John Mearsheimer: Europe Sacrifices Ukraine — and Itself

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#Glenn

Welcome back, everyone. We're joined today by Professor John Mearsheimer, and today is November 11th. Thank you for coming back on the program.

#John Mearsheimer

My pleasure, as always, Glenn.

#Glenn

We see an interesting development. As we speak, we have this trilateral meeting in Abu Dhabi in which the Europeans, who used to be the main sidekick of the United States, have no role, which they're quite upset about. And soon we'll also have a meeting between Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, and Donald Trump—the leaders of the three great powers. This will be in China, but yet again, there will be no real role for the Europeans. And here as well, we see a lot of concern from Europe. They refer to this as a new Yalta, essentially suggesting that these spheres of influence are being institutionalized, with security matters being decided over their heads.

And, you know, I was wondering, how do you interpret these new developments? Because the international distribution of power has now shifted from unipolarity to multipolarity. So it seems

reasonable that we will acquire new institutions, new structures to organize the international system. But what will these structures look like? I mean, we're not going back to the Cold War, but the unipolar moment, when the US and Europeans got to dictate to the world, is obviously over. So how are you interpreting these arrangements? And where do you see all of this headed?

#John Mearsheimer

Well, just to focus on Ukraine and the fact that the Europeans were excluded from the trilateral meeting that just took place in Abu Dhabi, the Europeans are clearly players here. It's not like the Europeans don't matter in the Ukraine war. They matter enormously. There are four players involved here. One is obviously Russia. Two is obviously Ukraine. But then the United States and Europe are key players, and that's not about to change anytime soon. But what's happened here, especially with regard to Abu Dhabi, is that the Russians feel such profound hostility towards the Europeans that they insisted that the Europeans not be at the table in Abu Dhabi. It's not because the Europeans don't matter.

It's because the Russians despise the Europeans and just didn't want them there. Now, with regard to this meeting or potential meeting between Xi, Putin, and Trump, a lot of people think that the three of them are going to get together and settle the Ukraine war. This is a pipe dream. They're not going to settle the Ukraine war. That war is going to be settled on the battlefield. And the Ukrainians and the Europeans have a voice in this. And the idea that the Russians and the Americans together, working with Xi Jinping, can bring this war to an end is just not going to happen. So I think that the key is that Ukraine and the Europeans are still players. And the Europeans are a huge obstacle to shutting this war down.

#Glenn

Yeah, well, I think this is one of the problems for the Russians, though, because I hear the same contempt and anger towards the Europeans. I mean, it's already reached boiling point. So I can understand why they don't want them there, especially if they see the Europeans as simply trying to torpedo any talks. But at the same time, the source of this conflict was a broken European security architecture, so the solution has to be fixing the European security architecture. If they recognize that, at some point, they do need to talk to the Europeans, though. So do you think the Americans, in this instance, are representing the Europeans? Yes.

#John Mearsheimer

I think that you're thinking about this all wrong, Glenn. There's no talking here. There's no diplomatic solution. This one's going to be settled on the battlefield. I mean, this two-day conference that just took place in Abu Dhabi was a waste of time. And it's no surprise that I've just been

reading news reports that nothing came of it. They're going to have some sort of limited prisoner exchange. That's it. But they didn't reach an agreement on security guarantees or creating some sort of European security architecture. And they didn't reach an agreement because it's impossible.

If you look at the demands of the Ukrainians and the Europeans on one side, and you look at the demands of the Russians on the other side, they're irreconcilable. There's simply no bargaining space here. So it's going to be settled on the battlefield. If diplomacy were going to settle this war, you would have to be moving toward some sort of agreement that looked like what you were contemplating in Istanbul in March and April of 2022. And that would involve a neutral Ukraine. Here's the key issue of security guarantees: a neutral Ukraine. A neutral Ukraine means, number one, no Ukraine in NATO, and two, no security guarantees from the West. And here we're talking mainly about the United States.

Look, the Europeans and the Ukrainians insist on Ukraine having a meaningful security guarantee. That's categorically unacceptable to the Russians. So how do you square that circle? And the answer is, you don't. So you're not going to have any diplomacy that produces a fruitful outcome here. Look, the war will be settled on the battlefield, and you will eventually get a negotiated settlement in the sense that you'll get an armistice or a frozen conflict. At some point, that will happen. But short of one side conceding or both sides pushing to end the war, negotiations are just going to go nowhere. There are just irreconcilable differences.

