

John Mearsheimer: Ukraine May Cease to Exist — The Coming Ugly Victory

I apologise for the audio issue in the previous version of this video. Thank you for your understanding. Prof. John Mearsheimer is the R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor in the Political Science Department at the University of Chicago. Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: <https://glenndiesen.substack.com/> X/Twitter: https://x.com/Glenn_Diesen Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/glenndiesen> Buy merchandise: <https://diesen-shop.fourthwall.com/en-nok> Support the research by Prof. Glenn Diesen: PayPal: <https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/glenndiesen> Buy me a Coffee: buymeacoffee.com/gdieseng Go Fund Me: <https://gofund.me/09ea012f> Books by Prof. Glenn Diesen: <https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B09FPQ4MDL>

#Glenn

Welcome back. Today is September 17, 2026, and we have the great pleasure of being joined by Professor John Mearsheimer to get a better understanding of what is happening in the Ukraine proxy war. So thank you for coming back on the program. As always, my pleasure, Glenn. I should also say welcome back to the U.S., because you just returned from a trip to Russia. And, well, you were obviously not at the front lines and assessed the military situation, but what you did get to assess was the social situation, economic and political stability in Russia. And you also got to speak with some of the political leaders. You, from what I understand, also had a dinner with Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and got to sit across from him. And I was told you did not shy away from hard questions by our common friend Larry Johnson. So I was wondering, though, what's your takeaway from this trip in terms of how you see the wider situation?

#John Mearsheimer

Well, there are a lot of dimensions to this trip that I can't talk about all at once. But I think that the Russian economy is in quite good shape. I think the conventional wisdom in the West is that the economic sanctions have not hurt as much as we thought they would, but they have still hurt the Russians in significant ways. And the situation will eventually deteriorate in ways that will cause them to make serious concessions at the negotiating table. So, with regard to the economy, I didn't see any evidence that Russia is in trouble. And I didn't talk to anyone who said that Russia is in trouble.

The only real evidence I saw of the sanctions having a negative effect on Russia were lines at a number of petrol stations, or what we here in the United States call gas stations. I saw a number of lines of cars at different gas stations. But that was the only evidence that this was a country that was being affected not only by the war, but by sanctions. And if you sort of walked around—I was in

two cities, I was in Moscow and I was in St. Petersburg—if you walked around on the streets and you went into stores, department stores, drugstores, convenience stores, and so forth and so on, life looked very normal. It was not much different than walking around France, a place like Chicago, or a place like New York City.

I think those two cities in Russia are cleaner than the two American cities that I just mentioned, and probably safer as well. But otherwise, I could have been walking around in Chicago or New York, and it would have seemed very similar. And when you talk to people about the war, you didn't have any sense that the war was interfering with their life in any meaningful way. Now, this is not to say that the situation in these two cities is the same as it is in the countryside, right? A number of people said to me that people who live in the countryside are more affected by the war than people who live in Moscow and who live in St. Petersburg. But I was not in the countryside, so I did not see evidence of that.

One might surmise from that comment that below the surface, there is deep dissatisfaction with Putin's leadership and deep dissatisfaction with Putin for getting Russia into a war that it has not been able to win after four-plus years. But I saw no evidence of that. I think there's no question that the Russian political elites were generally dissatisfied with Putin's waging of the war up until very recently. I think there were lots of people in the national security elite inside of Russia who felt that Putin was not waging the war vigorously enough and that he really had to take the gloves off and get this war over with once and for all. I mean, I think that's been a sentiment inside of the Russian elite for a long period of time. And you hear a lot about—we have been hearing a lot about that in the West in the past.

But it's quite clear that since some point in June, Putin took the gloves off, and the Russians are definitely playing hardball with the Ukrainians now. They have escalated the air campaign in serious ways, and there's lots of evidence there. The Russians are determined to continue escalating until they bring Ukraine to its knees. And therefore, the dissatisfaction with Putin has basically withered away, at least as best I can tell, inside the Russian elite. So I don't see any evidence that there's going to be an uprising of any sort against Putin. He's going to be removed from office, and you're going to get a new leadership in Russia. Nobody I talked to, and I talked to a lot of people, even hinted that that was a possibility.

I may be missing something, who knows for sure, but I do not think there's any evidence that there's serious dissatisfaction with Putin at this point in time. And by the way, if Putin were to be removed from office or if Putin were to have a massive heart attack tomorrow and pass away, the person who would replace him in all likelihood would be a real hardliner, someone who is inclined to be even tougher in terms of waging the Ukraine war than Putin has been and even is now. So the idea that if Putin goes away and you get a new leader, that that leader is going to be more interested in accommodating the West, I think you're living in a dream world. That is not going to happen. So those are just a number of my impressions, but that just, I think, skims the surface.

#Glenn

Well, that's an interesting remark about that you saw the big cities, but not the rural areas, the small towns, because there is a historical pattern, I guess, that most countries would want to shield politically important urban populations from the visible costs of war, because that's usually where governments will be more vulnerable to. That being said, there's no convincing data that the situation is dramatically different in the countryside as in the cities. But it is an interesting point, though. I just feel some of this problem, the strategy we now have in NATO to do these deep strikes in Russia, to put pressure on the Kremlin to end the war. I mean, the problem is, I think, that we define ending the war as a Russian capitulation.

