

# George Beebe: Window of Opportunity for Peace in Ukraine

George Beebe is the former CIA Director for Russia Analysis and currently Director of Grand Strategy at the Quincy Institute. Beebe examines the possibility for a diplomatic settlement to the Ukraine War. Russia's demands are high and there is little room for concessions as NATO in Ukraine represents an existential threat, and Russia is winning. Russia's for restoring Ukraine's neutrality, territorial concessions and limiting the military capabilities of a post-war Ukraine can all be met. The European leaders are determined to prolong the war, yet they can also be brought on board. Read *Responsible Statecraft*: <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/> Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: <https://glennDiesen.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](http://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 are joined today by George Beebe, a former CIA director for Russia analysis and the current director of grand strategy at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. Thank you very much for taking the time. Whenever we discuss the issue of ending the war in Ukraine through diplomacy, opinions are always very divided. Some believe it has to be resolved on the battlefield because the sides are too far apart, while others think there's still a pathway to peace. I guess the key challenge is that Russia sees this as something that's been going on for 30 years and views it as an existential threat, which makes its demands very high. So how do you see the pathway to peace here?

## #George Beebe

Well, you know, it's an interesting question because if you look at expert opinion on this, there was a large group of people before the invasion who didn't think it was likely. A lot of those were in Moscow itself, by the way. The invasion took much of Russia's own expert class by surprise. But in the West—and I'd say the bulk of what I'd call the foreign policy establishment in Washington—there was quite a bit of skepticism that this would actually turn into a war. There was, I think, a relatively small circle of experts, largely realists, who said, hey, this war is likely; the Russians do see the possibility of some kind of military alliance between Ukraine and the United States, or Ukraine and NATO, as an existential threat, and they'll take extreme actions to prevent that from happening.

So there's a very substantial chance that this invasion is going to happen. But then, if you look at that circle of people who said, "Hey, this is serious—a war is in fact likely unless we find a compromise way out," very few of them also think that some sort of peaceful resolution to this war is possible. What I think you have to look at here is a very important factor that has changed since 2022, and that's the United States itself. Back in 2022, the Biden administration did not want to compromise to find a way to avoid a conflict. They thought that the notion that NATO could and should continue to expand eastward for as long as it wanted to—and that Russia had no veto, no say over that—was an important principle.

And that, in fact, NATO hegemony was seen as fundamental to world order—that for the world to be peaceful and stable, the United States needed to ensure that the Western order remained the dominant one globally. They weren't willing to give that up. What has happened since then, however, is that the Trump administration won the election and came into power with a very different view of what the basis of world order ought to be, what European security should look like, what the role of the NATO alliance in the world should be, and what America's own role in that alliance ought to be. There's been a fundamental shift.

And if you look at the U.S. national security strategy, it's immediately evident that they're taking what I would call a more realist approach to the world—essentially saying that the great powers have to be in a state of balance, and that we have to find a way of balancing interests among these great powers when they come into tension. So there has to be a combination of a balance of power and engagement through diplomacy. Now, when you look at the war in Ukraine through that prism of a changed American approach, I think it changes the likelihood of a compromise here. And I'll point out something that a lot of people recognize in retrospect was a missed opportunity: the Istanbul negotiations between Russia and Ukraine, mediated by the Turks in the early months after the invasion, where it looked like the two sides were zeroing in on a compromise that could have ended the war.

It would make Ukraine militarily neutral. It would set some limits on Ukrainian military capabilities and resolve many of the other issues between them. And if you believe the press narrative, a lot of people have said the Ukrainians were willing to consider that kind of compromise and were close to saying yes. But the West, in the form of Boris Johnson from the UK, came in and said, "Yeah, we're not so comfortable with the terms on offer here. You can do better. So let's keep this war going, negotiate later from a position of strength, and see where we are after a while." Now, what has changed since April 2022 is Washington's attitude.

Imagine if, in April 2022, the White House had said, "Hey, good deal. You've got to take this. It's not going to get better. You'll be far better off ending this war, preserving your independence in Ukraine, and focusing on reconstruction." Well, that has now happened. We've got an administration that has said, "We're willing to compromise with Russia on a key security aspect of this war—namely NATO enlargement, the place of Russia in Europe, and the place of Ukraine in Europe." Given that, and

given that Ukraine is now hearing from its primary benefactor—without whom it really can't continue this war—that it had better find a way to compromise, I think that fundamentally changes the situation we're looking at. It doesn't mean that peace is automatic.