#Glenn

But if it's going to be won on the battlefield, how long can this go on? Because, again, if there were to be a diplomatic solution, I think it was Jared Kushner who commented that it could take a year or even two to come up with a deal. But even if there's victory on the battlefield, wouldn't there have to be some kind of arrangement between the Russians and Americans, perhaps the Russians, Americans, and Europeans, in terms of how to manage the post-conflict settlement, even if it's dictated by the Russians, so it doesn't spill over to Moldova or Georgia or Belarus or Kaliningrad or the Arctic? I mean, there are a lot of possibilities here.

#John Mearsheimer

Absolutely. I want to be very clear here. The Russians are not going to win a decisive victory as they did in 1945 against the Germans. They're not going to end up with the equivalent of being in Berlin and the Third Reich being completely destroyed. That's not what we're talking about here. You've heard me say on countless occasions that the Russians are going to win an ugly victory. There is going to be a dysfunctional Ukrainian rump state that emerges from this war. So you're going to have to have negotiations at some point once this war is effectively settled on the battlefield. You'll still need negotiations to engineer the armistice or the frozen conflict.

And this is exactly how the Korean War ended. But you didn't get a meaningful peace agreement after the fighting stopped. And that's going to be the case here. And the problem that you face, Glenn, is that you're going to have poisonous relations in Europe involving the Russians on one side and the Ukrainians and the Europeans and probably the Americans on the other side for as far as the eye can see. And you're going to have all sorts of potential for conflict. There's no happy ending here. The decision to expand NATO into Ukraine, which led to the subsequent crisis in 2014 and war in 2022, now in its fifth year, was a catastrophic mistake.

We should never have done this. And we are going to live with the consequences for decades to come. Poisonous relations are going to exist between Russia and the West. I mean, I hope I'm wrong on that count. But I don't see any factors pushing in the other direction. If anything, if you watch the British and the Germans and the Europeans more generally, their animosity towards Russia is growing. I watch the British and the Germans quite carefully. And my sense is that when the Russians finally do win this ugly victory, the Germans and the British will be angrier than ever.

And as we were talking about at the top of the show, if you look at the Russians, the animosity in Russia toward the British and the Germans in particular, but toward the Europeans in general, is really off the charts. As you know, I went to Russia in early September and talked to all sorts of people, including Lavrov. I can tell you there's nobody over there who has any use for the Europeans. They view the Europeans as mortal enemies, as they should. A lot of people like to talk about this war as if it's Ukraine versus Russia. It's not Ukraine versus Russia. It's Ukraine, Europe, and the United States versus Russia. The CIA is deeply involved in this war.

I laugh when I see the Americans describe themselves as mediators in Abu Dhabi. The United States is not a mediator. The United States is a party to this conflict. Donald Trump may think he's a mediator, but he needs to have a phone call with John Ratcliffe and have John Ratcliffe brief him on what the CIA is doing in this war. And he'll quickly realize that the United States is a major-league participant in this conflict. This is a war between Russia on one side and the United States, Europe, and Ukraine on the other side. There's no way Ukraine would have stayed in this war this long if it weren't for all the support that it gets from Europe and the United States.

#Glenn

Yeah, I hear some of our leaders and the way they talk, and there's an inherent contradiction in what they say. They make the point, "No, we're not participants in this war." But the strategy is also that we have to show the Russians that they will take immense losses. We will impose huge losses on them unless they do as they're told, essentially. Yeah, so they want to have it both ways. They want to show how much pain they're able to bring to Russia, but at the same time, they're not participants. I mean, it's very difficult to square that circle. But how about the failure to have any talks over the European security architecture? Indeed, I don't think there should be much optimism there. So far, the Europeans don't even want to talk to Russia.

