

# John Mearsheimer: Cold War 2.0 & NATO's Defeat in Ukraine

John J. Mearsheimer is the R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, where he has taught since 1982. Prof. Mearsheimer discusses the new Cold War and NATO's defeat in Ukraine. Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: <https://glennndiesen.substack.com/> X/Twitter: [https://x.com/Glenn\\_Diesen](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](https://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 Professor John Mearsheimer to get a better understanding of what's happening in the world now with this new great-power rivalry, and also how the outcome of the Ukraine war will impact this new Cold War. Thank you for coming on. I wanted to open with a big question: have we entered a new Cold War? And if so, who are the players, what are the competing interests, and what are the rules of this new Cold War?

## #John Mearsheimer

Well, I think we have entered a new Cold War. I think we're in a multipolar system, and the United States, China, and Russia are the three great powers. The United States is certainly in a Cold War with China. Now, what exactly do I mean by that? I think, because China is so powerful and threatens to dominate East Asia, and because the United States will almost certainly go to great lengths to prevent that from happening, you automatically have an intense security competition with China. And I think we've seen evidence of this over the past few years. For me, an intense security competition is a Cold War, and I distinguish a Cold War from a hot war.

A hot war is when two countries, like the United States and China, actually get into a fight with each other. And of course, that's what we want to avoid. But the fact is, we are in a cold war with the Chinese—or the Chinese are in a cold war with us. It's an intense security competition, and the name of the game is to make sure that this security competition, or this cold war, does not turn into a hot war. Now, this raises the question: what about Russia? Well, it's quite clear that since we moved into multipolarity, the Russians and the Chinese have been close allies against the United States. And this is largely a result of the Ukraine war, which has pushed the Russians into the arms of the Chinese and caused the Chinese and the Russians to have very close relations.

So the United States, certainly through the Biden administration, was involved in a Cold War with the Russians as well as the Chinese. Now, what's happened with President Trump is that he tried to change that situation. He doesn't want to have an intense security competition with Russia. In fact, if anything, what the Trump administration would like to do is have good relations with Russia and make it a Russia–U.S. alliance or a coalition against China. I think that's the basic goal of President Trump. But he's been unable to make that happen, and the end result is that the United States is basically still in a Cold War with Russia as well as with China.

And in both cases, we want to make sure, as I said before, that those Cold Wars don't turn into a hot war. And if anything, if you look at what's happened with regard to Ukraine in recent years, if there's one place where a Cold War could turn into a hot war, it's in Ukraine. Ukraine so far—or Europe so far, or the U.S.–Russian relationship so far—has actually been more dangerous than the U.S.–China competition. We've had no major crisis in East Asia involving the United States and China, so that Cold War has remained very cold, which is all for the good. But the war in Ukraine, and some of the events that have taken place there, have made me worry greatly that the Cold War there could turn into a hot war.

## **#Glenn**

I guess the hope and expectation of many European leaders was that the U.S. and Europeans would unite in this new Cold War. So, the liberal hegemon is over. They thought we would now retreat into this—well, let's actually go back in time—and return to the kind of complete unity we had in the first Cold War. That is, unity in opposition to Russia as a common enemy. And, well, this was the assumption of NATO as well: that Ukraine would unite us. But instead, now it seems to divide us. What is it that—how do you explain this? What is it that the Europeans don't understand? Is it that the U.S. doesn't see Russia as the same threat the Europeans do? Is it the concern about pushing Russia toward China? Is Europe too costly a partner, rather than a force amplifier? Or is this just a uniquely Trump policy or approach to international security?

## **#John Mearsheimer**

Just to take the United States—from an American point of view—it makes eminently good sense to have good relations with Russia. China is the peer competitor. If you sort of line up these three great powers from top to bottom in terms of which one is the most powerful, there's no question that the United States remains the most powerful state on the planet. But the Chinese are a close second, and many argue that they're closing the gap. So we have this situation, from an American perspective, where there is a peer competitor in the system—and that peer competitor has the potential, and I underline the word "potential," to dominate East Asia, which the United States does not want to see happen.