There are still a lot of very difficult issues that have to be handled. But when the United States itself says, "You know what, we have to find a way out of this situation," and Ukraine has some good reasons on the battlefield to want to find a way out—because if this war continues, Ukraine is gradually going to see the prospect of a secure and prosperous future completely disappear. Russia needs a way out of this not because it believes it can't win on the battlefield, but because geopolitically it has found itself in a cul-de-sac—very dependent on China, not able to have any reasonable discourse with Europe and the United States, and as a result, weakened geopolitically, much less influential, much less able to tack back and forth between East and West to play the sides off against one another.

And so Russia has, I think, some fundamental geopolitical reasons to try to find a resolution here. And you have to ask yourself, well, if the United States wants this done, if Ukraine has some very practical reasons for wanting this war to end, and Russia has some big geopolitical reasons for it, who opposes this? What stands in the way? I would argue that there's a group that doesn't want this to end, and that's really what this is about at this point. I would call that the old foreign policy establishment that has prevailed in the United States since the end of the Cold War and has dominated Europe in its own approach to security and diplomacy. That's the group that doesn't want to see compromise here.

It's not so much a standoff between Ukraine and Russia, although there are certainly big disagreements there. I think those disagreements are bridgeable. There's a way of compromising that everyone can find acceptable. But, you know, the "blob," if you want to call them that—the group that has ruled Washington in foreign policy for the last three decades—they don't want to see this kind of compromise. They don't want to close the door on an approach to European security, on an approach to world order that they're very much committed to. So the path to peace really is a question of whether the Trump administration can overcome the resistance of that old guard, that old establishment in Europe and the United States that still doesn't want to see a compromise here.

## **#Glenn**

Why would the Europeans accept any compromise? Because, you know, if we were able to defeat Russia, then essentially the outcome would be that the Americans might stay. So we'd have America behind us, we'd have this powerful Ukrainian shield in front of us, Russia would be weakened, and again, it would have to do as it's told. Meanwhile, if we lose the war, the entire post-Cold War project of establishing a Europe without Russia is over, and the U.S. will likely pivot to other regions. So Europe's relevance collapses, and without the American pacifier, it's likely that the Europeans will

begin to fragment on their own. There wouldn't be one Europe, but many Europes. So, given that this seems like an all-or-nothing situation, under what conditions would the Europeans be willing to accept an end to this war?

## **#George Beebe**

Well, I think Europe has to face a reality here: their optimum choice, as you described it, isn't achievable. The United States won't permit it. We're simply not going to allow this war to continue just so Europe can sustain the fighting for as long as it chooses, in order to block a future it's not comfortable with. The nature of the transatlantic alliance is going to change one way or another. Either it can be a managed change—a managed transition in which the United States and its European allies work to orchestrate something less abrupt, less bumpy, less damaging to everyone involved, and that preserves the core interests of all the allies—or it can be a very abrupt, very destabilizing transition.

Europe doesn't have the power to compel the United States, or the Trump administration, to continue sustaining that old approach to NATO hegemony in Europe and U.S. and Western primacy in the world. The Trump administration is going in a different direction. The world itself, and power relations within it, are moving in a certain direction. The Europeans don't have the power to prevent that. So what's in it for the Europeans to get on board the train? I think what's in it for Europe is that the train is going to leave the station with or without them. It's far better for them to get on board that train than to be left at the station, which would be a much more problematic situation for them overall.

And they simply can't sustain the war effort for Ukraine without the United States. They don't have the intelligence resources to provide Ukraine with what it needs. They don't have a satellite communication system comparable to Starlink, which is vital to Ukraine's battlefield communications. They don't have the military-industrial capacity to supply the quantities of equipment the Ukrainians need to sustain this conflict, particularly in air defense. So simply telling the United States, "No, we're going to go it alone and this war is going to continue," really isn't a viable option for Europe.

## **#Glenn**

But a key challenge, though, is that we've allowed these problems to fester for the past 30 years without addressing them. The Russians said this was an existential threat—and they meant it. And now that they've fought for all these four years, and they're very clearly winning now, I think that's put them in a position where they not only have high demands or requirements for peace, but they're also able to push them and not accept any major concessions. So, given that they have all these demands—again, neutrality being one for Ukraine—which puts strict limitations on security guarantees aside.

Also, a post-war Ukraine would have to have a more friendly government. They used the word “denazification,” but also a smaller army—not this 800,000. And lastly, of course, the territorial concessions. To what extent do you see space for compromise here? Because I'm not saying there aren't any areas of compromise, but we know very little about what was, for example, said in Alaska—what kind of commitments were made by each side. So how do you see this, I guess, scope for what? Because the Russians will have to, you know, make some concessions. Otherwise, there's no way to find a meaningful settlement here.