It falls apart, essentially. And, you know, this doesn't work if Russia sees this as an existential threat. I think our definition is premised on the idea that this is just Russian military opportunism and expansionism, as opposed to genuinely seeing an existential threat. And I think the public also see it this way in Russia, which kind of NATO has helped to make that point over the past few years. So if we put pressure on the Kremlin to put an end to the war, you know, that's essentially intensifying pressure on the Kremlin to, as you said, take the gloves off and become much more ruthless in the way it conducts the war. I was wondering, though, your talk with Foreign Minister Lavrov—did it, did any new information come to light? Anything that shaped your view of Russia or the war itself?

#John Mearsheimer

No, I think that my conversation with Lavrov basically reinforced my view of what he thought about the war before I met with him. I think that Lavrov is clearly a hardliner. I think it's obvious when you talk to him that he thinks that diplomacy with the West is not going to go anywhere. In fact, I think most Russians at this point in time understand that. My surmise would be that he understood that a long time ago. He's had real doubts about what you could do to end this war diplomatically in negotiations with the United States, and certainly with the Europeans. And I think he's interested in making sure that Russia gets a deal, or Russia ends this war in ways, excuse me, that leave Russia in a position where it is secure from attacks, future attacks from Ukraine and from the Europeans.

I mean, I think he clearly sees, as most Russians do, the Europeans and the Ukrainians working hand in hand, and the Ukrainians, in effect, using Ukraine as a battering ram against Russia. And that means that for people like Lavrov, and I would imagine for almost all of his colleagues inside the Russian elite, what has to be done is that you have to get a settlement here that greatly weakens Ukraine and leaves it in a position where it can't restart the war and do damage against Russia. So Russia has to win this war in a clear-cut way. Now, very importantly, I asked him, and I asked almost everybody I talked to, what they envisioned as the endgame here. In other words, what were Russia's goals in terms of ending the war?

What would the territorial settlement look like? How did they view the Ukrainian rump state that was left over once the shooting stopped? And nobody I talked to would answer that question. And I think

it's in large part because they just don't know. I think it's very hard to tell exactly how this war will play out militarily. I mean, I think the Russians are fully confident they're going to win. I did not meet a single person who didn't believe that Russia would win. But as you know, Glenn, winning has many meanings. What exactly is winning? And I tried to push people on that. And as I say, you couldn't get a clear answer. But I don't think it was because people were being evasive. There may have been some of that.

But it's just because it's not clear how much territory they can grab and how badly weakened they can leave Ukraine. It seems clear to me that most Russians understand that the more territory they take, the more secure they will be moving forward. In other words, if you take Odessa and you effectively turn Ukraine into a landlocked country, that will greatly weaken Ukraine economically, which in turn will greatly weaken Ukraine militarily. So there's an incentive there for the Russians to take lots of territory. And a number of people I talked to agreed with that. And it's also important to understand that the Russians understand that Ukraine has to be—or let me put it differently—the rump Ukrainian state that is left over after this war ends, or after the shooting ends, has to be a dysfunctional and weak state.

It simply can't be a powerful Ukrainian state because then it would be a threat to Russia, especially since that Ukrainian state is likely to continue to have close relations with the Europeans, and the Europeans are likely to want to continue to use Ukraine to weaken Russia. So again, you see the incentives for the Russians are clearly to take lots of territory and to make sure that the rump state that is left over, the Ukrainian rump state that is left over, is weak and dysfunctional. But what exactly the Russians have to do, or to put it in slightly different terms, what exactly the Russians can do to make that a reality is difficult to say. And I believe it's difficult to say in large part because it's difficult to say exactly how this war will play out on the battlefield.

We've watched this war for a long time now, and the Russians are clearly making progress on the ground, but they're not making rapid progress. So for the Russians to take Odessa, to take all of Kharkiv, to take a handful of other oblasts, they have to find themselves in a position where their army can conquer lots of territory at a relatively rapid speed. And the \$64,000 question is obviously: is that possible? Will the Russians, once the Ukrainians begin to fall apart on the battlefield, then be in a position to take places like Odessa or oblasts like Odessa? And I don't think anybody can answer that question firmly. I certainly can't answer that question.

I'm not sure exactly how this war is going to play itself out militarily. I can tell you what I think their incentive structure is. You know, you were saying, Glenn, quite correctly, that the Russians view Ukraine and NATO, and they view this Ukrainian-European alliance as a mortal threat or an existential threat. There's no question about that. Just go back to the famous Bill Burns memo that he wrote to Condoleezza Rice in early 2008, before the infamous NATO summit where NATO said it would bring Ukraine into the alliance. Burns made it clear that he had talked to lots of people inside the Russian elite, and virtually every one of them made it clear that Ukraine and NATO was an existential threat.

Nothing has changed in that regard. And in fact, given Ukraine's invasion into the Kursk region of Mother Russia in August of 2024, and then later in the summer of 2025, when the Ukrainians struck at one leg of Russia's strategic nuclear triad, the Russian elite has no doubt that Ukraine in NATO, or even a Ukraine that has a close relationship with Europe, is an existential threat. And therefore, the incentive to greatly weaken Ukraine and take lots of territory is clearly there. But again, whether the capability is there is not clear to me. And I don't think it's clear to anybody I talk to.