The Russians are, you know, seething with contempt for the Europeans. But we even saw Kaja Kallas, the EU foreign policy chief, arguing that there's no need to talk about the European security architecture. That's all fine. It's good. It's organized around NATO and the EU. There's no need for any changes. But of course, they don't want to link that to the huge war we're now having in Europe. And I'm therefore wondering: there will unavoidably be some change here. If we don't negotiate something new, what happens at the end of this ugly victory? What would the breakdown look like? How would the existing institutions break down? Because the EU and NATO can't exist in their current form after a Russian victory, which is essentially, as you said, a defeat for NATO.

#John Mearsheimer

Look, if you look at what the Russians are doing, they're basically destroying Ukraine. It's truly stunning what's happening to Ukraine. You know, there was that Yulia Mendel article. She was Zelensky's first press officer, his first official spokesperson. And she wrote this article that attracted a huge amount of attention. It said that Ukraine is basically pursuing a policy that's the equivalent of national suicide. I think she's correct. If you look at the demographic situation in Ukraine, it's truly stunning. There was a piece in The Times of London the other day that pointed out that there are four times as many deaths as there are births in Ukraine these days.

To keep the size of the population steady, the average woman has to have 2.1 babies, 2.1. And Ukrainian women are having 0.7 babies. It's the lowest birth rate in the world, according to the Times piece. It's just stunning what's happening. So many people have left the country, especially women with young children, that the remaining population is quite elderly. And then the Ukrainians have lost all those people who live in the territories that the Russians have conquered and annexed. So this is a demographic disaster. And then, on top of that, if you look at what's happening to the Ukrainian economy, the Russians are destroying it. Zelensky's talking about the fact that the Russians are trying to cut the country in half.

The fact that the Russians have cut off all the Black Sea ports that Ukraine relies so heavily on is having a devastating effect on the Ukrainian economy. And then the Russians are going around the country, destroying Ukraine's energy network, which has all sorts of ripple effects on the water supply and so forth and so on. They're destroying Ukraine's transportation network. They're destroying supply centers. It's truly stunning what's happening to Ukraine. And the Russians are not going to back off. The Ukrainians and the Americans and the Europeans have been pushing the Russians to back off, to agree to some selective ceasefires. And the Russians say, "Absolutely not." The Russians are just going to up the ante.

They're going to produce more missiles, more bombs, and they're going to hammer away, and they're going to wreck Ukraine as a functioning society. And this, of course, has effects on what's happening on the front lines as well. So I just don't see, you know, what the point is of continuing this war from Ukraine's point of view and from the Europeans' point of view. But nevertheless,

people don't agree with me or with you on this matter, and they think it's important that we hang in there, continue to support the Ukrainians, and at some point we'll be able to turn the tide. I'd like to know, given the demographic situation—and again, this is not a story that I invented. This is a story that was in the Times of London. It's well documented.

And by the way, Yulia Mendel talks about many of these same issues in her piece on Ukraine pursuing national suicide. So these are numbers that are out there. What's the story that these people have in mind as to how you turn this around? What's wrong with the story in the Times of London? What's wrong with Yulia Mendel's story? What facts does she have wrong? How are we going to come out of this war with a robust and thriving Ukraine? How are you going to come out of this war with a situation where the Russians and the Europeans can live together? What's the story here? Nobody has any answers to that.

They just make these empty statements about how we have to win and how we can't accept a Russian victory in Ukraine and how we have to do this or how we have to do that. Fine, but please tell me how you plan to do that. This is the same problem that you run into in the Iran war. You know, a lot of hawks in the United States are talking about the need to go in and pound the Iranians, just, you know, turn the bombers loose. The problem is, we stopped after 40 days. We should have continued the war then. All right, we had this pause. Now it's time to go in and do it. Please explain to me how this works. You know, the administration says the most we could do is a three-day bombing campaign.

Well, then you scratch your head and say, "Well, if we couldn't win this war in 40 days, please tell me how we win it in three days." And of course, they have no answer, right? They just assert that if you whack the Iranians real hard, they'll throw up their hands and quit. Well, you whacked them for 40 days, and they didn't quit. And you've been putting tremendous economic pressure on them since February 28th. And there is no evidence they're quitting. So please tell me, what's the causal mechanism? What are we going to do, and how does it cause Iran to quit? But we never hear anything like that. And the same thing goes for Ukraine. You know, what's the happy ending here? How do you rescue Ukraine? And one could argue they're not interested in rescuing Ukraine.