So we have a vested interest in focusing on East Asia over Europe, because Russia is the weakest of the three great powers, and Russia is not a threat to dominate Europe. And to the extent that Russia is a threat in Europe—and again, I don't believe it's a very great threat at all—but to the extent it is a threat, we believe, and this is certainly true of President Trump, that the Europeans can deal with that threat. That should free us to pivot to Asia more fully, to deal with this peer competitor called China. So we have a powerful structural incentive—and when I say structural incentive, I'm talking about what the balance of power tells us we should do. We have a powerful structural incentive to pivot to East Asia and let the Europeans deal with Russia.

So that's our incentive structure, and that's not Europe's incentive structure. Europe is in a very different situation. Europe, because the Russians are right next door, has to think first and foremost about Russia. Now, my view is that Russia was not a threat to Europe. But the Europeans and, of course, the Americans foolishly pushed forward NATO expansion into Ukraine, which has led to this disastrous war. And for a variety of reasons that you know well, Glenn Diesen, the Europeans got into a situation where they ended up seeing Russia as a mortal threat. They are therefore deeply committed to using Ukraine as a battering ram to weaken Russia, because they see this Russian threat at every turn. And whether you and I think it's foolish or not is largely irrelevant, because they do think that way.

So the Europeans have a very different view of the so-called Russian threat than the Americans do. And as I said, if anything, the Americans have an incentive to ally with the Russians against the Chinese. This is anathema to Europeans—they don't want to hear that. And where you see this dispute between the United States and Europe, this transatlantic dispute playing itself out, is over Ukraine. Because what's happening with regard to Ukraine is that the Americans are trying to shift the burden of dealing with Ukraine and the Ukraine war onto the shoulders of the Europeans. The Europeans, on the other hand, are scrambling like crazy to keep the Americans involved in the fight and to keep the transatlantic relationship alive and well. But it's very hard to do that when you're dealing with Donald Trump.

## **#Glenn**

But is it still an incentive for the Europeans? Because if you go back to the '90s, I can see the argument for redividing the continent and essentially recreating the logic of the Cold War. Yes, you'd make an enemy out of Russia, but you'd bring the United States into Europe as the main pacifier. And, well, you'd essentially maintain the same structure we had throughout the Cold War. So the political West also keeps Europe united. However, now that the United States has clearly signaled it wants to leave... won't this continued division of Europe only create more problems?

Also because we can't manage Russia on our own. We're betting everything on the U.S., and the U. S. doesn't even want to be there. We're creating excessive dependencies. Wouldn't it make sense for the Europeans to shift their position on Russia? Or what is the actual threat from Russia? I know it

has big capabilities, but this assumption that they're an empire, that they want to rebuild the Soviet Union—this narrative seems to have emerged after 2014, but it didn't appear in a vacuum. Then in February 2022, that's when, I guess, they began lashing out. Sorry—lashing out, I think, is the term.

## **#John Mearsheimer**

Yeah. I mean, as you and I have said on numerous occasions, there's no question that bringing Ukraine into NATO was destined to lead to big trouble. And of course, in February 2014, a major crisis broke out. Then eight years later, in February 2022, a war broke out—and that war is still going on. In fact, the war between Russia and Ukraine has lasted longer than the war between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union during World War II. That's really quite remarkable. The end result is that it's poisoned relations between Russia on one side and Europe on the other, and there's no evidence those relations are going to improve anytime soon.

So it looks like we're going to have poisonous relations between Russia and Europe for a long time to come. This is disastrous for the Europeans, largely because Russia is just not a serious threat. And I believe, if you look at Putin's behavior over time, he wanted to work out some sort of *modus vivendi* with the Europeans. He's not an aggressor. He's not bent on creating a greater Russia, despite the fact that many people in the West make that argument. He wanted to live a rather peaceful existence with the Europeans. But that's all gone down the toilet bowl now. That's over with. So you have this terrible situation where the Russians and the Europeans are bitter enemies. That's point number one.

