John Mearsheimer: NATO's Choice as Ukraine Collapses: Negotiate or War with Russia

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#Glenn

Welcome back, everyone. Today is October 28th, 2026, and we are joined by Professor John Mearsheimer. Thank you for coming back. It's great to see you again.

#John Mearsheimer

Great to see you, Glenn, as always.

#Glenn

It seems that the United States is facing possible major strategic defeats in both Ukraine and the Middle East. In the Middle East, I would say both the war against Iran and what's happening in Yemen will have consequences. Yet the political leadership still seems unwilling to recognize limits on American power. And I was wondering, what might be the consequences of this? I ask because I know that you like Machiavelli, and I know that in The Prince, you know, he presented the idea that men tend to see the world as they wish it were rather than how it actually is. And this becomes their downfall. So what are the possible miscalculations here that could result from not accepting the limitations of power?

#John Mearsheimer

I think, Glenn, if you look carefully, Trump and his entourage understand the limits of American power. Let's just talk about the three big conflicts: Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Ukraine. With regard to Iran, President Trump has done hardly anything militarily for a long time now, since early September, in fact. There's no question that he's constantly threatening to attack Iran, but he's not done anything serious in that regard. He says he's now going to attack after the midterms, and he might do that. But I wouldn't bet a lot of money on it. He's backed off so many times up to now. And furthermore, if you look at the attack that he's threatening, you know, they're talking about an intensive three-day bombing campaign.

We had a 40-day bombing campaign to start the war, and that didn't work. One asks oneself, what's a three-day bombing campaign going to do? The answer is not much. And again, it's not clear that he'll do that. Furthermore, if you look at our position in the Gulf, virtually all of our bases are either badly damaged or destroyed. And when you think about the future, we really don't have much prospect of reestablishing those bases and continuing to have a significant military force in the Gulf region. It doesn't look like that is in the cards. And we understand that, I believe. So I think there's a very healthy sense of the limits of our power in the case of Iran.

Let's go to Saudi Arabia. I think it's clear that President Trump not only greenlighted the Saudis to pick a fight with the Houthis, but also encouraged them to do that. But then, when the Saudis quickly got into trouble, which he should have foreseen and the Saudis should have foreseen, they came begging for help. They asked for help twice on September 10th, and they asked for help again on September 17th. And President Trump said no. And the question is, why did he say no? It's because President Trump understood the limits of American military power. And let's go back to last year, 2025. As you well know, Glenn, we picked the fight.

We, meaning the Americans, picked the fight with the Houthis in March of 2025. And we basically conceded defeat in May of 2025. We couldn't beat the Houthis back then. And Trump, when he was asked by MBS to intervene on behalf of Saudi Arabia, undoubtedly thought about what happened in 2025 and said no, in good part because he understood the limits of American military power. So if you sort of look at the two big conflicts that are taking place in the Middle East, Iran and Saudi Arabia, I think you see a lot of evidence that we, the United States, recognize the limits of what we can do there. Excuse me.

And by the way, Glenn, I think we understand that moving forward, those same limits will apply. And this is what I was saying about reestablishing bases in the Persian Gulf region. And then go over to Ukraine. Trump has basically shifted a lot of the burden of dealing with Ukraine to the Europeans. He wants the Europeans to pay for the weaponry that is sent to Ukraine. He doesn't want to do that. And the only fly in the ointment here is that the CIA is obviously still deeply involved in the war in Ukraine. Trump has not been able to rein in the CIA and get the CIA to back off. But I think Trump fully understands that there's just not much we can do to win the war in Ukraine in any possible way. I think Trump fully understands that we picked the fight and we've lost that fight. And now it's time to cut a deal.

I mean, Trump wants to cut a deal. He has three big obstacles in front of him. One is the Ukrainians, in the form of Zelensky. Two is the Europeans, which you know all about. And number three is the deep state in the United States and all those hardliners in the Senate. But if you think about Trump, he understands we don't have a war-winning strategy. So I think at this point in time, you can make a quite persuasive argument that the Trump administration, at the top, fully understands the limits of American military power. And then just one final point on this, Glenn. You want to remember that when Trump got elected, he promised no more forever wars. He promised no more regime change. He made it clear that he wanted to settle the Ukraine war, which he would never have started because he understood...

So he said that it was a losing proposition. All this is to say, I think that going into the White House in January of 2025, Trump was interested in cutting back on American military commitments and not getting involved in more wars, in large part because he then recognized the limits of American military power. But he made one fatal mistake, and I do believe it was a fatal mistake that will wreck his presidency. And that is, he entered the war against Iran. And of course, he also encouraged the Saudis to pick a fight with the Houthis. And he's been unable to shut down the Ukraine war. So all those calculations make it look like he might think that American military power can solve problems here, there, and everywhere. But I don't think that's the case, Glenn.