What they're interested in doing is using Ukraine as a battering ram to weaken Russia. Well, is that really working? Is Russia really badly weakened? If you were to look at the state of the Russian army today and compare it to the Russian army on February 24th, 2022, I think the Russian army today is more formidable than it was then. The Russian economy does not look like it's about to go off a cliff to me. And in fact, I'm actually surprised at how well the Russian economy has weathered this war. So what's the story here? You know, how does this battering ram produce a defeated Russia? How do we get the Russians to come to the negotiating table and basically surrender to a deal that reflects Ukraine's interests?

If anything, given the way this war is playing itself out, it looks like Ukraine will be the first side that's forced to go to the negotiating table because of how the war is evolving. And it will be forced

to make significant concessions so that we can get a frozen conflict. And then please tell me, what's the story as to how this frozen conflict is good for Ukraine, good for Europe? Is it really in Europe's interest to have a frozen conflict in Ukraine and to have poisonous relations with Russia? When you look at the damage that this war has done to the economies of the various European states, is this in their interest? And how are they going to fix this? I just don't understand. And okay, now we're going to rearm.

The Germans are going to rearm. They're going to build this kind of missile and that kind of missile. And they're going to have to worry about nuclear deterrence. They're going to have to worry about a reduced American footprint in Europe. Is this all good? What's the happy ending here? Again, this all brings us back to that April 2008 decision to bring Ukraine into NATO. That was a catastrophic mistake, a catastrophic mistake. Remember what Angela Merkel said about why she opposed it. She said that the Russians would view this as a declaration of war. She, of course, was absolutely right. And we eventually got a war. We're in that war right now. We can't figure out how to get out of it. But as you and I know, when you fight wars like this, the lingering negative effects are invariably very great. And you see that in spades in this case.

#Glenn

Yeah, I also struggle a bit with the strategic thinking here. That is, I can understand why, in April of 2022, they torpedoed the Istanbul Agreement—primarily the British and Americans. At that point, they had spent years and years building up an army of hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians who could fight as a proxy to weaken a strategic rival. So one can see, yeah, why would you want them to sign any agreement that would make them neutral? Why not at least spend that investment, using the cold language here? But now that we're almost five years into the future, they're looking at the collapse.

And in a collapse, not only would they take massive casualties, which you usually see towards the end of big wars, but you would also see the loss of infrastructure and the inability to rebuild Ukraine after this war. I mean, the death of a nation, essentially. I don't see the strategy in continuing the war. And for the people who really want to defeat Russia, who genuinely believe in this project, not just in using Ukrainians as cannon fodder, if you recognize that the options are losing fast or losing slowly, with less ability to rebuild and worse relations with the Russians in the long run, I still don't get it. I mean, I'm struggling to see the strategic thinking here. And even if the war were to end now, perhaps it would still be possible to keep good relations with the Ukrainians.

But I'm assuming that over time, Ukrainians as well, like Julia Mendel, whom you mentioned, will start to develop a lot of resentment towards the West because, you know, as William Burns warned back in 2008, the reason why there would likely be a civil war is that a lot of Ukrainians are not happy about such a direction for Ukraine. And even those pro-NATO, anti-Russian ones, like the former presidential candidate Yulia Tymoshenko—she even said last year, in March of 2025, that her worst fears had been confirmed: that Europeans were simply using Ukrainians as a way of buying

time for themselves. And so we might not even have Ukrainian friends in the future. They might grow very resentful towards us. And that's something you hear more now from German analysts as well. So I don't understand the strategic thinking, is what I'm trying to get at. I mean, how would you make an argument, essentially, for continuing this war now?

#John Mearsheimer

Well, I think it all revolves around the fact that the European elites think that the Russians are a serious threat to dominate all of Europe. They're a potential hegemon. They see Vladimir Putin as the second coming of Adolf Hitler. They see the Russian army as something like the Wehrmacht. And they believe that if Putin is not stopped in Ukraine, it won't be long before he's in Eastern Europe and then in Central Europe. When you listen to some of the Germans at the top talk, they describe the Russian threat as if it were an existential threat, as if this were the threat from the Soviet Union, with hundreds of divisions primed to roll over Europe and create the Soviet empire, at least in Eastern Europe, if not in all of Europe.