But point number two—and this is what we were talking about a few minutes ago—is that at the same time this poisonous relationship has developed, the Americans are talking about greatly reducing, if not leaving, their presence in Europe. President Trump, as we well know, would like to take a sledgehammer to NATO if he could. He'd wreck that institution if he could. And this is another way of saying that the Americans are threatening to leave Europe, which means the American pacifier, which has played such an important role in keeping the peace in Europe, would disappear. And the Europeans, of course, understand almost to a person that this would not be good—that you want to keep the Americans in Europe because the Americans serve as a pacifying force.

They keep all those centrifugal forces just below the surface in Europe. And if the Americans leave, those centrifugal forces will come above the surface. Then you'll have huge collective action problems trying to work out arrangements among the European countries to deal with this Russian threat that they've done so much to create. So you're getting the worst of both worlds here. The Europeans seem incapable of recognizing this or doing anything to fix the situation. They're just so deeply committed to this hostile relationship with Russia, and they're having so much trouble dealing with President Trump that it appears there's no way out for them. The future, therefore, looks bleak for Europe.

## **#Glenn**

So how will this war end, then? I mean, are you optimistic about these negotiations taking place? Because I guess, on one hand, we see the situation going from bad to worse on the NATO and Ukraine side, which would mean that, if we're being rational, we'd want to secure a good deal today—better than what we might get tomorrow. On the other hand, we saw before Christmas that this 20-point plan from the Americans, which they were trying to sell to the Ukrainians and the Russians, was already quite far apart. But then the Europeans came in, essentially trying to pull it further toward the Ukrainian side, which made it even more untenable for the side that's been victorious—the Russians. But a lot of things are happening now. Do you have any optimism about these negotiations?

## **#John Mearsheimer**

I have zero optimism. I think there's no reason at all to believe these negotiations will produce a real peace. If you look at Russia's demands, which have been clearly laid out many times, and recognize that several of them are basically non-negotiable—and we know them well—then you look at the European and Ukrainian position on those demands, they're polar opposites. There's no overlap. The Europeans and the Ukrainians are completely at odds with Russia's demands. So I don't see how you can even come close to having any sort of agreement.

I don't think you can point to any of Russia's major demands where the Europeans have caved in. The Europeans and the Ukrainians both still want Ukraine to have a security guarantee. From a Russian point of view, this is unacceptable because it's just another way of putting Ukraine inside NATO—it's de facto NATO membership. The Russians do not want the United States giving Ukraine an Article 5 security guarantee. But that's what the Ukrainians want, and that's what the Europeans want. As for territory, the Russians have made it manifestly clear, again on countless occasions, that they want all of the territory in those four oblasts they've annexed.

As best I can tell, the Ukrainians and the Europeans won't even agree to give the Russians full control over those two oblasts in the Donbas, much less all four oblasts of territory. There's just no sign of meaningful agreement. And with regard to the size of the Ukrainian army that would exist under any peace agreement, the two sides are light years apart. The Europeans and the Ukrainians are talking about a Ukrainian military with somewhere between 600,000 and 800,000 troops. At the Istanbul negotiations back in 2022, the Russians were insisting on a Ukrainian army of about 85,000 soldiers. So when you contrast 85,000 with 600,000 to 800,000, you see the two sides are light years apart.

Has there been any movement, any sign of a compromise on this issue? No. Has there been any sign of a compromise on the territorial issue? No. No. Has there been any sign of a compromise on the issue of a security guarantee? No. So what is all this talk about getting some sort of meaningful agreement? This is all, as I like to say, a giant kabuki dance. There's just no there there. And nevertheless, just to take this a step further, the Ukrainians and the Europeans continue to talk

about a ceasefire. Even occasionally, the Americans talk about a ceasefire. The Russians have made it unequivocally clear there will be no ceasefire. In fact, when Trump met with Putin in Anchorage last summer, Trump came out of the meeting saying the whole subject of a ceasefire was off the table because Putin had made it clear to him there was going to be no ceasefire—that this war was going to be settled one way or another on the battlefield.