#Glenn

I hope you're right, but I also had a similar thought before he attacked Iran to begin with: that this would have a very low probability of success, which was a reason why he wouldn't do it. But of course, this is months afterwards, and surely the lesson must have been learned by now. But that is an interesting point of view, though, because his very belligerent rhetoric can mean two things. One, he's building the case for war. But it could also mean that talking a big game allows him to postpone any further military action. No one's going to accuse him of backing away with all his crazy talk, I'm assuming. But how do you make sense of the military hardware, though? There's military hardware and troop movements towards the Middle East. I saw this third aircraft carrier heading down. Is this for pressure during negotiations or to maintain, I guess, a tough persona so he won't be criticized at home for being weak? Or is this preparing for war?

#John Mearsheimer

Well, let me make a couple of points. First of all, it's just kicking the can down the road. You remember he signed the 17 June Memorandum of Understanding, which was, in effect, a surrender document. The Iranians clearly won the war, based on what we saw in the 17 June Memorandum of Understanding. And, of course, that's why he walked away. And he's been desperately searching for a way to rescue the situation, to get some sort of agreement where he can claim victory. And he's been unable to do that, so he just keeps kicking the can down the road. The second point, and the more important point I'd make, is that, as you know, Glenn, there's a very important distinction in

international relations between threatening military force to coerce an adversary into doing something that you want it to do…

And on the other hand, there is the matter of actually going to war to get your way. So with coercion, you threaten war. You don't go to war. You threaten war to get what you want. And then, in the case of going to war, you use military force to get what you want. Now, I think that what Trump is doing here, by threatening to attack Iran and by moving lots of military assets into the region, which lends credibility to that threat, is trying to coerce the Iranians. There's no question about that. Now, I don't think that that coercion is going to work.

In fact, I think there's almost no evidence to suggest that that coercion is going to work. And that brings us to the really key question: Given that the coercion is not going to work, will he use military force? That's the question. He can't kick the can down the road forever. At some point, he's going to have to decide whether or not to go to war to rectify this situation. And therefore, the big question is: In late November, after the midterms are over, after the USS Teddy Roosevelt aircraft carrier gets on station in the Persian Gulf, and once you have additional ground forces, will he then launch an attack? That's the question.

#Glenn

Well, I'm glad you mentioned the elections. Actually, that's a bit of a concern as well. That is, when you see domestic politics beginning to influence foreign policy, you know, often you're almost walking into the realm of irrational politics, of being an irrational actor. And indeed, at least from a political realist perspective, you would assume that it's the international distribution of power that dictates your foreign policy. But we see now the U.S. midterms, and the Israelis are also having their elections. And I guess the commonality is that both will affect U.S. foreign policy. But what will change if the opposition takes power, though? I mean, both Netanyahu and Trump could face serious legal consequences. That is, while Netanyahu would be removed from office, Trump, of course, could have his position weakened, even though it's not a presidential election. He could also begin to face these legal repercussions.

#John Mearsheimer

But how do you see these elections affecting the wars? Let me just stick to the American case. I want to ask you a question. And the question is, why do you think Trump doesn't attack Iran before the midterms and says that he's going to attack Iran after the midterms? I mean, I think this is a very important question, right? Let me give you my answer, and you can tell me what you think. My view is that he's not attacking before the midterms because he fully understands that if he attacks, the Iranians will retaliate, and this will have disastrous consequences for the international economy. In other words, he does not have a war-winning strategy. If he had a war-winning strategy against

Iran, he would have attacked a month ago, or two weeks ago, or two months ago. Instead, he says, "I'm going to delay it until after the midterms." That tells me that they understand that attacking is going to cause an enormous amount of trouble.

Then you have to ask yourself the question, well, what's going to change after the midterms? What are we going to be able to do after the midterms that we couldn't do before the midterms? And the answer is nothing. So all that's a way of saying that if they attack after the midterms, it's going to be disastrous, just as it would be disastrous if we attacked before the midterms, which is why we're not doing it. And doesn't that just tell you they have no war-winning strategy here? So the truth is that the Iranians have us over a barrel, and they understand that. That's why coercion is not working. They're just saying to us, "Go ahead, attack." They're daring us to attack because they understand it makes no sense from our point of view. And therefore, they're betting on the fact that Trump won't do it. And if they're wrong and Trump does attack, it's going to work to their benefit. What do you think of that logic?

#Glenn

It does make sense. Well, again, they're delaying the attack. I also thought it could be because, if it has a low level of success, you wouldn't want to do this before the election. And also, given that this war has become very unpopular, it's easier for him to show strength and suggest this has been successful. That's kind of the theme in his speeches: "This war ends when I decide it's over. We might consider whether we'll make a deal with the Iranians." So he wants to be in control and at least give the illusion of success. I think if he goes back into the war, the vulnerabilities and weaknesses of the U.S. position might become more obvious. But that doesn't mean I disagree with what you said. I think it's more likely that this is because he knows this is a horrible idea. So that is probably the best interpretation, though.