#Glenn

Well, I think the mood has shifted, though, in Russia over the years. I remember I was there in 2022 after the Russians invaded. I was in St. Petersburg, Moscow, but also in Vladivostok. And then I got the sentiment from many that they might have walked into a trap because the whole idea of just sending in troops and getting a deal of neutrality from the Ukrainians, it obviously fell apart. And now they were in a position where they could be just bled over a long period of time. But by 2024, when I was back, because, well, again, we usually met some of the leading figures like Lavrov and others as well, and suddenly you could feel the confidence in the room that things were now secure. The war was securely won, essentially. It was just a question of time.

But if you speed up to 2026, one gets the impression now that they want to put an end to this before this ends up in a direct war with NATO, because obviously it's escalating. And at some point we will be at war. That is, NATO will be at war with Russia. And then no one can predict how this will escalate. There will be no escalation control, I guess. But given that, you know, you said the Russians would have to increase the speed of the war, and we see already that the Ukrainian position is getting more difficult, do you see further escalation coming from the Russians, not against NATO necessarily, but against the Ukrainians in terms of using harsher means, more acceptance for collateral damage? How do you see this?

#John Mearsheimer

Well, I think there are sort of two dimensions to this war. And one is the battlefield, what happens on the ground, up on the front lines, what we used to call when I was in the military the FEBA, the forward edge of the battle area. So the question is, what's happening up where the rival armies are crashing into each other? And then what's happening with the air war? And my sense is that what's really changed and gives the Russians lots of confidence, and has basically eliminated the criticism of Putin, is that the Russians have changed their policy vis-à-vis the air war since June. And they believe that this change in policy is having a significant effect on the battlefield, and it is having a significant effect on the state of the Ukrainian economy, independent of the battlefield.

And let me just say a bit more about that. The Russians started this summer for the first time to go after the ports on the Black Sea that the Ukrainians depend heavily on, and shut those ports down and, in effect, turn Ukraine into a landlocked country. And they have been successful. There's just

no question about that. I knew that before I went to Russia, and you, of course, and I have talked about this before. But anyway, it's just very important to understand that that really matters because it's had huge effects on the Ukrainian economy, number one, and two, lots of weaponry was coming in via the Black Sea, and that's now been cut off. So turning Ukraine into a landlocked country has not simply had economic effects. It's had military effects as well.

Now, the other thing that the Russians are doing with the air war is that they're going after energy infrastructure. They've determined at this point that they're going to destroy the entire energy infrastructure inside of Ukraine. In the past, they've destroyed about 80%. But then the Ukrainians have done a lot of repairs. And some of the estimates I heard were that about 50% of Ukraine's pre-war energy network was working these days. Well, the Russians are determined to wreck it now, to completely wreck the energy network, which has huge consequences given that the winter is coming. In addition to that, and this is of great importance, the Russians make it clear that they're destroying other kinds of economic infrastructure, but military infrastructure in the country that is related to what happens up on the front lines.

In other words, they're destroying roads. They're destroying gas stations. They're destroying rail lines. They're destroying locomotives. They're making it increasingly difficult for the Ukrainians to supply the frontline forces. They're trying as best they can to cut the frontline forces, the Ukrainian frontline forces, off from their support network, from their logistical network that's in the rear areas. So you see what's happening here is that they're going to great lengths to wreck the Ukrainian economy. And of course, a military is built on an economic foundation. One of the building blocks of military power is economic power. And what's happening here is that the Russians are wrecking that economic foundation.

Go back to what I said about cutting off the Black Sea from Ukraine, turning it into a landlocked country. Think about bombing economic infrastructure all across the country. This has consequences for the Ukrainian economy that affect their ability to build military forces and supply military forces. But furthermore, as I said, they're going after military infrastructure as well. They're going after infrastructure that directly affects what's happening on the battlefield. And this goes even back to the Black Sea, because as I said before, military equipment is coming, or was coming, into Ukraine across the Black Sea.

That's no longer the case. And then they're destroying the support network for those frontline forces. So the air war is having a significant effect on what's happening up on the front lines in ways that was not the case before June of this past year, or of this year, June 2026. And again, Putin's critics say that this should have been done much earlier. We waited too long. The Black Sea ports should have been shut down a long time ago. But better late than never. And there's no point in complaining now because Putin is fully on board. There's no daylight. There's no daylight between Putin and his more hawkish colleagues.

But the effect of all this, the effect of all this, is to hurt Ukraine's efforts on the battlefield, to make it more difficult for Ukraine to sustain its positions on the battlefield. Just one other dimension to this that's worth talking about. You surely saw this story that came out when I was in Russia, which is that Ukraine says it is running out of money and it needs an extra \$27 billion. And this, of course, shocked the Europeans. But this is hardly surprising, given that the Russians are in the process of wrecking Ukraine's economy. As that continues to happen, the Ukrainians will naturally need more money from the Europeans.