And Trump said that. He recognized that at the time. But with the passage of time, uh, he's back to occasionally talking about ceasefires, and, uh, the Europeans and the Ukrainians much more frequently talk about a ceasefire. But it's not going to happen. This one's going to be settled on the battlefield. There's eventually going to be, I think, an armistice, because one side or the other will prevail. And, uh, that's just another way of saying it'll be settled on the battlefield. But it's not going to be settled in diplomatic negotiations in Abu Dhabi or in Istanbul or in Moscow. It's not going to happen, at least based on everything we've seen up to now.

## **#Glenn**

Yeah, I find it very strange—a lot of the rhetoric around this, especially when the Europeans are calling for a compromise. The compromise they could have gotten was pretty good back in 2022, but they waited four years, a long time, and they still expect the parties to somehow meet in the middle and come to an agreement. Even more than that, they want the Russians to make the greatest concessions, it seems. And the kind of concession they want is essentially the reason why the Russians went into Ukraine—to prevent NATO from embedding itself there. So, in a peace agreement after a Russian victory, it appears the Europeans want what the Russians went to war to prevent, which is, yeah, European or NATO troops within Ukraine.

It baffles me a bit, though—this very normative language they use—because they make the point, “Well, Ukraine can't make the greatest concession. It's not fair, because Russia's the aggressor. Ukraine is the victim.” So they won't even talk about security guarantees for Russia, as if there's no recognition of the security competition. It's just goodies and baddies, an aggressor and a victim. And so the Russians seem to speak in the language of power—“we've won, we get to dictate the terms”—while the Europeans are speaking this normative language of “that's not fair, because you're the aggressor.” It's very strange to watch. It's like they're not speaking the same diplomatic language. Um, but, uh, sorry.

## **#John Mearsheimer**

If I can just jump in, Glenn, I actually have an explanation for that. I'm not saying it's the correct explanation, but it's how I think about this issue. I think the vast majority of people in the foreign policy elite in Europe—and this is true even in the United States, because I think Trump is something of an anomaly—believe that Ukraine in NATO is not an existential threat to Russia. They think what's going on here is that Putin is an imperialist trying to create a greater Russia. Yes, it matters for security, but there's a deeper cause at play. It's that imperial gene they think all Russian or Soviet

leaders have, and Putin is particularly aggressive. This, in their view, has nothing to do with NATO expansion.

How could anybody possibly believe that a benign alliance like NATO—and again, this is where you see the rhetoric about us being the good guys that you were just talking about—how could a benign alliance like NATO possibly be seen by any Russian leader as a mortal threat? That's our worldview here in the West. There are, of course, people like you and me and a handful of others who don't accept that argument, but we're in the minority. On the Russian side, they've made it manifestly clear over the years that Ukraine in NATO is an existential threat. It is, from their perspective, an existential threat. And once you understand that they see what's going on in Ukraine as a threat to their survival—again, whether we in the West like that argument or not—there is an abundance.

Let me change my rhetoric. There is an abundance of evidence that they see what's going on in Ukraine—and especially with the Europeans and the Americans backing the Ukrainians—as a mortal, existential threat. That's why they're unwilling to make any meaningful compromises. In fact, as you well know, Glenn, if anything, the situation from their perspective gives them strong incentives to take even more territory than they've already taken, to annex more oblasts, to go to greater lengths to wreck Ukraine—to really turn it into a dysfunctional rump state, to poison relations within Europe, and to poison relations across the Atlantic between the United States on one side and Europe on the other.

Again, once you understand that the Russians see this not as a case of imperialism but as an existential threat, it looks very different. But we refuse—we in the West, and this, of course, doesn't include us, I want to be clear on that—but people in the West, people in the foreign policy establishments in European countries and in the United States, for the most part, refuse to accept that Russia has a legitimate point of view, that the Russians actually see things this way. And that, I think, accounts for the fact that the two sides are so far apart. Furthermore, it explains why people in the West are so baffled that the Russians won't make any concessions. They should make concessions, we think—but that's because the picture we have in our heads of how the Russians are thinking is simply wrong.