#John Mearsheimer

Let me make one quick point, though, Glenn. You say quite correctly that the war is unpopular. In fact, it's wildly unpopular. It's been unpopular from the get-go. But if the war is unpopular, doesn't that incentivize President Trump to end the war and get a settlement before the midterms? And if the military instrument is as effective as he says it is, doesn't that suggest, at least, that he should have gone to war a month or two ago, won the war, and put this problem to rest? Instead, what he's done is he's let it fester, which works to his disadvantage because it is unpopular.

And as the days go by, it becomes more and more unpopular, especially because it's linked in so many people's minds to the state of the U.S. economy. So, again, all of this just tells me what you and I understand anyway: we have no military option here. It gets back to the Saudi case as well. We have no military option. You know, you read the newspapers, and people talk about a three-day bombing campaign. It's an intensive bombing campaign. They're going to go after nuclear sites, which I thought they had already destroyed. But anyway, they're going to go after nuclear sites, and

they're going to go after infrastructure. And sometimes they put the word "energy" in front of "infrastructure."

#Glenn

Okay, that's the target set.

#John Mearsheimer

You're going to do it for three days. Please explain to me, number one, how this hurts Iran to the point where it throws its hands up. And number two, please tell me what you think the Iranians will do in response and what the consequences will be. I mean, we have to have a full-throated story here, right? We're in the realm of strategy here. If you're going to use military force, we have to know how you produce the desired results, how you get your adversary to dance to your tune. And there's virtually nothing about that in the newspapers. And when you listen to people in the Trump administration talk, they don't tell a story. They just talk about whacking Iran, you know, just slapping it around and sort of implying that that's all you have to do, and they'll throw up their hands. This is not smart. You've got to explain what your theory of victory is. And they don't do that. And of course, the reason they don't do that is they have no theory of victory.

#Glenn

Well, I think the reports we've seen about the plans for this three-day strike, short but intensive, have some flaws. First of all, the timeline. We assume that the Iranians will agree to this timeline. They don't have to finish anything. And also, one of the reasons why the Iranians restrain themselves is because they know that if they go up the escalation ladder, the Americans will as well. So they don't want to have their energy facilities destroyed. But if the U.S. attacks their energy installations, why wouldn't they torch all the Gulf states and do exactly the same? And at that point, I think the U.S. would have predictably harmed itself. But also, I guess, if you're going for a third round of war, what changed?

The U.S. used to have good infrastructure in the region. With all these military bases, it was well positioned to attack Iran. Now it's all burned to the ground. It's going to be very hard to replicate even what it did in the past. So if it can't even replicate what it did in the past, which didn't work, why go back in? I guess the lack of a clear plan here gives me some optimism in terms of the U.S. not going down that path. But on the other hand, there's so much at stake, domestically and internationally. We're talking about world order here. Is the U.S. going to dominate the Middle East, or is it going to have to retreat? I'm just thinking there might be a willingness to do irrational and stupid things under these circumstances.

#John Mearsheimer

Yeah, I think the best explanation for why we will get a war is desperation, which is what you're getting at. But I just want to make another point on this whole question of carrying out this military campaign. And here we're talking in rational, legal terms. We're not talking about desperation. But it's quite clear that the present situation incentivizes the United States to really slam Iran. In other words, if you're going to get the Iranians to throw up their hands, you really have to punish them severely in that three-day bombing campaign. It can't be a light touch. But the problem you then face is that the harder you hit the Iranians, the more you incentivize them to do great damage to the United States and its allies in the Gulf, and to Israel itself.

And let me give you just a couple of examples here. The Iranians have said very clearly that if we—the United States—attack Pickaxe Mountain, which is their new nuclear site that we talk about attacking, they're going after Dimona, which is the nuclear site in Israel. And you just sort of say to yourself, wow, if they actually go after Dimona, that could have huge consequences because you're talking about putting ballistic missiles, you know, on a nuclear site. And God knows how that will play out. Furthermore, the Iranians have made it clear that they're now well aware that there are these seven cables that carry internet traffic and so forth and so on underneath the Persian Gulf.

And they say that they will go after those seven cables, sever those seven cables, and cause huge damage to the international economy if we go after critical infrastructure inside Iran. And then they've also talked about going after—this is their rhetoric, not mine—$2 trillion worth of data centers. In the Persian Gulf region, we've been building all these data centers, and they're talking about, you know, going after them, destroying them. And it's quite easy to do that, of course, with the ballistic missile inventory and the drone inventory that they have. And so the point that I'm making to you, Glenn, is, yes, we're incentivized to really slam them. But they are, on the other hand, really incentivized to slam us back. And when you start thinking about the targets that they can go after...