And the problem is that the Europeans have already given Ukraine a huge amount of money. And in a situation like that, when the Ukrainians come asking for another \$27 billion, the Europeans start saying to themselves, "This is probably not politically possible, or maybe even economically possible." And if you tell the Ukrainians that, you're basically saying, "We really can't fund the war anymore, at least in ways that we have in the past." And this will have devastating consequences for the Ukrainians. And if you compare the Ukrainian situation to the Russian situation, you see that it's fundamentally different. And what am I saying?

As I told you, you go to Russia, you see hardly any evidence, at least on the surface and from talking to people, that the Russian economy has been badly hurt by this war and by sanctions. I'm sure that some problems of some significance have been created. I don't want to be Pollyannish here, but there's no real evidence that the Russian economy is in trouble. And at the same time, the Russians are not getting large infusions of money from anybody else. They're pretty much on their own. And they have this huge industrial base, and they're pumping out massive numbers of missiles and artillery rounds and so forth and so on. And then if you go over to the other side and you look at the Ukrainians, they're desperate.

They get all sorts of weaponry from the West. They need Patriot missiles, and they can't get them. So the Russians are basically pounding them with ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and drones. The Ukrainians can't defend themselves. The Americans and the Europeans really can't help them. And they're running out of money, and they're dependent in a major way on large infusions of cash every year. So you see that Ukraine is really in desperate straits. And then we haven't even talked about what's going on up on the battlefield. By almost all accounts, the Ukrainians are struggling to hold on up on the front lines because they simply don't have enough manpower. And there are large gaps up on the front lines that the Russians are able to exploit.

Now, I talked to a good number of people about this whole issue of what's happening up on the front lines. And everybody says, and this is true, I think common sense at this point in time, that drones are Ukraine's savior. I'm not talking about the long-range drone attacks into Russia. I'm talking about drones up on the battlefield. A number of people said to me, and I believed this before I went, that were it not for drones, this war would have ended two or three years ago. The drones

have kept the Ukrainians in the fight. But the problem is that there are real limits there, because there's all sorts of evidence that the Russians are beginning, in a serious way, to roll up the Ukrainian—excuse me, yes, the Ukrainian defenses.

And there's just not much the Ukrainians can do to fix the situation. They have a huge problem with desertion. They have a huge problem with draft dodging. The population—there was a piece by Zelensky's former press secretary, Yulia Mendel, who said that the population of Ukraine today is half of what it was when Ukraine got its independence, half. She estimates it's somewhere between 20 and 25 million people. This is shocking. And then she said that half of those people are of retirement age. She also said that four times as many people are dying in Ukraine as are being born. These are stunning statistics. And they're not my statistics. They're coming from Yulia Mendel, who was Zelensky's press secretary.

And I've not seen anybody refute those numbers. So when you think about Ukraine and its position up on the battlefield, and you start thinking about those numbers, and then you add to that the desertion problem, or what we call in the American military the AWOL problem, absent without leave, and you think about the problem they have with draft dodging, all of those young Ukrainian males who are in other countries in Europe because they don't want to be dragged into the fight, you just see that Ukraine is not in a position to win this war and that the Russians are going to win. They're going to win an ugly victory. And again, what that victory is, is hard to say.

#Glenn

Yeah, well, Yulia Mendel, being the former press secretary of Zelensky, you know, she was supposed to give a speech, I think it was yesterday, in the European Parliament. She had been invited to speak, and at the last minute, the European Parliament banned her from entering because, you know, she's critical of Zelensky now. So they simply don't want to hear it. So this is, you know, all the awful casualty rates, all the narratives which they have been spinning. You know, it's not nice or good if the former press secretary of Zelensky comes in and punches a hole in it. So they're defending that narrative to the bitter end, but actually banning her from entering. It's quite extraordinary. Can I say something here, Lenny?

#John Mearsheimer

You know, you and I have just been talking—I've mainly been talking, of course—about what's going on on the battlefield and in terms of the air war, who's going to win and what the final settlement is going to look like. But if you look at Yulia Mendel's piece that I was quoting from, what she is saying, and I think it's true, is that Ukraine is committing national suicide. It goes beyond winning and losing. You can lose a war and then over time recover from that defeat. This happens all the time in international politics, as you and I both know. But she's talking about something very different, something that is much more disturbing, something that's profoundly disturbing. She's talking about the death of Ukraine.

She's talking about national suicide. And when you start thinking about the numbers—you know, I've said on this show and other shows that people have said in the past that Ukraine is undergoing a demographic death spiral, or it's in a demographic death spiral. This is basically what she's saying, that the population has been halved since Ukraine got its independence. That was not long ago. If my memory is correct, it was 1991. That was not that long ago. And since then, the population is half. You have 20 to 25 million people, and she says half of those people are retirement age. What does that tell you? And then she says that four times as many people are dying per day as are being born. This is a disaster.

And if you look at all the territory that they're likely to lose, you and I were agreeing that it's hard to say exactly how much territory they're going to lose, but they've already lost 20% of their territory, and they're surely going to lose another slice of territory. They may end up a landlocked country. The Russians will have powerful incentives to keep the state as dysfunctional as possible forever, and its economy has been wrecked. This is a disaster. And it's just very important that we understand that. And I want to emphasize, Glenn, that people on the other side of this debate from you and me, who have been encouraging and supporting continuation of this war because they see Ukraine as a battering ram to be employed against Russia, to weaken Russia, bear a great deal of responsibility for what's happening to Ukraine. And again, this is much more than merely losing on the battlefield. This is, as Mendel points out, national suicide.