## **#George Beebe**

Well, that's right. I think we're already seeing some concessions from the Russians. The notion that they've had maximalist demands that haven't changed for years is just wrong. One of the things that became evident coming out of the Anchorage summit was that the Russians offered a territorial compromise. Going into that summit, their position—as defined by President Putin in his June 2024 speech—was that all the territories Russia had officially annexed had to be fully controlled and conceded by Ukraine to Russia in order for there to be peace. I think what happened at Anchorage was that Putin said they were comfortable ending the war at the line of contact in two of the regions Russia has annexed, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson, in return for a Ukrainian withdrawal from the parts of the Donbass they still militarily occupied.

Now, the Ukrainians have said, “Yeah, no, we're not comfortable with that.” I think the Russians expected, coming out of Anchorage, that the Trump administration would essentially twist Ukraine's arm into accepting that deal. That hasn't happened, and I think there's a good reason why. The Trump administration correctly recognizes that if this deal looks like something that was force-fed to Ukraine, it's not going to get support in Washington, not in Congress, not from the foreign policy establishment. It would be perceived as unfair—a Ukrainian capitulation.

And that's not in the interest of the Trump administration, because it wants to get buy-in from the Washington bureaucracy and from Congress. I think it's envisioning a series of agreements that the Senate will, in fact, ratify. And I think the Ukrainians want that ratification. I think the Russians do, too. The Russians want the ratification because one of the key provisions in these deals will be that the door to NATO enlargement to the east will be closed—that Ukraine is not going to become part of NATO. And the Russians want that in treaty form, as a legal obligation, so they're not just trusting the handshake of a president that could be reversed in the future by a different administration.

The Ukrainians want it because they want to be able to show their public that they got security guarantees with legal force from the United States. Now, the question is, can you find a compromise that respects Russia's red lines about a European or U.S. military presence on Ukrainian territory, but at the same time gives the Ukrainians enough assurance that they won't be left alone if there's a re-invasion in the future? I think the answer to that is yes. Again, you have to do a little bit of reading between the lines.

But if you look at the document that came out of the Paris talks a few weeks ago, it looks like what the negotiators have set up is essentially a three-tiered system, where Ukraine itself will be primarily responsible for its own defense—for deterring a future Russian invasion. They're the ones who bear the bulk of that responsibility. The next tier beyond the Ukrainians is the European "Coalition of the Willing," and they're going to be providing Ukraine with the military wherewithal to sustain that self-defense effort. That document lists a number of options, including direct military involvement on Ukrainian territory from the Coalition of the Willing.

Provided that there's a clear indication of a reinvasion of Ukraine by Russia, the United States is in that third tier. In this setup, the U.S. doesn't provide direct support to Ukraine; it provides support to the Coalition of the Willing in areas where it has unique comparative advantages. None of this obliges any of the Western participants in the deal to treat an attack on Ukraine as an attack on themselves—in other words, there's no literal Article 5-style commitment. But it also doesn't take off the table the possibility of direct Western combat participation if there's a Russian reinvasion.

So the idea there is to deter the Russians—to give them enough uncertainty about the situation to worry that there might be a direct clash with the West if it reinvades—but also to respect Russia's concerns that it doesn't want to see U.S. or European military infrastructure on Ukrainian territory that could be used to pose an offensive threat against Russia. Now, how you define that is going to be important. And I think part of what the negotiators are dealing with right now is the specific language about what might trigger a Coalition of the Willing intervention. How do we define that? Those words are critically important in this kind of situation.

I think the Russians are going to want to rule out any stationing of Coalition of the Willing forces on Ukrainian territory outside the context of a clear reinvasion in the future. So that's, I'm sure, one of the things the negotiators are trying to define in all of this. But in principle, is there a way of splitting the difference—of giving the Ukrainians enough assurance while not seeming unduly threatening to the Russians? I think, yeah, we're probably close to finding that sweet spot. Not an easy thing to do, but I don't think it's impossible. And I think the negotiators have actually made a lot of progress on that.

## **#Glenn**

What's interesting with Alaska, though, is that the Russians haven't confirmed they'd be willing to make this compromise. On the other hand, they did stress that Ukraine has to leave Donbas. By leaving out Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, there's definitely a strong indication that this is what was said. But my impression is that, for the Russians, the main concern is that any peace deal would essentially be another Minsk—just a little pause to rebuild Ukraine and then have another go at it. And, you know, I think that's why they look for these reassurances, because the Ukrainians obviously want to pull NATO into this war.

So, you know, if we have the security guarantees, then there will be every incentive in the world to first rebuild Ukraine, and then Ukraine would want to trigger something to get the Americans and Europeans on their side. But—yes, it’s a tricky situation. I think this is also why the Russians want a friendly government in Kyiv and limits on the size of the post-war Ukrainian army. Do you see this as one of the areas where the Russians have to give way, or is there a halfway meeting point here?