Right. And I haven't even mentioned desalination plants. I haven't mentioned energy infrastructure in the Arab states that could be in their crosshairs. But just talking about all those additional things, like cables, Dimona, and so forth and so on, you see, actually, some pretty frightening scenarios could play themselves out. And again, this is why Trump has not done anything with regard to bombing Iran. He understands that, as bad as the situation is, he doesn't want to make it any worse. If he's going to use military force, he's got to be able to tell a plausible story about how it works. And as I said, you know, five minutes ago, nobody's telling that plausible story. What you and I are doing is going back and forth and explaining how this could lead to disaster.

#Glenn

Yes, another thought that occurred to me is the merger of all these wars, because it looked for a while as though...

#John Mearsheimer

The Ukraine war might merge with the Iran war, but there are two other wars.

#Glenn

That is, the Iran war merging with the Saudi war, or the Saudi-Yemen war. If the U.S. attacks Iran now, it will probably use Saudi airspace or facilities. So, in other words, the Saudis would make themselves complicit in the attacks on Iran. Iran would then almost certainly retaliate against Saudi Arabia. However, at the moment, Pakistan, Turkey, and Egypt have all said that they're committed to defending Saudi Arabia from Yemen. But would they then also defend the Saudis from Iran? It looks like this could get very messy very quickly. But it could be advantageous for Trump if he wants to do this buck-passing and essentially hand over the war to regional powers instead. Again, I'm not saying that any of this is what Trump is currently thinking, but it could be a miscalculation and a danger if these wars were to merge. I was wondering what you thought about that possible scenario.

#John Mearsheimer

Well, I would note that there are some reports in the press—I'm not 100% sure whether they're correct—that the Russians are helping the Houthis with intelligence and targeting information for their attacks on Saudi Arabia. And of course, there's no doubt that the Russians have been helping the Iranians as well. So you have this very interesting situation where the Russians, the Chinese, the North Koreans, the Iranians, and maybe even now the Houthis are all being driven together and put in a position where they have a deep-seated incentive to defeat the United States.

If you think about the Russian position here, and even the Chinese position, they have a vested interest in making sure Iran wins this war. The last thing the Russians want is for the United States to defeat Iran. And I believe the same thing is true with regard to China. And the Houthis come into play here as well, because Saudi Arabia is closely aligned with the United States. The Iranians understand that. The Russians understand that. And the Russians have a vested interest in seeing the Houthis really slam the Saudis, because the Saudis are aligned with the United States, and the United States is a mortal enemy of Russia. There's just no question about that.

We're not talking about that today, you and I, but you and I have talked about that at great length in the past. The Russians understand that the United States is out to get them. Trump may be a bit different, but the deep state is out to do the Russians in. So the Russians have very powerful incentives to help both the Houthis and the Iranians. Now, I don't think the Iranians have any reason at this point to help the Houthis. As best I can tell, the Houthis are doing very well by themselves, right? Not only are they doing significant damage to the various airports inside Saudi Arabia, but they're now beginning to tear apart infrastructure as well.

They have hit the East-West pipeline. There's evidence—it's hard to say whether it's correct or not—that the East-West pipeline has been shut down. They have been targeting Yanbu, which is, of course, at the western end of that pipeline, on the Red Sea, and very important. And to my surprise,

they have hit Ras Tanura, which is this big Saudi refinery and port on the Persian Gulf. So the Houthis are tearing apart Saudi infrastructure. They're tearing apart the airports, and the Saudis have no way of dealing with the threat. The Saudis are trying to put an end to this conflict. So I don't see any incentive for the Iranians to do any more than they're doing now.

But it is possible, as you say, that the Iranians may get dragged into the fight against the Saudis because the United States and Israel may attack Iran, and the United States may use Saudi airspace. I would think the Saudis would go to great lengths to tell the Americans they can't use their airspace to avoid that outcome. But, you know, I don't know for sure what all the stocks of weapons look like on all the different sides. One could imagine that if Saudi airspace is used by the Americans in an offensive against Iran, the Iranians would seriously attack Saudi Arabia.

They'll take their assets and use them on Israel or the other Gulf states and let the Houthis continue to deal with the Saudis. In other words, the fact that the Houthis are dealing with the Saudis, in a way, relieves the Iranians of having to deal with the Saudis. That kind of logic could kick in. And that would mean that the Iranians would have more assets to throw at countries like the UAE, Israel, Kuwait, Bahrain, and so forth and so on. And that, of course, would just contribute to making the situation worse.

#Glenn

Well, we did link it to Ukraine here. And of course, this is all happening at the same time. And I guess a strategic defeat in Ukraine will also have profound impacts, not just on the US, but, I would think, even more on Europe. But we've seen a lot of developments lately. There's been some renewed effort at diplomacy. And obviously, this is tied to the fact that things are going terribly wrong for NATO on the Ukrainian front line against Russia. And so we're kind of in this position now where the Europeans especially are, you know, thinking either we talk to the Russians or we have to get more directly involved to try to rebalance this and, as you said, rescue the situation. So where do you see this headed at the moment? Because it doesn't look like all the Western countries are on the same page.