## **#Glenn**

It is interesting, though—the reluctance to accept that the Russians do see NATO as an existential threat. Because, well, there's a good point behind the Russian view, I often feel, that if you try to create a Europe without Russia, it would unavoidably become a Europe against Russia. How can you have a Europe where the largest country doesn't belong? It would be as if you created a security architecture in the Americas ruled by China, and the United States were the only one not allowed to participate. It would unavoidably be seen as aimed against the United States. It's very difficult to understand why there's no recognition of this, especially given the assumption of our benign

intentions after Afghanistan, Iraq, Yugoslavia, Libya, Syria, Iran, Gaza, and the last twelve years in Ukraine. There should be some understanding that perhaps it's not just a group of democracies spreading values. But you mentioned this idea of...

## **#John Mearsheimer**

Glenn, can I just jump in and say a word or two about that? Because I've thought about that question. First of all, I think it's important to understand that the decision to bring Ukraine into NATO was made in April 2008. That was during the unipolar moment—at the height of it. We viewed ourselves as the good guys, the benign hegemon. And the Europeans bought into that rhetoric at the time. We thought NATO expansion could not possibly be seen as threatening by the Russians in any meaningful way because, again, we were the good guys.

The United States was a benign hegemon, and the Europeans were tagging along with us, behaving in benign ways as well. Now, you could argue that that was wrong, but that's how we thought about it. Then the crisis breaks out in 2014, and of course the war breaks out in 2022. But as soon as the crisis begins in 2014 and you have really serious trouble, the question becomes: who is responsible? And that question is still out there today—who is responsible for this disaster? Well, if you believe that NATO expansion is largely responsible for causing this war, this disaster, this unbelievable disaster, then you're saying the West is responsible.

If you say that Russia was driven by imperialist ambitions, that Putin is a classic Russian imperialist who had to be stopped, then Putin has to be blamed. So we in the West have a vested interest in making the argument that Putin was an imperialist, and it was his imperial ambitions that caused the war, because we want to put the responsibility for this war on him. We want to blame him for this war. If you go down the road that we have gone down—you and I—and make the argument that NATO expansion is principally responsible for this disaster, you're in effect saying the West is responsible. And for leaders in the West, this is a categorically unacceptable argument.

## **#Glenn**

But where do we go from here, though? Because there's been a lot of pressure on the Kremlin—well, on Putin—to change his tactics a bit. I mean, this is not new. I remember back after 2014, when he tried to patch things up with the Europeans. There were a lot of hawks in the Kremlin who were making the argument that if they didn't act more assertively, NATO would interpret Russia's efforts to make up with NATO as weakness. So they said, well, why are we negotiating? We should be preparing for war, essentially.

But this has gone on all the way until now, 2026, when they're saying, why aren't we taking off the gloves and putting an end to this war? Do you see that happening? Do you see Russia changing course anytime soon? Because I do see some escalation lately—not just the efforts to destroy the electric grids and turn off the lights, but also this quasi-blockade of Odessa, attacking ships going in



and out of the ports, the bridges. It seems like we might be entering a new stage of the war. Or do you see it differently?

## **#John Mearsheimer**

Well, I think the Russians believe that the Ukrainians are on the ropes, and that there's a good chance that over the course of this year, 2026, Ukraine will collapse—that the Russians will win on the battlefield. And they can do that conventionally, of course. Whether that happens is hard to say. It's quite remarkable how tenacious the Ukrainians have been on the battlefield. I thought that by the end of 2025 the war would have been over, that there would have been an armistice. I didn't think the Ukrainians would still be hanging on. They are hanging on.

I think they're hanging on by a thread, but they are hanging on, and they're continuing to get support—especially from the Europeans, but also from the Americans. So it's possible that by the end of 2026, they'll still be in the fight. It is possible. And I think as this coming year unfolds, plays itself out, what you'll see is the Russians upping the ante at the conventional level. I think they'll commit more forces to the fight. They have large reserve armies that they've not committed, and I think they'll commit them. And I think they'll try to finish off the Ukrainians in 2026. If that doesn't happen, I think there will be powerful reasons for the Russians to up the ante and even think about using nuclear weapons.

