# George Beebe: A New U.S. Grand Strategy & Europe's Strategic Failure

George Beebe is the former CIA Director for Russia Analysis and currently Director of Grand Strategy at the Quincy Institute. Beebe examines the difficult strategic choices facing the United States as it confronts the end of the post–Cold War hegemonic era. He also analyses Europe's failure to adapt to this shift, arguing that it has resulted in a strategic dead end and decline. Read Responsible Statecraft: https://responsiblestatecraft.org/ Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: https://glenndiesen.substack.com/ X/Twitter: https://x.com/Glenn_Diesen Patreon: https://www.patreon.com/glenndiesen 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. We're joined today by George Beebe, the former CIA director for Russia analysis and currently the director of grand strategy at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. I'll definitely leave a link in the description, as this is an excellent publication to follow as well. Thank you for coming on. I really wanted to ask you about America's grand strategy because it seems to be requiring some kind of shift now. After the Cold War, the U.S. pursued a strategy that could be defined as a hegemonic peace.

So I think, on one hand, if there's only one center of power, then there wouldn't be any great power rivalry. It would essentially mitigate international anarchy, as no state or even group of states could aspire to rival the U.S. But I think there was also the assumption that if the U.S. had global primacy, it would be expected to elevate the role of liberal democratic values, which many then expected to fundamentally transform the international system.

So anyway, a lot of critics of hegemonic peace pointed out back in the 1990s that the U.S. would eventually exhaust its resources and provoke some kind of collective balancing, such as BRICS. But, you know, regardless of how we now assess this hegemonic peace, it seems like an undeniable fact that that reality is gone. There's simply a new international distribution of power. And for this reason, the U.S. has to adjust—well, to some extent at least. I was wondering what your take on this is. How can we understand the American position? I mean, what are the hard strategic choices the United States has to make? It can't balance all the great powers, because that would end up being very unfavorable for the United States.

### #George Beebe

No, I think you're exactly right. I think you've done a good job describing that old order during the post–Cold War period, that unipolar moment. It was inevitably going to be temporary. The question was, how long would it last? And I think the United States during that period undertook some objectives in the world—some ambitions that were far beyond its capabilities. Not only did we aspire to that hegemonic peace, we thought our security and the world order depended on the transformation of other countries internally—on liberalization, on a transition from authoritarianism, from communist rule to Western-style liberal governance—and that the United States could facilitate that.

We could roll up our sleeves and get involved in the internal affairs of other countries in a way that we could re-engineer them socially and politically, to make them look more or less like the United States. That was way beyond our capabilities, and I would argue not at all essential to order in the world or to the United States' own security and prosperity. The classic description of a situation where your objectives far outpace your capabilities is "foreign policy insolvency," as the old saying goes. American commentator Walter Lippmann once put it that way, and I think it well describes the situation we've found ourselves in in recent years. We are in strategic insolvency. We tried to do things in the world that were beyond our capability and not very closely matched to our own national interests. So we're now in a correction.

And I think the new Trump national security strategy that was published a few weeks ago is an indication that we are reorienting America's goals in the world. We are now recognizing that we have finite resources and limited capabilities. In that kind of situation, you have to prioritize what's most important. The strategy essentially says that determining what's most important for the United States has to begin with the United States itself—what matters to our own security, to our own prosperity, to our own ability to maintain republican governance in the United States. Our foreign policy priorities ought to flow from that. So you're seeing what I would call a consolidation or a retrenchment of the United States and its ambitions in the world. We've said, look, what's most important begins with geography for the United States.

And this is actually something that, throughout history, all great powers have regarded as almost axiomatic. What happens in their immediate vicinity and their immediate neighborhoods is more important, as a matter of priority, to their well-being than what's happening in distant parts of the world. So the United States is returning to something that America's founding fathers would have considered completely uncontroversial: what happens in the Western Hemisphere, in our immediate neighborhood, is most important to the United States. From there, we can ask, okay, beyond that immediate neighborhood, what else matters? And I think the next most important thing listed in the national security strategy is China.

And then Europe, and then other parts of the world. So this is, I think, a fundamental redefinition of what matters to the United States and how we're going to match our objectives in the world with our actual capabilities. Now, there's a lot more to it than that, but this is fundamentally different

from the last 30 years of U.S. foreign policy. It's a recognition that the balance of power in the world has changed. We're now in a much more polycentric world. We have other, either peer or near-peer, rivals that we can't simply defeat and we can't transform into some version of the United States. So there's going to have to be a balance of power—some balancing of interests.