#John Mearsheimer

I think there's no question that the Western countries are not all on the same page. And I think this is reflected by the fact that the Norwegian prime minister and the Finnish president talked to Putin, and this angered a number of the other European states, especially the Danes. So they're not all on the same page. But the more important issue, Glenn, is what's going on here. And I think it's quite clear that many Europeans, maybe even most Europeans, understand that Russia is going to win the war. You know, Mike McFaul, who is a real Putinophobe—and I would argue even a Russophobe—has been a huge supporter of the war in Ukraine. He's, you know, a staunch supporter of the Zelensky government.

He just published a piece in Foreign Affairs, and the piece is entitled "Putin's Strategy Is Working." This is Mike McFaul publishing a piece in the most recent issue of Foreign Affairs that says Putin's strategy is working. And of course, I think what you see in Europe is a lot of evidence that people are coming to understand this. And I think the key, Glenn, is that once the Russians took the gloves off in terms of their strategic bombing campaign, which they did in midsummer, and really ramped up the campaign all across Ukraine, they seriously damaged the Ukrainian economy and other kinds of infrastructure that relate to the military inside Ukraine. And this has two effects.

One is that it means that events up on the front lines are going to be affected by this bombing campaign. This bombing campaign, again, is tearing apart infrastructure that is important for supporting the troops on the front line. But furthermore, putting that aside, it's badly damaging the Ukrainian economy and making Ukraine more dependent than ever on economic support from the Europeans, not the Americans, because the Americans have gotten out of the business. The burden of providing economic support for Ukraine is now on the shoulders of the Europeans. And what the Ukrainians are saying is, "We need more and more economic support from the EU." As you know, at the end of 2025, we agreed to give Ukraine $52 billion for 2026 and $52 billion for 2027. This summer,

#John Mearsheimer

Zelensky said, "The $52 billion for 2026 is not enough. We need $27 billion more." And of course, the Europeans balked at this, right? They thought the $52 billion would be enough. But Zelensky says, "No, we need another $27 billion." And you can understand what's happening here, right? What's happening is that the Ukrainian economy is crashing, and the Ukrainians cannot find the money to fund this war. And they need more and more help from the Europeans. To take it a step further, they got $52 billion for 2027. Zelensky has said they need another $82 billion. Think about that number: $82 billion.

They're going to need another $82 billion to fund the war for next year, on top of the $52 billion that they have already gotten. All of this at a time when the Europeans are in a terrible position when it comes to providing those sums of money to the Ukrainians. Do you really believe that Europe is going to be able to cough up $82 billion more? I don't even know where they're going to get the $52 billion that they've already pledged. And so I think when you look at the financial situation or the economic situation that Ukraine is in, I don't see how this war gets funded moving forward.

And then, furthermore, all this infrastructure that's being torn apart—these bridges that are being destroyed, these railroad locomotives, railroad tracks and railroad stations, the transportation network, the damage that's being done to the energy network, what's going to happen to Kiev over the course of this coming winter—all of this is just going to have huge consequences for what happens up on the front lines. And they're doing poorly up on the front lines. I mean, we could go through that. You know, lots of people think the Russians have been stalemated and so forth and so on, that they're losing astronomical numbers of soldiers. Oh, this is nonsense, right?

There's no question that the Russians are moving very slowly, but they're moving very slowly in part because they want to minimize casualties, number one. And number two, because they're depending on the air war against infrastructure in the rear areas to greatly weaken the forces up on the front lines. And I think that is working. So anyway, all of this is to say that I think Ukraine is definitely going to lose the war. The Russians are going to win an ugly victory. What exactly that looks like, we can't say. But there's no plausible story anyone can tell at this point in time as to how Ukraine rescues the situation.

#Glenn

No, I agree. But I want to get back to the frontline issue. First, though, you know, we seem to have a choice: either we go for a diplomatic settlement, or Russia will win this ugly victory, as you say. I guess my concern is that what the Russians demand is essentially what they've been saying for the past 30 years. They want a European security architecture, because we've had 30 years now of building a European security architecture that didn't take Russian security into account. I mean, take a step back and look at it. The whole premise of European security was that we'd expand NATO closer and closer to Russian borders.

Eventually, everyone should be part of NATO except for the largest country in Europe—the country with the largest territory, the largest population, the largest army, and now the largest economy. And, you know, this would create stability. But again, we've done this for 30 years. So now what the Russians are saying is, "We want what we asked for in the '90s. We want a mutually acceptable post-Cold War architecture in Europe." So, you know, this doesn't seem likely, though, because it's a lot to ask. But it's even more to ask if we consider that in Europe, you know, we're not even allowed to discuss Russian security.