I mean, I find it hard to believe that anyone takes this argument seriously. As you and I have said on numerous occasions, if you look at what's happened in the war over the past five years, what you see is that the Russians have had a devil of a time conquering the eastern one-fifth of Ukraine. Does this really look like the Wehrmacht? Have you heard any evidence that the Russians are thinking about conquering all of Ukraine? Forget Eastern Europe. Forget Central Europe. Let's just talk about Ukraine. Is there any evidence that the Russians can conquer all of Ukraine, number one? And number two, is there any evidence that they're interested in conquering all of Ukraine?

I've never seen one piece of evidence that says they want to conquer all of Ukraine. And by the way, if they did, they'd find themselves in a giant tar pit, and they wouldn't be able to launch an offensive against anybody else because they'd have a huge insurgency on their hands if they tried to conquer the western half of Ukraine. So I don't understand it. And by the way, Glenn, let's just go back to 2022. What you were effectively saying is that we had trained up and armed quite a formidable Ukrainian military. And what I was saying is that the Russian military was not very good at the time. It's gotten much better.

Its army has improved significantly since 2022. That was my point. But if you marry my point and your point together, the fact is that in those early days, the Russians were no threat to conquer all of Ukraine. You hear all this talk now, and you heard it at the time, that the Russian offensive was aimed at conquering Kiev and they were really bent on conquering all of Ukraine, and so forth and so on. This is not a serious argument. The Russians went in with a very small force. There's no way they could have even conquered Kiev, much less conquered the whole country. They did not even try to conquer Kiev. They did not have the manpower to conquer Kiev.

You know how difficult it is to conquer cities? For those people who don't understand how difficult it is to conquer cities, just study why the Russians have had so much trouble conquering the eastern

one-fifth of Ukraine. It's filled with towns and cities where well-armed defenders make it extremely difficult for the attacking forces, in this case the Russian forces, to conquer those cities. That's what's going on here. Did the Germans try to conquer Leningrad in World War II? No, they didn't. Why? Because they understood that they would have a devil of a time and would pay a huge cost to conquer Leningrad. So they surrounded it and tried to starve Leningrad out.

This just tells you that you need one heck of a lot of troops and a lot of time to conquer a big city like Kiev. And the Russians didn't try to conquer it. They didn't try to conquer the entire country. And in fact, as we watched events evolve after February 24th, 2022, the Ukrainians actually turned the tide after they were invaded, and they did very well over the course of that year, especially in the two big offensives that they launched in Kherson and Kharkiv. And this is why, as you remember very well, Glenn, General Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said in November of 2022 that the Ukrainians had reached the high-water mark and now was the time to cut a deal, to put an end to the war, because Milley understood that the Ukrainians had done very well.

They had a better army and a bigger army than the Russians did at that point in time. But he correctly understood—Milley, that is—that that advantage was going to evaporate. It was going to melt away, and the Russians would build up. And because the Russians had a much larger population base and they had the industrial might that we all know about, they would become a much more formidable military. And the Ukrainians would get worn down, and the balance of power would shift in Russia's favor. And that's exactly what's happened. But nevertheless, we didn't want to cut a deal in 2022. We didn't. As you said, the British and the Americans told the Ukrainians to walk away from Istanbul.

But at the same time in 2022, just as now, people were positing that there was this great Russian threat out there, and we had to worry about the Russians conquering all of Ukraine and conquering territory in Europe and so forth and so on. They didn't have that capability or anything near it in 2022. And even though the balance has shifted in Russia's favor from 2022 up to 2026, as Milley knew it would, right? The Russians still do not have the capability to conquer all of Ukraine, much less an empire in Eastern Europe. This is delusional rhetoric. But you can't get this argument through in the West, in large part because people like us are excluded from the mainstream.

We can't make this argument publicly. They'll attack us for being Putin's puppet or for being defeatist or what have you. And instead, they'll put people on the air who constantly say the Russians are 10 feet tall. They're the second coming of the Third Reich, and we'd better use Ukraine as a battering ram to weaken the evil Russians. That's the basic outlook. And the end result is that Ukraine is allowing itself to be destroyed. That's what's so tragic about this situation. Not only is it counterproductive from a strategic point of view—this is just, you know, strategic nonsense that the European elites and Zelensky talk about. It's nonsense. But furthermore, from a moral point of view, this makes no sense at all.