And we're going to have to think hard about how we define our goals and how we amass enough power and leverage so that we can reach bargains and understandings with other great powers that protect our own interests, but also don't cross the red lines of other great powers—which would be a formula for great power conflict, something I think would be disastrous for everybody involved. So this is a real transition for the United States. It's going to take several years to work out, and it's very likely to be messy. These sorts of transitions are seldom smooth. Things happen—friends, foes—they all have their own interests to pursue in all of this. And so the challenge is going to be managing this transition in a way that doesn't spin out of control.

## #Glenn

This massive shift in the world order—like what happened after the Great War—it'll be interesting to see if this can be done peacefully or not. As we look at the world today, it doesn't seem very peaceful. But often, the criticism of the United States in Europe seems to be organized around the idea that it's only America's intentions that have changed—that perhaps Trump doesn't care as much about democracy—rather than focusing on the capabilities of the U.S. to continue the same strategy as in the past. But how do you see Europe adjusting to this new world? Because there's very little discussion about how the world itself is changing. In all fairness, Trump has a tendency to suck the oxygen out of the room, so all eyes are always on him. I think they often don't recognize the wider shift in the international distribution of power that's forcing some of these changes. So how do you see Europe adjusting?

## #George Beebe

Well, I think Europe is not adjusting very well at this point. Absent the forcing mechanism of Donald J. Trump, I think the Europeans would still have their heads in the sand and pretend that everything can just continue as it has for the last 30 years—where they can essentially outsource their security to the United States, focus on economic prosperity, and pursue the ambitions of the European Union: deepening integration within Europe, broadening membership, and trying to spread European values throughout the neighborhood. But that approach is anachronistic.

It's not recognizing the realities of the world as it is today. The United States cannot afford to continue serving as the security benefactor of Europe. In a multipolar order, the United States needs partners and allies who act as force multipliers—who add to its capabilities in trying to counterbalance other centers of power in the world. And that requires the ability to conduct diplomacy proactively, not just to protect one's own interests, but to ensure you understand and respect the interests of great powers that aren't in direct conflict with your own.

And right now, Europe is incapable of doing that. It can't provide for its own defense. It simply hasn’t invested in the military capabilities required to play a more active role in ensuring its own security. It doesn’t really have the ability to conduct diplomacy, to be honest. It issues pronouncements and directives, but diplomacy means actually engaging with other powers. At the moment, the European Union isn’t even capable of sitting down and talking with Russia. That’s a major liability in a world where that kind of diplomacy is becoming essential.

Absent that kind of diplomacy, you’re going to be increasingly subject to great power conflict. In a world where the United States has to worry about counterbalancing China and counterbalancing Russia, Europe has to play a part in that. It has to become one of the poles in an emerging multipolar order. That would actually be a strategic asset for the United States—to have partners in Europe capable of playing that role. Right now, Europe is a dead weight. It drags the United States down, not just in terms of spending and military responsibilities, but it’s actually a net liability in our ability to talk with and engage with Russia, and to counterbalance China.

So those things have to change. And Europe, I think, is lagging behind in recognizing how the world has changed and what it now requires to adjust to those changes. Now, Trump is, I think, trying to push Europe toward making the kinds of changes the United States believes are necessary. Part of that is increasing military spending and enhancing Europe’s own military capabilities. But that’s a smaller part of it than actually healing itself internally—getting healthy politically and socially, believing in itself.

One of the requirements for conducting effective diplomacy is self-confidence—an ability to understand where your own interests lie, to know where you can compromise, and to have enough confidence to feel secure in compromising on those things where you can, while being secure enough to stand up for the things you have to stand up for. Right now, Europe can’t do either of those things. It can’t stand up for its own self-interest, and it’s so fearful—of Russia, of its own shadow, I would say—that it can’t actually compromise on things where it should be able to, and where compromise is necessary.

## #Glenn

To summarize, in a multipolar world, the U.S. needs allies or force multipliers. The Europeans have become a cost or a liability, and the weak can’t defend themselves—can’t even do diplomacy. Is this more or less what defines their competing positions on Ukraine? Because, again, in Europe, the rhetoric about the U.S. and Ukraine is very... it’s a lot of catchphrases like, “We stand with Ukraine,” or “The Americans are not standing with Ukraine.” No one really questions what standing with Ukraine actually means, what it’s supposed to be, or what it’s supposed to achieve. You’ve discussed the whole concept of strategic insolvency, but is this the main dividing line, as you see it, in terms of why the Europeans and the Americans don’t see eye to eye? I mean, a misunderstanding, if you will?

## #George Beebe

Well, I think that's a big part of it, yes. I think Europe is trapped in its own paradigm—its belief that this is a replay of World War II, of Nazi Germany and its expansionist aggression—and the belief that that expansionism has to be resisted by force or it will continue. And that, in turn, is a concept of what the war in Ukraine is about that actually precludes compromise. You don't compromise with Nazi Germany; that only encourages more aggression. You don't appease. But the implication of that is that this war can only end in unconditional surrender—that the path forward is to win, to defeat Russia altogether, and to dictate to Russia the terms of a settlement.