Our media don't do it. Our politicians don't do it. I mean, if you had politicians arguing that, well, we do have to take Russian security into account as well, and maybe they should have some security guarantees, this would be the end of their political careers. You would be a Putin stooge. So, you know, if this is not possible, I would like to ask: What does it mean if Russia just goes for victory? What happens to Ukraine, the political West, the US, NATO, Europe? Sorry, I'm making the question a bit too big here. But it seems we're at a very critical time.

#John Mearsheimer

Well, if you look at the proposals that the West is putting forward at this point in time as the basis for negotiations, I would think that anybody with a triple-digit IQ could figure out very quickly that the West's ideas are non-starters, right? Look, if you're playing Putin's hand, you understand full well that you cannot trust the West and you cannot trust Ukraine. The idea that you can strike a deal

now, get a ceasefire or some sort of tentative peace agreement, and that the West and Ukraine will stick to that deal and negotiate in good faith—do you think Putin is really going to believe that? You have to be a fool to think in those terms.

Putin understands, I am absolutely certain, that he has to end this war in such a way that Ukraine is so weakened that it is no longer a meaningful threat to him, and that there is no way Ukraine can join NATO or have meaningful security guarantees from the West. Putin has a deep-seated interest in taking as much Ukrainian territory as he can conquer and then govern. It's very important to understand this. He wants to take as much territory as he can possibly get, because that's the best way of maximizing Russia's security over the long term. From Russia's point of view, you have two choices. You can end up with a settlement where you control Odessa, or you can end up with a settlement where Ukraine controls Odessa.

Which one do you want? In my opinion, this is not an interesting question, right? From a Russian point of view, you absolutely want to control Odessa if you can. Now, I'm not sure that the Russians can conquer Odessa, but if they can, at some reasonable cost, they certainly will. They'd be fools not to. You're dealing with the West, and you're dealing with Ukraine. And these countries will come back at you someday if they can. Or at least there's a serious possibility that they will come back at you if they can. Therefore, you want to make it impossible for them to come back at you, if you can. So that means conquering lots of territory, number one.

And number two, turning Ukraine into a thoroughly dysfunctional rump state and keeping it as a thoroughly dysfunctional rump state so that it's in no position to join the West. In other words, what we've done up to now is incentivize the Russians to weaken Ukraine as much as possible and to take as much Ukrainian territory as possible for strategic reasons. As you know, Glenn, from being a student of international relations theory, one of the biggest problems with regard to international politics is the credibility of commitments. The credibility of a promise from the West and from Ukraine to accept forever a security architecture that satisfies the Russians is just not very great, right?

The credibility of any commitment that Zelensky makes or the credibility of any commitment that the West makes to Russia is remarkably low. And in a world where you can't trust the other side's commitments, and where there's no higher authority that can come down and punish the other side if it misbehaves, the Russians are incentivized, again, to maximize the amount of territory they take and inflict as much damage on Ukraine as possible and turn it into a rump state, a badly damaged rump state. I mean, that's the tragedy of this whole situation. We have incentivized the Russians to do as much damage as possible to Ukraine.

#Glenn

You know, after the Cold War, or after the Soviet Union broke up, to be more specific, there was a theory in Russia which gained some popularity. It was called “Island Russia.” The idea was that

Russia could be a little bit like the United States. It would be protected by the water around it. Of course, not actual water, but it wouldn't be so close to the NATO countries. And it was assumed that this could keep it peaceful or keep its borders stable. And I was thinking, you know, following this line of thinking, it wouldn't be so bad if Odessa were in a neutral Ukraine.

It could actually serve their interests, that is, to not be so close to NATO. But in a world where Odessa has to either fall inside some NATO sphere or be under Russian control, I mean, I think from that perspective, the position hardens even more. Then it's impossible, I think, for them to let Odessa remain outside Russian control, which is also why I agree with you. I think it's so incredible to see all of these NATO leaders talk about, you know, "After this war, Ukraine will be a part of NATO." I mean, what are you doing? You're essentially telling the Russians, you know, "Ukraine has to be a landlocked country. You have to take Odessa." I mean, that's what they're hearing. I find it incomprehensible. I don't understand what they're doing.

#John Mearsheimer

Glenn, just go back to 2014. Why did the Russians take Crimea? Because the thought of Sevastopol being a NATO naval base was categorically unacceptable to them. Going back to Mike McFaul, he has said—and this is Mike McFaul—that there's no evidence that Putin was intent on taking Crimea before 2014. And what happened in 2014 is that Putin was spooked by the possibility that a NATO naval base would be located on the Crimean Peninsula. And what you're doing is laying out the same basic logic for Odessa. The Russians have a deep-seated interest in making sure that NATO is not able to put naval assets in Odessa.