It's sickening to read what's happening in Ukraine. It's hard to disagree with Yulia Mendel when she says that this is effectively like committing national suicide. It's true. And we're encouraging them. So this is a strategically foolish policy and a morally bankrupt policy. But don't worry, you can count on the European elites to get up on their high horses and proclaim that they are the most morally virtuous people who have ever walked the face of the earth. And they're all strategic geniuses. And it's people like you and me who really don't know what we're talking about and who are morally bankrupt to boot. And the same thing applies, by the way, with regard to the Gaza genocide.

I was talking to an audience in the Middle East earlier today, and a number of people who were on that channel were reflecting on the fact that moral hypocrisy, especially as it applies to the Gaza genocide, is abundant in Europe. It's abundant in the United States as well. But, you know, the Europeans are always talking about human rights, the rule of law, international law, the Genocide Convention, and so forth and so on. And the Europeans have basically been complicit in the Gaza genocide. Have we seen any European state try to shut down the Gaza genocide? Absolutely not. Instead, they've supported Israel, which is executing the genocide, at every turn. The hypocrisy here is stunning. Anyway, the situation is not much different with regard to Ukraine. The idea that these European elites occupy the moral high ground is a laughable argument, given what they're doing to Ukraine.

#Glenn

What you said about the argument that Russia wanted to conquer all of Ukraine and then move on to the Europeans—there's so much evidence pointing in the other direction. That is, they went in with a bit over 100,000 troops to conquer a country of 35 million—a huge country. It doesn't make sense. Also, as we saw in the early phase of the war, the Russians were quite restrained in terms of bombing. Again, they dropped fewer bombs in the first month than the U.S. did on the first day of the Iraq war. And again, not because of their more humane values, but simply because more bombing would undermine their ability to strike a diplomatic deal. And indeed, we also learned from Zelensky on the first day of the war that he had been contacted by the Russians, who wanted to sign a peace agreement based on restoring Ukraine's neutrality.

And again, this is nowhere in the Western media. You can look for it. You can go on the Ukrainian government website and find Zelensky's comments, but you can't find them in the media, not in the West. I mean, that's why I think that this is not just a misunderstanding. This is quite deliberate, the way they're manipulating it. And of course, why did they do this on the first day? Because they spent 30 years complaining about NATO expansion. They spent the last seven years before that complaining about the Minsk agreement, which would have also, to some extent, restored Ukraine's neutrality. And again, all of this is just dismissed. It's called disinformation, propaganda, and you'll never hear about it again. It's quite extraordinary, the hypocrisy. Well, I wanted to touch on what you said. Sorry, go ahead.

#John Mearsheimer

It's very important that we get this point out on the table. General Syrskyi, who was the second commander of the Ukrainian troops, said that the Russians invaded with about 100,000 troops. I have used the number 190,000, which I thought was a very conservative estimate. So I've said over the years that I thought the Russians invaded with 190,000 troops. And Syrskyi says it's 100,000. That is a tiny force. That's too small a force to even take Kyiv, much less conquer all of Ukraine. The second point, Glenn, is that the Russian army was not an offensively oriented army in 2022. It was a very defensively oriented army.

If you look at how it was structured, and I've spent some time looking at this, it was an army that was designed to protect Russia. There were no serious threats to Russia at that point in time. But nevertheless, the army they had, which was rather small in size, was defensively oriented. But you have to turn that army into an offensively oriented army when you go into Ukraine, whether you go in with 100,000 or 190,000 or 590,000 troops. It's still an offensive action. But this was an army that was not primed for offense. It was an army that was primed for defense. Just a final point here.

We never want to lose sight of the fact that before the war started on February 24th, 2022, the Russians went to enormous lengths to avoid a war. It is very important to understand that. The Russians were trying to negotiate a deal, and it was the West, especially the United States, that would not cut a deal or even make an attempt to cut a deal. Furthermore, as you pointed out, once the war starts, once the Russians invade, they almost immediately say, "Let's start negotiations." So think about what we're talking about. Think about what we're saying here. We're talking about a situation where the Russians clearly did not want this war.