#Glenn

That's why, yeah, I've been very critical of this reluctance to find a deal with Russia which restores the neutrality of Ukraine because, as you said, what is the alternative? As you said, the incentive structure for Russia is clear now. If they think in the future Ukraine can continue to be used as this battering ram by NATO, then, well, if you're in Russia, what would you recommend? You would probably recommend, well, you know, take back all the historical Russian territory so they won't be used by NATO, and wreck the rest of it so it can't be essentially a powerful sledgehammer or dagger, whatever analogy one wants. But, you know, it goes beyond this.

It's also, you know, what remains of the Ukrainian population now, the majority of them want negotiations. But if you listen to the European leaders, they say, "No, no, no, that's capitulation. We stand with Ukraine. We won't even talk to the Russians." And indeed, they go to Kyiv and they push for Ukraine to start conscripting its women because they ran out of Ukrainian men. I mean, the whole thing becomes so dark, and all of this is under the umbrella, "We stand with Ukraine." I mean, it's so cynical. And as you said, it's not even a possibility to recover after this, maybe. It could be the death of an entire nation. It's, I mean, it's very dark, which is kind of why you would think nobody really wants this, the death of a whole nation.

I mean, it's not good for Europeans. It's not good, well, obviously not for Ukraine. It's not good for Russia. You want something that resembles stability. Again, and the Russians have also said, "We

want, you know, a normal neighbor again, one that gives, you know, Russian speakers, ethnic Russians, the same rights, allows the Russian language, the Orthodox Church, doesn't use its territory as a frontline." I mean, if we could take Ukraine away from this frontline status of a divided Europe and put it as a neutral buffer, one could save the nation. But, as I said, the Europeans don't even want to talk with the Russians. I'm not sure about the Americans. Actually, I was going to ask you about that, but you were going to say something.

#John Mearsheimer

Yeah, I'll say something about the Americans and the general point that you were just making about the importance of settling this conflict earlier rather than later. One thing I learned from talking to Lavrov, but from talking to others as well, Lavrov talked at some length about what happened at Anchorage. And I had long believed that the stories about Russia accepting a compromise deal at Anchorage were probably not true. I thought that the Russians would insist that they get all the territory that Putin demanded in his famous June 2024 statement. But what Lavrov said was that after Trump came to office, this is in January 2025, Witkoff started coming to Moscow, as we all remember. And Witkoff came with a proposal, and he talked to Putin at great length about this proposal.

And the proposal called for the Russians to make compromises. And the most important compromise was that the Russians had to agree to freeze the conflict lines in Kherson and Zaporozhye where they were. And the implication was that although the Russians had annexed all of Kherson and they had annexed all of Zaporozhye, but they had not conquered all of those two oblasts, they would agree that the line in those two oblasts would be drawn where the conflict was at the moment. So the Russians would make concessions, territorial concessions involving Zaporozhye and Kherson. And the Ukrainians would withdraw from all of Donbass, the two oblasts that make up Donbass. And that was the quid pro quo for the Russians not taking all of Kherson and all of Zaporozhye. That was the deal.

And there were all sorts of other elements to it. And the details clearly had to be worked out, Glenn. There was no question about that. But anyway, Witkoff and Putin effectively worked out a deal, or at least the broad parameters of a deal, before Anchorage. And the purpose of Anchorage was for Putin and Trump to come together to talk about the deal and shake hands and accept the fact that they basically had a deal. Again, the details had to be worked out. And according to Lavrov and others, this is what happened at Anchorage. The Russians thought that they had made compromises and they had a deal. And Trump thought the same thing. So I think it's clear that the Russians thought that they were on the same page, generally speaking, as Trump and Witkoff, and that they were on the verge of settling.

But as Putin made clear to Trump, and as Trump fully understood, a deal between those two was no good unless you got the Ukrainians and the Europeans on board. And Trump assured Putin that he could get the Ukrainians and the Europeans to agree to the deal. But as we all know, that didn't

happen. Trump fumbled the ball. And one result of that, by the way, is I think that the Russians have zero faith in American diplomacy. I think they have zero faith in Witkoff, Kushner now, and Trump as well.

I think the Russians understand this war has to be settled on the battlefield. The Americans can't settle it. But the point I'm making to you, Glenn, which dovetails with what you were saying, is that the broad outlines of a deal were there at Anchorage in August of 2025. It's a situation that's somewhat analogous to the situation at Istanbul in March, April of 2022. But what happens is that the Europeans and Zelenskyy adamantly oppose the deal that Witkoff slash Trump and Putin had, in effect, worked out before and during the Anchorage summit.

And all I would say is that the Ukrainians would have been much better off accepting the Anchorage terms, assuming that my description of them is correct, than continuing the war, just like they would have been much, much better off accepting the deal at Istanbul that was being worked out. And again, I want to be clear: the deal at Istanbul had not been finalized, and it's possible it would have never worked out. But we'll never know for sure whether a deal could have been realized because the Ukrainians walked away. And of course, the Ukrainians and the Europeans walked away from the Anchorage agreement, and the war goes on. And the question you have to ask yourself is, is this good for Ukraine, or does it make a bad situation worse?