Look, Glenn, the more general point here is, just building on what you said, if there had been no NATO expansion, if there had been no talk of or possibility of bringing Ukraine into NATO, Ukraine would be intact today within its pre-2014 borders. And that includes owning Crimea. Again, as McFaul said, there was no evidence. I know you can't sell this argument in the West, but the fact is there is no evidence that the Russians were thinking about taking Crimea before 2014, or, in the period before 2022, conquering all of the territory that they've now conquered since 2022.

#John Mearsheimer

Let me put it differently: Putin was not an imperialist before 2014, and he was not an imperialist before 2022. And the only reason that Russia has conquered and annexed all this territory, and is going to want to conquer even more territory, as we were talking about, is for strategic reasons. It has to do with the fact that Russia lives in a dangerous neighborhood. By the way, you are comparing the United States' geographic situation to Russia's strategic or geographic situation. I would note that they're fundamentally different. In 1812, Napoleon invaded Russia.

Moscow, in the process, got burned to the ground. In 1917, the Russians had to surrender to Imperial Germany. They were defeated by Imperial Germany, which, through the Brest-Litovsk

Agreement of March 1918, ended up taking a huge chunk of Russian territory and incorporating it into Imperial Germany. And then, on June 22nd, 1941, Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union, and that was one of the most barbaric military campaigns in recorded history. So Napoleon, Imperial Germany, and Nazi Germany all invaded Russia or the Soviet Union, as it was known at different points in time. All three inflicted enormous damage.

And therefore, if you are a Russian leader today—you're Vladimir Putin—and you see NATO, a military alliance that was a mortal foe of the Soviet Union during the Cold War, when Vladimir Putin was a young man, as you know, you see that alliance moving up to your border, and you think about what happened in 1812, 1917, and 1941, you get very nervous, right? You get very nervous. The United States is in a fundamentally different situation. We're a regional hegemon. We're separated on the east and west by two giant moats, the Atlantic Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. The Russians, or the Soviets, don't have those two giant moats. And who are our neighbors? The Canadians and the Mexicans and the Cubans and the Guatemalans?

Are any of these countries a serious military threat to the United States? Thankfully, they're not, right? But the Russians have neighbors that make one stay awake at night. And by the way, although the Russians and the Chinese are close allies at the moment, the fact is that the Russians and the Chinese historically have not had good relations. And I remember when I was young, they fought some huge battles in the Siberian region. And then, of course, the Russians have to think about the Germans. And they also have to think about the United States projecting power through NATO into Europe and threatening them. And as you and I have talked about before, what happened in August of 2024? The Ukrainians invaded Russia. Anyway.

#Glenn

No, but the history is important, though, because I was actually interviewed earlier today by a Chinese journalist, and she even asked, “Why can't the Europeans sit down and negotiate with the Russians?” And I was making the point that we kind of have the ideological consensus here that NATO was a force for good. That is, NATO expansion meant expanding democracy and freedom. And we all agreed that Russia shouldn't consider it a threat. They should be happy because we're bringing stability, you know? And she was smirking, like this is a mad proposition. But this is kind of where we were, though.

This is what we all agreed on. Not we, but, you know, this was the consensus of a liberal hegemon. It's quite extraordinary that this has gone unchallenged, and even contesting it is seen as something suspicious. But my last question to you was about the front lines you mentioned before, and indeed, not just the front lines, but what's happening behind the front lines, which is becoming, as you said, more important. What exactly are the Russians doing now? What do you see as the strategy? Because it has shifted. I mean, it is part of this war of attrition. But how do you see what's being done now?

#John Mearsheimer

I think, Glenn, up until this summer, the bombing campaign that the Russians waged against Ukraine was quite limited. The Russians had not taken off the gloves. And as you know, there was a huge amount of dissatisfaction inside the Russian national security community with Putin over his unwillingness to take the gloves off. Many people felt that he should have done that a long time ago, but Putin did not do that. Putin has waged this war in a very cautious and restrained way. I know you can't sell that argument in the West, but I think anybody who is fair-minded understands that. But what happened once the Ukrainians launched this extensive 40-day drone campaign against Russia is that Putin was forced to retaliate in a significant way.

So he took the gloves off. And I think once that happened, Glenn, the Russians began to realize that it was a very effective way of weakening the Ukrainian economy, damaging military infrastructure, and hurting the fighting forces up on the front lines, who are already stretched to the limit. So what the Russians have done is they've kept the pressure on up on the front lines, for sure. But I think they have not been waging the war on the front lines all that vigorously in recent months. And they've been waiting for the air campaign to do great damage to the fighting forces up on the front lines and to the Ukrainian economy.

And I think the Russians also understand that as support for Ukraine in the West continues to wither, and Trump is more and more friendly towards Russia, that will have an effect on Ukraine's willingness to continue the war and maybe even have an effect on Ukraine's frontline forces. So I think the Russians are moving cautiously, very cautiously, up on the front lines, very slowly, very deliberately. And again, as I said before, this is a smart strategy because it minimizes Russian casualties. And at the same time, I think they're depending more heavily than ever on the air war to affect events on the battlefield.

