putin and China’s President Xi Jinping and the Russian invasion of Ukraine became major new factors for the foreign policy experts to consider within the discussion topics.

The PowerPoint slides on the left describe the backdrop to the program’s topics and presentations.

Three foreign policy panels held with seven professors/policy experts from Japan and from the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at the University of Denver. The newly confirmed ambassador to Serbia, former Korbel School Dean, Christopher Hill, joined in the second panel as a special guest. Prof. Floyd Ciruli, director of the Crossley Center for Public Opinion Research, moderated the panel discussions and presented these slides.

An examination of American public opinion shows that the ferocity of the invasion of Ukraine has rallied Americans to the Ukraine cause. Americans now see Russia as a threat and Ukraine as a victim. The American public supports sanctions, but not direct combat. President Biden has helped rally the allies and guide the effort, but he hasn’t received much credit from voters.
The West (geopolitical usage) failed to heed Putin’s threats. His imperialistic views have been voiced for 20 years in his calls for restoring Greater Russia. He viewed NATO and the West as holding Russia back. The effort to neutralize or dismember Ukraine has been a long-stated goal. Since 2014, his threats became more urgent as the war in the Donbas ended in a stalemate and the politics of Ukraine shifted toward the West. In 2021, Putin gave his “Historical Unity” speech and began to assemble troops. On Feb. 4, 2022, he joined China in challenging the West. On Feb. 24, Russia’s invasion began.

President Xi, leader of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the party’s agents and the Chinese media have been communicating for more than a decade their grievances, their view of the West in decline and their belief in China’s historical destiny. Any criticism of Chinese behavior is called an attack on its sovereignty. China is aggressively engaged in implementing its foreign policy with attacks on the West while promoting its narrative of providing a better model of development and a new form of democracy.

Russia and China have been moving toward an accord for several years. The specific timing of Feb. 4, 2022 was most useful for Russia, but the language of the communiqué had long been heralded in events and articulated in statements and speeches. Diplomacy, military power, economic interests and state propaganda have underscored the effort.
The China-Russia accord is historic and a major challenge to the West. The 5,000-word document is a tome of historic grievances, assumptions and goals. Fifty years after the 1972 Nixon-Mao summit, it reflects a dramatic shift in the framework of both countries’ relationships. China makes clear that its goals are in dominating the Pacific, and it rejects NATO-type alliances, sanctions and an independent Taiwan. For the near term, China stands “rock solid” with Russia.

Both Putin and Xi have mastery over public opinion in their respective countries, broadcasting only nationalist and populist messages. But while they control both the media and their country’s political processes, neither are popular among world democracies. Citizens of democratic nations most object to the lack of freedom for Russian and Chinese citizens. Although lack of popularity globally doesn’t deter authoritarians, it helps countries to approve and citizens to tolerate sanctions, as well as support providing weapons and aid to victims of their policies. Xi and the CCP wish to win world favor, as evidenced by Belt and Road programs.

Putin’s invasion had the element of surprise, but has suffered many setbacks as it was based on a number of false assumptions. Strategically it has been a disaster, with Ukraine’s resistance, NATO’s revival, Germany’s shift, sanctions coming fast and deep, and the Russian economy damaged. Putin has become an archetype of the cruel dictator. By contrast, Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is regarded as a hero. World opinion reflecting the war’s damaging impact on Russia’s reputation is evident in cable TV coverage, social media postings and United Nation voting defeats.
Xi and the CCP continue to make clear that Taiwan must be back under China’s control. Ukraine is a wake-up call and the West should prepare. But Taiwan is different from Ukraine; it is economically important to the West and if China takes control it would mean a massive shift of power in the Indo-Pacific. The U.S. has a strong political/military relationship with Taiwan. Ukraine’s invasion highlights how difficult and costly a war over Taiwan could be for China.

As Putin and Xi make clear, the personalities and ambitions of government leaders are important. Xi considers Taiwan a legacy issue for the CCP that this generation must resolve. The question of when China intends to act remains. U.S. military officials believe it will be before the end of Xi’s new term (6 years). China took control of Hong Kong with little cost, but damaged its reputation in the world — especially within the Indo-Pacific.

The authoritarian model is unpopular among democratic countries, and where countries are specifically threatened, it is resented and resisted. Denying political choice costs autocrats friends, except among other dictators. Polling shows that Russia has lost Ukrainian people’s support since 2014. Japanese public opinion has shifted towards taking more assertive action. Taiwan citizens now say they are ready to defend against forced unification with China. The U.S. public has awakened to authoritarian threats.
The Japan-U.S. alliance has become stronger. The Quad countries of Japan, the U.S, India and Australia have solidified. Concerns over North Korea’s missile and nuclear weapons development and China’s potential attack on Taiwan mount. Improving Japan-South Korea relations will help strengthen the Indo-Pacific defense.

The Crossley Center and Consulate General of Japan in Denver have sponsored three years of dialogue among professors and experts on diplomacy and strategy in the Indo-Pacific. Each year, the topic has become more critical and urgent for the alliance. We end at a historical turning point for peace and security among democratic nations in the Indo-Pacific.