Or let me put it differently. Does it make a horrible situation even more horrible? And the answer is yes. So it's really quite remarkable when you look at what's happened over the course of this war, how foolish the Biden administration and then the Europeans and the Ukrainian leaders have been in thinking about how to bring this conflict to an end. Really amazing. And Trump, to his credit, had, I think, the right instincts. I think he and Witkoff had the right instincts. But they were stumblebums when it came to the diplomacy. Trump was just unable to get the Europeans and the Ukrainians to come on board. In fact, he didn't even come close. And this is tragic for the Ukrainians.

#Glenn

I was going to say, well, we can argue that the deal—if they didn't make Anchorage, the deal they had before—I would argue that Minsk was even better than that. And you can go further than this. You can argue that the deal they made with Yanukovich back in 2014 for a unity government, that would have been even better. So it's, you know, these horrible deals. They ignored the deal they had with Yanukovich for a unity government. Then you end up in this crisis, and then you have the Minsk agreement. They ignored this. Then you have an Istanbul agreement and ignore this. Then you have Anchorage.

And every time it gets worse and worse. And the next time around, when they sit down with the Russians, Anchorage 2.0, it's not going to be the same deal anymore. Then, obviously, the Russians will already have much more of Donbas and Zaporizhzhia. They will have a great deal more. They might actually have taken the main city as well. And also, they have expanded their footprint in

Kharkov, Sumy, and soon probably Chernigov as well. So it just gets worse and worse. And then, of course, they could also have demands for regime change in Kiev. So I don't understand why they continue to push the can down the road.

If they know what's actually happening on the ground, I know that they have to sell the war to the public as, "We're winning, we're winning," so the public will continue to accept devoting all these resources at the same time as things are going so horribly at home. But are these politicians—do they believe their own lies now? Because, you know, we can see where this is headed, and there's no course correction. There's no one pulling the brakes here. It's astonishing to me. But again, we've been watching this disaster go on for so long. Again, I'm not sure how to explain this. Yeah, sorry.

#John Mearsheimer

I just want to make another point, Glenn, because I don't want to forget this. When I was in Russia, I talked to a number of people and sort of asked them, how do they think about the Americans as adversaries, the Europeans as adversaries, and the Ukrainians as adversaries? You know, what's the intensity of the hatred, the loathing? Because, as you know, whenever two countries get into a war because of the power of nationalism, or sometimes religion, they end up loathing each other with an intensity that's hard to measure.

Just let me say that with regard to the Americans, I think that most Russians don't have a lot of animosity towards the Americans. These are the Russians that I talked to. They don't have a lot of animosity towards the Americans, especially the Trump administration. I think they believe that Trump and Witkoff, as I said, are not capable of doing successful diplomacy. They think that they're stumblebums. But there's no deep-seated animosity towards the United States. The deep-seated animosity you see is towards the Europeans, especially the British, but also the Germans now. Friedrich Merz, he's not viewed favorably in Russia, to put it mildly.

#Glenn

He's not viewed favorably in Germany either, but sorry.

#John Mearsheimer

That's correct. That's correct. But the Europeans are the ultimate bad guys. But I want to talk about the Ukrainians because this is very interesting. Almost everybody you talk to emphasizes that they have relatives in Ukraine or they are of Ukrainian heritage. To use a phrase I don't like, they have Ukrainian blood in them. But you get a very powerful sense, talking to people, that there has been a significant intermingling of Ukrainians, ethnic Ukrainians, and ethnic Russians over time, which means that lots of Russians don't really hate the Ukrainians the way you might expect. You know,

anytime two countries go to war against each other or have a history of warfare, they usually hate each other pretty intensely. Think about how the Poles think about the Russians, Polish-Russian relations.

Think even about Polish-Ukrainian relations in the past. Think about German-Polish relations and so forth and so on, Franco-German relations. We could go on and on here. But it's different in Russia. Again, I don't want to be Pollyannish here. But you do not have a sense when you talk to people that there's an intense hatred of the Ukrainians, because many of those Ukrainians are ethnic Russians, and many of those Russians inside of Russia have Ukrainian heritage of one sort or another inside of them. And the reason I bring this up is I was thinking as I was talking to people that you should be able to work out some sort of reasonable modus vivendi between Russia and Ukraine, given that the Russians don't hate the Ukrainians anywhere near as intensely as one might think.

In fact, I had no sense that there was hatred towards the Ukrainian people or the Ukrainian nation. There's no question that the Russians loathe Zelensky, and they loathe the people who they identify as Nazis. And people talk about denazification, as you know well. But no real animosity towards the Ukrainian people or nation, so to speak. It's not like the Europeans. The Russians love the Europeans, but not the Ukrainians. And I just bring this up because it says to me that you could have worked out, I think, some sort of modus vivendi between the two sides, between the Russians and the Ukrainians, at Istanbul and at Anchorage, if you had had smart diplomacy, if you had had, I think, better leadership inside of Ukraine and certainly in the West. But you didn't have that.