#Glenn

Is there anything that stands out, particularly in terms of how the front lines are moving? I know this is a war of attrition, but even in a war of attrition, the key cities have a logistical purpose. You know, Zaporizhzhia, Kiev, Kharkov—a lot of these very important cities, the Russians are either moving closer to or pummeling, like they're doing with Kiev. So I don't know. Sorry, I'll squeeze in one last question. What do you think is most critical here? Because I guess they all have great importance.

#John Mearsheimer

I think that the Russians are not far away from conquering all of the Donbass. The Slavyansk-Kramatorsk salient, or agglomeration, is really the last main Ukrainian set of cities that they have to concentrate on. And they're not far away from the point where they will envelop those two cities, or

envelop that agglomeration, and end up controlling all of the Donbass. And I think they're making significant progress in Zaporizhzhia as well. And I would imagine that, you know, in the next couple of months, that oblast will be rolled up and the Russians will be in excellent shape.

And I think all the while, the Ukrainian forces up on the front line are withering away. It's very clear if you read various Telegram channels that the Ukrainians are having difficulty populating the forward edge of the battle area. There are certain places where they just can't fill gaps with manpower. And instead, what they have to rely on are drones. And that's creating problems for them. And I think that problem will only get worse with the passage of time. And the Russians are not facing similar problems. You know, if you read the Western media, you have the sense that the Russians are suffering these astronomical casualties.

And this is in line with the rhetoric that you sometimes hear, that the Russians don't care about lives and they're launching frontal attacks against fixed Ukrainian positions. And the Ukrainians are mowing down those Russian forces, and the Russians are not able to replace all the soldiers they're losing. This argument bears no resemblance to what's really happening. Again, the Russians are using infiltration tactics. They're using very small units to infiltrate Ukrainian positions. And very importantly, what they're doing is substituting firepower for manpower as much as possible. You see this tendency in any war of attrition.

Once an army gets into a war of attrition, it quickly figures out that the last thing you want to do is pursue tactics or a strategy where you kill huge numbers of your own soldiers. The name of the game is to kill huge numbers of the adversary's soldiers and preserve your soldiers' lives as much as possible. And that invariably leads to emphasizing firepower as a way of winning the war. You saw this in World War I, as the importance of artillery grew by leaps and bounds in the rival armies. And during the Cold War, I remember very well, the conventional wisdom used to be that the Soviets or the Warsaw Pact had an advantage over NATO and the United States in terms of manpower.

And our solution to that problem was to emphasize firepower over manpower. This is just a normal way of doing business. All this is to say, just look at what the Russians are doing. They're using infiltration tactics with small units—no frontal assaults here. They're moving slowly and deliberately, and they're substituting firepower for manpower. And you want to remember that although drones matter greatly, artillery matters as well. And the Russians have a huge advantage in artillery. They have a huge advantage in terms of FAB bombs, which can destroy Ukrainian frontline forces.

The Ukrainians themselves hardly have any capability to drop these very accurate bombs on Russian forces. So when you put all these things together, I think it's quite clear that the Russians are suffering fewer casualties than the Ukrainians, and the Russians are making progress. I think it's just a matter of time before they control all of Donbass and all of Zaporozhye. And then the last oblast they'll have to deal with is Kherson. And once they deal with Kherson, they'll have to think about Odessa and Kharkiv. And, you know, whether they can take those oblasts, Kharkiv and Odessa, remains to be seen.

#Glenn

I'm also concerned that we delude ourselves with these tales about Russia's huge casualties, because they do have large reserves. And I think once the collapse or fragmentation in Ukraine begins to set in, they will have some options in terms of how to intensify it. If there's a massive manpower shortage, then, you know, I think there are some plans to open up a huge front in the Chernobyl region. And if they do this, then the Ukrainian troops will be spread out even further. And it just looks like things can speed up very quickly. And again, my concern is that at the end of these kinds of wars, that's when you see the casualties really beginning to spike, especially among fleeing soldiers. I think it's quite obvious that those will be the Ukrainians. So no, I think we're looking at a disaster here. Anyway, any last thoughts? Yeah, just very quickly.

#John Mearsheimer

You do want to remember that the Russian military is basically, at least in terms of the forces that are fighting inside Ukraine, an all-volunteer military. They don't rely heavily on conscripting people whom they then send to the front lines. The Ukrainians, on the other hand, are conscripting people. And there are apparently a huge number of draft dodgers inside Ukraine. The Ukrainians have to use very coercive measures to get people to serve on the front lines. There aren't a lot of volunteers these days. And in the Russian case, it's a very different story. And I think as you come to the climax here, that factor will matter as well.

#Glenn

Thank you for taking the time. And we probably should have started with Ukraine and ended with Iran because you had some more optimistic views on Iran. So anyway, thank you so much.

#John Mearsheimer

You're welcome, Glenn.