If you look at Sergei Karaganov, who I take to be a mainstream Russian strategist who's been around for a long time, he knows all the arguments about security, international relations theory, deterrence, and so forth. You listen to him talk—he's basically saying that the time is right for the Russians to use nuclear weapons to put an end to this war. But I think if the West believes it can keep the Russians engaged in a war of attrition and prevent them from winning that war for a few more years, they're wrong. The Russians will do something to end the war, and that something, I think, might very well be the use of nuclear weapons.

Again, you want to remember what I said before when I described this war as an existential threat from Russia's point of view. The Russians see what's going on as a mortal threat, number one. And number two, if they get into a position where they think they cannot win this war, and in fact they're suffering greatly because the war just hasn't come to an end, they'll be in desperate straits. And when great powers with nuclear weapons are in desperate straits, you really have to worry about what they might do. So I think, in a very important way, everyone should hope that the Russians win this war at the conventional level rather quickly, in the first part of 2026. There's no incentive for the Russians to go further up the escalation ladder.

## **#Glenn**

Another reason they might want to finish sooner is the logic coming out of some European capitals that we have to keep the Ukrainians in the fight a bit longer so we can prepare ourselves. I mean, if

there's a possibility that the Europeans are preparing themselves to possibly enter the war at a later stage, then it would be much better to end the war now before it has the chance to expand into a wider pan-European conflict.

## **#John Mearsheimer**

Can I ask you a question, Glenn? What's your sense of the pressure on Putin to up the ante, to escalate, and to get this war over with? Do you think he's under tremendous pressure to do that? And if so, how do you see this playing out?

## **#Glenn**

Well, I think there's a lot of pressure on him not to take any weak deal coming out of Washington, because they've paid a heavy price as well. It's been four years of war. They've lost everything—tens of thousands of men. And the idea, I think, is that if they agree to any deal that would allow the West to essentially revive the Ukrainian frontline in the future, and they'd have to fight this whole thing over again, that would be completely unacceptable. So there are many who, I guess, are questioning why he hasn't brought this to an end already with more forceful means. I mean, this is not just Russians.

I've spoken to many foreign ambassadors to Russia—well, not the European ones, but others—who have also expressed concern about why he hasn't taken a much harder approach yet. And no, I don't know; Putin's not whispering in my ear. I'm not quite sure. But I do think, on some level, that they're also preparing for the possibility that if Ukraine does fall—when it falls—this would cause massive desperation in the West, especially in Europe. And that could lead to some reckless behavior, possibly even joining the war. And if that happens, it's better for Russia to be prepared.

So, having built up enough weaponry—at least enough Oreshnik missiles, which can strike critical infrastructure in Europe—if that's the direction the Europeans are going, then fine. But again, I'm not sure what direction they might be taking. I know that a lot of the pressure that came from Putin before, he rejected. You mentioned Karaganov—he would come to every yearly Valdai meeting and more or less ask Putin, “Why aren't we changing the nuclear doctrine?” And every year Putin said, “Well, this is not the time for it; we have to keep it.” And then, of course, in the end, he listened to Karaganov, and now they've changed the nuclear doctrine. And, you know, many people think this is political theater.

But, you know, when I used to work as a professor in Moscow, I actually worked in the department with Karaganov as my boss, because it was focused on Greater Eurasia—Russia's pivot to the East. They looked at how, yeah, the technology mix, how Russia could cooperate with China. And, you know, I spoke to him many times, and he's quite convinced that NATO's Article 5 wouldn't be

implemented in the way many people think. If you read the text carefully... I don't think this is theater. I think there are a lot of people in Moscow who really want this to escalate in a big way. But I'm not sure how Putin is influenced by it, though.