## **#George Beebe**

Well, I think the question of the size of the Ukrainian military is really a red herring at this point. It’s more symbolically important than practically important right now. The reason for that is that Ukraine has a demographic crisis on its hands. A lot of people have fled the war, and Ukraine’s birth rate is, you know, in what I would call the death zone. They’re really in a situation where much of their population right now is retirees, pensioners, who are increasingly dependent on the state but can’t really be economically productive—certainly can’t serve in the military. And it’s very unlikely that the Ukrainians can sustain a large standing army, given the economic circumstances they’re in and the demographic crisis they’re facing right now. And that’s not going to change, you know, unless some miracle happens.

They’ll get millions of returnees who fled to Russia and Europe after the fighting began. They’re going to have a very difficult problem on their hands building a standing army much larger than 250,000 or 300,000 men. So this question of whether the peace deal settles on a 600,000-man army or an 800,000-man army—and what the Russians are going to accept there—I don’t think the Russians really believe that figure means much in practical terms. If the Russians want to throw a bone to the Ukrainians symbolically and say, “Fine, you want an 800,000-man army on paper in this deal? We’re fine with that,” knowing full well that it’s a complete illusion for Ukraine, I think they can do that. I don’t think they’re really worried about a large standing army in Ukraine.

What they’re most concerned about are long-range weapons—strike weapons that could be developed or based in Ukraine—that could threaten Russia’s strategic military capabilities. That’s something I think they’re legitimately worried about. But, you know, apart from that—and this also includes the stationing of Western combat forces and Western military infrastructure on Ukrainian territory—I think those are things the Russians are simply not going to budge on. They’re going to draw very hard lines on those because those are real possibilities, and they’re things the Russians generally regard as threatening. But I don’t think those are deal breakers, really. I think the United States and, by extension, Ukraine have some real incentives to deal pragmatically with those issues.

## **#Glenn**

That's the last question. Do you think such a deal—are there any indications that the stop of NATO expansion would apply to other countries? Because a key problem with NATO continuously rolling toward the east is that once it reaches the common neighborhood—not just Ukraine, but Moldova,

Georgia—you find these very deeply divided populations, where half would lean west and the other half east. So if they're asked to choose between us or them, that's something that could trigger, well, maybe not a full civil war, but at least domestic disputes in which the Russians and NATO would, of course, lean in and try to pull them to their side. So essentially, what we've seen in Ukraine. How do you keep these countries from becoming future proxies? Do you think this could also be included in such a deal to really prevent that from happening again?

## **#George Beebe**

I do, actually. If you look at the Trump administration's attitude toward NATO enlargement, they're skeptics of continued expansion—if not downright opponents. The problem we're in right now is that successive U.S. administrations didn't look at NATO expansion as something really linked to America's own vital national interests. They never asked the question: is it vital to U.S. security to defend Georgia—to go to war with Russia to defend Georgia? Is it vital to U.S. security to go to war with Russia to defend Estonia? After we brought the Baltic states into the alliance, it was almost a decade before the United States and NATO actually put together a plan for defending them. We only did so after Estonia raised its hand and said, "Uh, don't you think we ought to have a plan?"

And the reaction in Washington was, "Oh, yeah, good idea. We should do that." Which shows you how seriously people in Washington took the notion that they might actually have to exercise an Article 5 defense of new members. We approached the expansion of NATO really as an ideological mission—an effort to transform other countries, to liberalize their governance internally, and to establish what I'll call a "NATOization" of the global order. This was not seen as a commitment to go to war to defend the new member states. That has now changed, and I don't think it will ever go back to that old conception. I think we recognize now that if we're going to take a new member state into NATO, we would actually have to seriously consider: should we go to war to defend this state?

Is it critical to America's own security to go to war to defend this state? I think the answer to that, for all the conceivable members that might want to join the alliance, is going to be no. If we really look at these states—now, is it vital to U.S. security to go to war to defend Georgia against Russia? The answer is no, it is not. We know the answer to these questions. So I think this question of whether NATO enlargement should continue, and whether the United States will want to keep the door open there, has really already been answered. The answer is no. And that, in turn, provides the basis for a compromise with Russia that goes beyond just Ukraine. It opens the door to a rethinking of the basis of Europe's security, of the transatlantic alliance, and of Russia's role in this regional security order.

## **#Glenn**

Well, as the Europeans are beating the drums of war, I do appreciate your optimism on this, and I very much hope that your assessment is correct and that we're coming to some kind of deal. So thank you very much for taking the time. Thank you.