And that's an entirely unrealistic ambition. It's not possible to achieve that. The Ukrainians have already shown they can't drive Russian forces off Ukrainian territory. And it should be uncontroversial to note that you're not going to drive a nuclear power to the point where it surrenders unconditionally. So I think this paradigm for understanding the war in Ukraine is flawed—both in its understanding of why the war began and in its prescription for ending it. The Europeans have to escape that concept.

They have to recognize that this war, from the start, has been an escalation spiral—a tug of war over Ukraine's geopolitical fate that can only end in compromise if it's not going to end in disaster. And the sooner we reach that compromise—one that understands and protects Ukraine's vital interests, but also recognizes that Russia has security interests at stake here, too, that have to be respected—the better. Putting together a compromise that both Russia and Ukraine can support, in which both sides make concessions but both sides' core national interests are respected, is still possible.

In fact, I'm optimistic that we're relatively close to finding that kind of compromise. It's not detrimental to Europe; in fact, it's vital to Europe's future security and prosperity. Some Europeans understand this, but far from all. That's not the dominant way of thinking in Europe. But I think Europe has to grasp this if it's going to find a way forward. Now, there are other issues at stake between the United States and Europe—part of them have to do with politics.

I think there's been what I'd call a kind of liberal-progressive approach to governance in Europe among most European leaders for quite some time—one that the United States, under the Trump administration, regards as self-defeating for Europe. It's seen as undermining the sources of good governance and long-term stability in Europe. That's also an issue currently in play between Washington and various European capitals. There are issues over trade, over internet freedom, over freedom of speech—these are complicated matters. And the U.S. does have a stake in them.

You know, when Europe, in the interests of internet governance, bans things online—prohibits certain kinds of speech—that inevitably affects Americans, because the internet doesn't respect geographic borders. If you ban things in cyberspace in Europe, you're inevitably banning Americans and American entities in ways that affect U.S. interests, and we're going to have a say in that. That's

inevitable. So these are things that are going to have to be worked out. It’s not just about a disagreement over Ukraine. I think these are manageable issues over time, provided we’re able to talk with each other and understand that reasonable allies can have differences of opinion on these things, but they can be managed.

## #Glenn

Yeah, I think that's a good approach to take. Well, I know you're a former director of Russia analysis at the CIA, but nonetheless, to suggest that this war isn’t simply about Europeans helping Ukraine fight an evil invader—again, kind of cosplaying World War II—I mean, that’s enough to get someone labeled a Putin apologist in Europe these days. So there’s not much room for trying to navigate these difficult times. But in terms of... one of the reasons I’ve become a bit more pessimistic about Trump lately—though one of the reasons I was really optimistic about him during the election campaign—was because the U.S. and Russia have had almost a century now of poor relations. But if one takes a step back, it doesn’t necessarily have to be that way anymore.

I mean, there would be plenty of opportunities to have a good relationship, which would eventually be good for the world as well—by not turning the world into a big chessboard. But what would you see as the strategic objective, or the possibility, of reshaping the U.S.–Russia relationship? Because, again, a lot of the conflict we had at the end of the Cold War was related to NATO expansion, which then undermined the European security architecture. NATO expansion was, to a large extent, linked to this idea of hegemonic peace. But if that’s off the table, it seems it would open up a lot of opportunities for some kind of great-power settlement—a grand settlement, if you will—between the Americans and the Russians.

## #George Beebe

No, I think that's right. When you look back at the history of U.S.–Russian relations, for a long time there wasn’t much that caused friction between Moscow and Washington in the 18th and 19th centuries. It was really with the Cold War that things started to get out of hand, and that was largely a result of a regime change in Moscow that brought an ideological component into it. Then came the legacy of World War II and everything that led to the Cold War. And that should really be over by now.

We don't have an ideological confrontation with Russia right now. We have different political systems, but there's no reason they can't coexist peacefully, provided each side refrains from trying to transform the internal politics of the other. My guess is that that phase has now ended for both countries. There will still be areas of competition between us, certainly, but I don't think they'll outweigh the strategic incentives both the United States and Russia have to normalize their relationship. For the United States, the big strategic incentive is that we don't want to drive Russia and China together toward security cooperation directed against the United States.

That only compounds the difficulty we face in attaining a stable balance of power with China and preventing China from pressing on U.S. vulnerabilities in ways that are very detrimental to American security and prosperity. Our ability to deal with China is greatly complicated by the degree to which China and Russia are in some sort of entente, alliance, or partnership against us. So having a more normal relationship with Russia enhances Russia's own ability to be less dependent on China, less beholden to China, to have greater room for maneuver internationally, and to play a more independent role as a power in the emerging multipolar order. And I think Russia wants that, too. Russia does not want to be a dependent, subordinate, junior partner to China. That's not how Russia conceives of itself.