By the way, just one more point on this while I'm on the subject. You remember that this is what I'm saying about how Russians view Ukraine and Ukrainian-Russian relations, is exactly what Putin said in his famous July 12th, 2021 article that he wrote. He basically argued in that article, as you well know, Glenn Diesen, that Ukrainians and Russians are blood brothers and blood sisters. That's basically his argument. And what I'm saying to you is I was surprised to hear all sorts of people in my conversations make basically the same argument. None of them referred to Putin's July 12th, 2021 article. That's just the way they think about Ukrainian-Russian relations. But anyway, I'm saying that I think that this could have helped ameliorate the animosity between the two sides once you got some sort of settlement.

#Glenn

Yeah, well, I remember Lavrov. He wrote an article in 2009 or something where he made the point that NATO wanted to remake Ukraine into another Poland, but he was making the point that this was impossible because Ukraine always had such a close relationship with Russia. And this was also based on some facts. They showed that no polls would essentially show more than 20% of Ukrainians wanting to join NATO up until 2014. But part of the reason is also this: they've been part of the same state for so many hundreds of years. And what I often find shocking is even at the highest level, the former head of the Ukrainian army, Alexander Syrsky, he's Russian.

He was born in Russia. He went to a military academy in Moscow. His brother still lives in Russia. I mean, he's a Russian, and he was the head of the Ukrainian army. And if you go to the Russian side, Putin's economic envoy, Kirill Dmitriev, who works to tighten economic ties between the U.S. and Russia, was born in Kyiv. So he was born Ukrainian. So the blood, if you will, might be a bit crude a term, but it goes across. They always had this close connection. And I think it was Solzhenitsyn who once made the point that this close connection was a double-edged sword. For some Ukrainians in the east, they saw this as, you know, we're one people with the Russians, we're brothers.

While in many parts of the western parts of Ukraine, where they have less connection, they see this close connection as being essentially an imperial relic, something that allows the Russians to diminish Ukrainian sovereignty and power, deny it independent status. So this is kind of the source, I think, of the internal rivalry in Ukraine and also some of the tensions between Ukraine and Russia. And I think this is, you know, this is kind of the horrible box of worms that NATO opened up when it decided to topple the government and try to pull Ukraine into the NATO orbit. It's just, you can't—you can't just build a wall and pretend they're another Poland, a country which has a clear history and consensus of not liking Russia.

#John Mearsheimer

Yeah, yeah. Well, you want to remember in the Polish case, in 1939, Czechoslovakia was the most ethnically heterogeneous state in all of Europe. But the second most ethnically heterogeneous state in Europe at that time was Poland, which then, as a result of the war, as a result of the Holocaust, and as a result of Stalin's lopping off a large slice of the eastern part of Poland and giving Poland a big slice of German territory in the west—and then driving the Germans out of that territory—you created a Polish state that was remarkably homogeneous after the war. Again, in 1939, Poland was a very heterogeneous state. But by 1946, it was quite a homogeneous state.

The problem with Ukraine is that inside of Ukraine, you have a great deal of heterogeneity, as you were describing it. What I was talking about was more the relationship between Russia and Ukraine, and I was ignoring the situation inside of Ukraine. And you correctly pointed out that that's dicier. But I would note there, Glenn, that the Minsk Accords were designed to deal with that problem. And if we in the West had put our full force behind getting the Minsk Accords to work, we may have been able to do a lot to ameliorate the problem that you described inside of Ukraine, which again is different than the problem I was describing, which was between Ukraine and Russia. But all of that's lost now, and we have this disastrous situation, going back to the Yulia Mendel article.

#Glenn

Yeah, well, critics of mine, they often ask, you know, if you were Polish, wouldn't you want to be in NATO in the 1990s? Because you can never know what will happen in the future with Russia. And, you know, my first answer would be, yes, of course, I can understand the difficult history. I can

understand being a small, weaker state on the border of a much larger, powerful state. I understand the difficult history. But the problem is, you know, international security is driven by security competition. More weapons doesn't always give you more security. Expanding a military bloc on the border of a great power doesn't necessarily create more security. Then the opponent has to take measures to enhance its security, and that's how you end up in conflicts.

All these emotions and this rhetoric and what's legitimate or not, it doesn't address the core. That is, how do you mitigate the security competition? And this seems like the only answer we have in the West is, well, we just need NATO to expand more. We need more weapons. We have to try to weaken the Russians. At no point does it seem to enter the thinking that perhaps we should look for a way to reduce the threats to Russia, because eventually that will enhance our security, too. I mean, for Europe now, that defined itself since World War II as a peace project, that we can't even talk to the Russians, that we can't talk about reducing mutual security threats. I mean, it's astonishing.

#John Mearsheimer

Yeah, sorry. Can I make just two points on what you're saying? Sure. As you know, Poland came into the alliance in 1999, along with Hungary and the Czech Republic. That was the first tranche of expansion. Then the second tranche of expansion was in 2004. And there, the most, I think, consequential expansion involved the Baltic states. But the Baltic states were brought into NATO, and this, of course, enraged the Russians. The first tranche enraged the Russians, but the second tranche in 2004 that brings in the Baltic states, I think, really bothers the Russians greatly.