## **#John Mearsheimer**

And if you don't go nuclear, right, what do you think the Russians can do at the conventional level to win a quick victory this coming spring or summer? In other words, do you buy the argument that they have large reserve armies they can bring to bear—that they can change their strategy, punch through the front lines, and collapse the Ukrainian defenses? I mean, what do you think the options are for the Russians at the non-nuclear level to win or end this war?

## **#Glenn**

Well, it's a war of attrition. Once the adversary's army is weakened and you have opportunities to punch through the front line, other opportunities open up. You can disrupt a lot of the communication and logistics, and there's more possibility to surround large groupings of troops. I think this is where they're going with it, because now that the Ukrainian army is being weakened, they have a massive manpower shortage. At this point, the Russians seem to be opening new fronts, especially in Kharkiv and Sumy. So I assume that as Ukraine seems to be on the point of breaking, this will be the time to open up a larger front line.

And you also had reports, confirmed in Western media, that a lot of the new military hardware being developed—armored vehicles and all—is not actually going to the front. They're building up in the rear. So again, it's hard to know in the fog of war what's real or not, but my impression is that they're building up a big force in the rear. Whether this is for taking advantage of a massive breakthrough in Ukraine, or if this is for us—that is, if the Europeans decide to enter the war—for me this is unclear. Yeah, yes. Just a very brief last question as we run out of time: what do you see as the likely way, if Ukraine and NATO are being defeated in this war, that Ukraine would be brought down? Is it a military defeat, economic collapse, political fragmentation—do you have any views on this?

## **#John Mearsheimer**

Well, I think what will happen is that at some point Ukraine is going to be defeated on the battlefield. Given all the problems the Ukrainians have, and the fact that the Europeans can only do so much to help them while the Americans are trying to wean themselves off the Ukraine war, it's hard to see how Ukraine can hang on over the long term. So I think they lose on the battlefield. At the same time, their economy is in desperate straits. And if they were to lose Odessa and even more territory than they've already lost, that would just add to their woes. So I think economically, the rump state that results from this war will be a basket case.

And then on the political side, I would imagine there are going to be huge political fights inside Ukraine once the war is over. There's going to be a big blame game—who's going to be blamed for losing this war? And it'll be ugly. So I think economically and politically, life in this Ukrainian rump state will be ugly. And then, of course, they will have lost on the battlefield as well. The question you have to ask yourself is, what do Ukraine–Russia relations look like moving forward? And as I said before, I think European–Russian relations will be poisonous.

I think there's no question that relations between Ukraine and Russia will be poisonous. And I think relations between Ukraine and Europe will be very messy, because there'll be some countries in Europe, like Hungary and Slovakia, that have a very different way of thinking about Ukraine than countries like France, Britain, and Germany. And even countries like France and Germany, or France and Britain, will be at loggerheads on some key issues regarding Ukraine. So Ukraine is facing a dismal future. And we haven't even added in the demographic issue. I mean, this is a country that's facing, you know, a demographic death spiral.

It's just horrendous, what's happening. There's a piece in the Wall Street Journal this morning that says it's time for Ukraine to begin mobilizing younger people—those in their late teens and early twenties who've been largely exempt from the draft. That would be really good, you know—take all those young people and feed them into the meat grinder. I mean, this is crazy, right? It'll just exacerbate the demographic situation, which is already disastrous. So once this war is over, Ukraine is going to be in terrible shape. There's no way it comes out of this war winning in any way. It loses on almost every dimension. Excuse me, Glenn.

And this, of course, is why people like you and I have long argued that this war should have been settled a long time ago. This is why the Ukrainians should not have walked away from the negotiating process in Istanbul in the spring of 2022. Their situation has just gotten continually worse with the passage of time. And if they manage to hang in there for another year or two, their situation is not going to improve. That's what's very important to understand here. Staying in the fight has never been a smart strategy from their point of view. They should have put an end to this a long time ago. When you add it all up, it's just categorically depressing.