It sees itself as a great power—rightfully—one that faces both East and West, like that double-headed eagle on the Russian state emblem. To face both East and West and have geopolitical room for maneuver, Russia has to have some kind of relationship with the United States. So those are big strategic incentives to normalize relations between the two countries. Now, that process isn't going to happen overnight. I think there's a lot of room for improvement in the relationship, but there are also many impediments to overcome. We have a deep level of distrust between the countries that won't be repaired very quickly. And a lot of the issues we'll have to address are complicated ones that can't simply be handled by two presidents operating more or less in small groups.

There's going to have to be an effort, at least in the United States, to gain the buy-in of the president and much of the U.S. government—the permanent bureaucracy—because they're going to have to implement a lot of this. And there's going to have to be some changes in attitude in the United States, some understanding on the part of the American people, Congress, and the national media as to why we're trying to do this, why it's important, and why it serves the interests of the United States. That's not going to be easy to do, at least not very quickly, because there's an awful lot of suspicion—an awful lot of people who don't think this is a good idea. And much of the national media are more or less opposed to this sort of thing. That's not going to be an easy thing to turn around very soon.

## #Glenn

I always make the point that, in this sense, the Russians are quite pragmatic. And I think that's one of the reasons they turned around very quickly and tried to make up with the U.S. now as well. That is, they want a balance of dependence. They want to diversify their ties. You don't want to be excessively dependent in an asymmetrical, interdependent relationship with a more powerful actor such as China. So what you want is some degree of strategic autonomy and, of course, diversified partnerships. But this is the problem: when Europe cuts itself off from Russia, it becomes more dependent on China. When we demand that the Indians cut themselves off from Russia, Russia becomes more dependent on China. It's very strange. This doesn't seem to serve our interests in terms of preventing these two Eurasian giants from coming together.

Just as a quick last question—how does China fit into this broader picture? Because, again, the U.S. and China, while they're competitors, are obviously the two main players in the international system, the two biggest economies. Still, there's a need to find some framework for organizing both cooperation and competition. Yes, there will be competition for influence, and it can turn ugly at times. But if the strategy is simply to defeat the opponent, that doesn't seem realistic, and it could get very ugly. So one has to manage this competition as well. What's a good way to do that—to organize the relationship in a way that would be acceptable to both the United States and, I guess, China too?

## #George Beebe

Well, here again, I think the National Security Strategy offers a good framework for doing this. It doesn't fit into a neat box. It's not containment, it's not rollback, to use some terms from the Cold War. It's a mix of things—a mix of competition, diplomatic engagement, deterrence, and also an effort to relieve the kinds of pressures that China has put the United States under. You know, when you talk about strategic minerals and China's domination of that sphere, the degree to which critical U.S. supply chains depend on China, and infrastructure around the world—the lines of communication in space and at sea that are critical to U.S. security—you have to have a way of making the United States less vulnerable to those pressure points that China has increasingly gotten a grip on.

And so a lot of what the United States is doing right now, I think, is reducing its vulnerability to Chinese pressure, increasing its ability to deter China, but also reaching out and trying to engage diplomatically to forge some understandings about the rules of the game—an understanding of where the red lines are for all the countries involved, a way of managing competition so that it doesn't spiral out of control into direct confrontation. And that's going to be a long-term process. We're not going to reach that kind of endpoint in a few months; it's going to be ongoing. But when you look at what the United States has done in Venezuela, what we appear to be heading toward on Greenland, these are efforts to relieve pressure points that the Chinese have gotten their grip on, making the United States less vulnerable to pressure and better able to come into that bargaining process with China from a position of strength.

We're not going to be in a position where we can dictate to China the terms of this bargain. But we don't want to go into it at a major disadvantage, with the Chinese having their boots on our necks, so to speak, on things like strategic minerals and space—things that are absolutely critical to the functioning of America's 21st-century economy, to our national security, and to our military capabilities. So this makes sense to me. I'm not sure I can wrap it up in a single term, but it's a mix of all these things in a way that I think makes sense. And it's directed not at world domination or at defeating China, but at finding an equilibrium that the United States can live with—and China can too. I think that's the way great powers have found their way toward some sort of order in the past, and I think that's the direction we have to head today.

## #Glenn

I think such a great grand bargain would be a good idea. You never want to have another great power with its back against the wall, feeling that it's all or nothing. I think this is the worst strategic position any country can be put in. Thank you so much. It's fascinating to explore this idea of where the U.S. strategy can go from here on. As we talked about before we started recording, these are interesting times indeed. Thank you very much.

## #George Beebe

You're welcome. Thanks, Fletch.