But then in 2008, the decision is made that Ukraine and Georgia will be brought in. And of course, you get a war in Georgia in August of 2008. And at the same time, trouble begins brewing in Ukraine. I think you can make the argument, Glenn, that NATO got away with bringing Poland in and even got away with the second tranche, where the Baltic states, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Slovakia, and so forth and so on came in. But Ukraine was a bridge too far. And I believe that the evidence is clear that everyone understood from the beginning that Ukraine in NATO was a really dangerous idea.

And you see it in the documents from the 1990s, when NATO expansion was being discussed at a theoretical level before the first expansion in '99. Everybody understood that Ukraine was a very special case. So I think, in an important way, we got away with bringing Poland into the alliance and even bringing the Baltic states and the various other states in the second tranche into the alliance. But bringing Ukraine and Georgia in was a bridge too far, and we got wars in both cases. That's my first point. My second point is I once had a very lengthy conversation with Viktor Orbán when he was the leader in Hungary.

And he was explaining to me how the Poles thought about the war in Ukraine as compared to how he thought about the war in Ukraine. You had a very conservative leadership in Poland at the time

these conversations between Orbán and the Poles took place. And Orbán was simpatico with the political leadership in Poland because they were ideologically conservative, okay? But their relationship went south in large part because of their different views on the Ukraine war. And Orbán's view is that there's no question we have to worry about a Russian threat. How serious that Russian threat is, debatable, but given Hungary's history, we do worry about Russia. But what we don't want to do is provoke the Russians. He said the Polish view of how to deal with Russia is very different. Their view is they don't want to be a frontline state.

They want Ukraine to be a frontline state. And the Poles believe that bringing Ukraine into the alliance will make Ukraine, not Poland, the frontline state. And furthermore, if you bring Ukraine into the alliance, and you already have the Poles, the Baltic states in the alliance, American military forces will move in large numbers much further to the east. And in essence, what will happen is that the American security umbrella will be put over Poland in a really serious way. It'll go well beyond Poland simply being a member of NATO, which of course is what happened in 1999. So Orbán's point was that the Poles welcomed the war in Ukraine because they thought that it would strengthen their security position.

Again, because Ukraine would be the frontline state and the Americans would be more deeply involved in Eastern Europe than they had been prior to 2014. But Orbán's view is this is not going to work out. This is going to backfire. The Russians are not going to lose in Ukraine because Orbán clearly understood that this was an existential threat from Russia's perspective. And trying to bring Ukraine into the alliance was just, you know, opening Pandora's box. And in the end, both the Poles and the Hungarians would end up worse off. And I think that Orbán was on the money. I thought that at the time when I was talking to him. But I think events are proving that to be the case.

#Glenn

Anyway. No, no, there's a lot of evidence behind that position. I mean, when NATO decided to expand in 1999, Gorbachev, of all people, was making the point that it wasn't just an issue about the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland, these three countries joining NATO. He said the problem was much bigger. It was the rejection of this entire inclusive pan-European security architecture that we had agreed upon. And again, this whole dream of a common European home. And instead, it would leave Russia with a bad status quo. You know, simply the dividing lines would not be removed. It would simply be shifted a bit further towards Russia. But again, as you said, that itself wasn't an existential threat.

But if you go in the literature in the '90s, you know, critics in the West of NATO expansion, their main criticism was essentially, well, if we start to expand it, where's the natural barrier? Where do we stop? And at some point, we're going to reach Ukraine, and everyone knew this is where the bomb goes off. So I think that's the Polish miscalculation. The whole idea that, well, we could expand into Poland, we could expand into the Baltic states, and the Russians would learn to accept the new status quo. But they cannot live with NATO in Ukraine. This is where the existential threat

kicks in. And I think that's the main flaw we have in the West. We always refuse to accept that this was an existential threat for Russia. We even call it pro-Russian to argue this. But if you don't recognize this, you're walking into a disaster, which is what we did, I think. Anyways, before we finish, any final thoughts?

#John Mearsheimer

No, I think I've covered all the different points that I had to make. I find this to be a categorically depressing situation. I don't know what to say more than that.

#Glenn

Yeah, no, I very much agree. I don't think history will be kind, Hannes, in terms of the choices that were made and all these possibilities to have found a peace. And as you said, if this is the path we're on, that is the death of the Ukrainian nation, I think. Yeah, that will end up being a tragedy for all. So anyways, on that note, sorry.

#John Mearsheimer

Let me just make one quick point. I'm sorry, just one quick point. I believe if they had listened to us, people like us, Alexander Mercouris, all sorts of others, that Ukraine would exist today within its 2014 borders. Crimea and those four oblasts that the Russians have now annexed would be part of Ukraine. I think this is why I've long argued, and I know you agree, the West, and I think especially the Americans here, bear the principal responsibility for what has happened to Ukraine. I mean, Ukraine obviously has agency. Zelensky matters.

The Europeans matter. I don't want to deny that. But the driving force behind bringing Ukraine into NATO in 2008 was the United States. And up until Trump came into the White House in January 2025, we have double-crossed them, we the Americans, at every turn. And that is certainly true of the Biden administration, which did nothing to prevent the war that broke out on February 24th, 2022. So the United States and the Europeans, and of course the Zelensky government, bear an enormous amount of responsibility for what has happened here.