And by the way, this gets back to my earlier point, Glenn, that the question of who is to blame for this disaster is going to come racing to the fore. Once it's over—once the war is over, once the fighting stops, once you get some sort of armistice—then the question becomes: who caused this? And of course, the vast majority of people in the West, or in the foreign policy elites in the West, are going to argue it's the Russians who caused it because they were imperialists. But you and I know better—that this is largely a result of NATO expansion and that the West is principally responsible for this utter disaster.

**#Glenn**

Even in the unrealistic scenario that Ukraine would win—the best possible scenario—who would be left to enjoy the victory, you know, with this demographic downward spiral? That's why it's very strange to me. And what makes it even sadder is the fact that Zelensky kind of knew what the consequences would be of going down this path. You mentioned the negotiations in early 2022. We recall that back in March 2022, he gave an interview to *\*The Economist\** where he said there were many countries in the West that didn't want them to take a deal, that wanted a long war—that's the phrase he used, "long war with Russia"—because it could weaken the Russians, even if it meant the destruction of Ukraine.

So... it's such a tragedy that we've gone down this path for the past four years. I think the war will end in Odessa, as you suggested before. This would be the best victory for the Russians, I think, because if they can landlock Ukraine, it wouldn't just be weakened and cease to be a future threat or a future frontline, but it would also lose its market value to NATO as an instrument for pushing Russia out of the Black Sea. And even the policies you see—the idea of de-Russifying Ukraine—I mean, this would entail de-Russifying Odessa, a historical Russian city, which would be impossible for the Russians to accept and just watch. So it just seems to me that this is where the war would end, with the Russians essentially stepping into Odessa.

## **#John Mearsheimer**

Glenn, just one more point that came to mind when you were talking about Zelensky back in 2022. Before the war broke out—this is February 24th, 2022, that's when the war started—as you remember, in December, January, and the first part of February, the Americans kept saying, "War is coming, war is coming." They were constantly saying that. And Zelensky was saying, "Stop saying that, you're going to make war happen." Zelensky was not interested in getting into a war with Russia. And then, of course, once the war breaks out, he's willing to go to Istanbul, or he's willing to send his negotiators there. He's willing to work out a deal with the Russians.

But then he makes a fatal mistake—he sides with the Americans and the British, walks away from the negotiations in Istanbul, and commits himself to a long war he thinks he's going to win. He buys into the Western rhetoric that Ukraine's initial successes on the battlefield—and you remember, they did reasonably well once the war started—combined with economic sanctions and military backing from the West, would finish the Russians off. And then, over the course of 2022, the Ukrainians again do quite well on the battlefield.

And by the end of 2022, they think they're in great shape. And then you remember the June 2023 offensive that was supposed to, you know, produce this giant blitzkrieg that would seriously damage the Russian military. So once he buys in at the end of the Istanbul negotiations to the Western view of what's going to happen—once he reverses direction—he's in deep trouble, because he doesn't

realize it, but he's joining the losing side. You remember General Milley—again, very important—General Milley said in the fall of 2022, after the Ukrainian successes in Kharkiv and Kherson, "Now's the time to cut a deal."

This is the high watermark for Ukraine. And of course, Milley was correct, but nobody wanted to hear what he had to say. That includes Zelensky, because he thought he was on the winning side—he was on the march. Ukraine was going to win a great victory and finish off the Russians, or at least wound them mortally, in the summer of 2023. That was their thinking. But what happened is he just got sucked into the vortex, and there's no getting out. The end result is he's going to be seen by historians as having played a key role in destroying his own country.

**#Glenn**

Well, that was on that topic as well, further contributing to the fracturing of the political West. So I think the outcome of this will be profound. As you suggested, I think future historians will look back on this as one of our greatest mistakes in terms of weakening the position of the West.

**#John Mearsheimer**

And it's not only political, Glenn, it's also economic. Europe has not only suffered politically; it's suffered economically from this war.

**#Glenn**

Well, thank you very much. We went a bit over time there, so I apologize. And thank you for coming and sharing your insights.

**#John Mearsheimer**

My pleasure, as always, Glenn.