And there's a lot of evidence that the West, and especially the Americans, were enthusiastic about this war. We thought that we could effectively knock the Russians out of the ranks of the great powers. You go back to the Munich Security Conference in February 2022—I think it was February 18th, if my memory's correct—about a week before the war started. And just go back and look at the videos of that conference. You can see that the Western leaders were actually kind of enthusiastic about taking on the Russians because they knew the Russians were not very powerful. And the Russians were not enthusiastic about going to war against Ukraine. They were not.

And then the war starts, and as you point out, they immediately want to have negotiations. And you get negotiations, first in Belarus, and then they move to Istanbul. And you, in fact, have two tracks: the Istanbul track and the Israeli track with Naftali Bennett, which is making progress, as is the Istanbul track. And who walks away from the negotiations? It's not the Russians who walk away. They're making a good-faith effort to get an agreement. Maybe you would not have gotten an agreement, but they were making a good-faith effort. It was the West that told the Ukrainians to walk away. So this is the basic story that one, if he or she believes in facts and logic, has to face up to. But of course, we never hear this story.

All we hear is about how the Russians were bent on conquering all of Ukraine in February 2022. They were just chomping at the bit to invade Ukraine, and they finally got the opportunity. And this greatly outnumbered and underarmed Ukrainian force bravely fought to protect their country and finally stymied the evil Russians. This is the basic storyline. But again, if you look at the facts here, they tell a very different story. I find it hard to understand, you know, how to deal with this issue when I talk to people on the other side, because the facts and logic are so clearly against them. But nevertheless, that doesn't deter them from continuing to make the same old arguments, which, to me, make no sense.

#Glenn

Well, if you look at what happened in Istanbul, that's why I think it's so important, because the whole idea that the Russians wanted this war is contradicted by all the evidence there, it seems. As you said, at the Istanbul talks in Turkey, the Turkish foreign minister said very clearly that both the Russians and Ukrainians wanted peace. But they got the impression that many of the Europeans and Americans, especially the U.S. and U.K., saw an opportunity to weaken Russia using the Ukrainians, so they didn't want peace. And then, as you said, Israel's Naftali Bennett comes in, does the same, and reaches the exact same conclusion. That's quite interesting. Even on the Ukrainian side, the negotiators, like the Ukrainian ambassador who participated in the negotiations—I forgot his name—said, "Oh yeah, the Russians were willing to do anything to get a peace deal."

And I even hear now that the whole idea that Boris Johnson would sabotage it is a conspiracy theory. But, you know, it's been confirmed by many, many sources on all sides. And at the same time, you had Boris Johnson himself giving speeches and writing articles about how we should avoid a bad peace. We need strategic patience, which is, you know, Newspeak for a long war. And I remember even Niall Ferguson had this now very infamous article in Bloomberg where he said he interviewed British and American leaders. This was in March of 2022, and he argued that they all reached the same conclusion: the only acceptable outcome is regime change in Moscow, not peace.

I mean, the whole idea that our military is just motivated by altruism, helping Ukrainians, is so bizarre. I know this is how all wars have to be sold, but—sorry, let me also mention Zelensky. In March of 2022, he even said out loud, "There are those countries in the West who would like a long war so they can weaken Russia, even if it means the destruction of Ukraine." How much more do you need? It doesn't even have to be conclusive to at least have a debate. But we can't even have debates. So it's extremely frustrating to see all the evidence on the table, but there is no forum anymore in the Western world to actually have a discussion and lay out the argument. It's mainstream. Yeah, mainstream, yeah.

#John Mearsheimer

Glenn, just one other very quick point we don't want to lose sight of. I believe that the West—and here we're talking mainly about the United States—believed that we could defeat the Russians with

economic sanctions. In other words, they didn't think the Ukrainians could win a decisive victory on the battlefield by themselves. They thought the Ukrainians could stymie the Russians and deliver some hammer blows to them on the battlefield. But the real coup de grâce would come with economic sanctions. To put it in slightly different terms, that was their Sunday punch, right? And the fact is that the sanctions didn't work.

And that's why the strategy that the West had in mind failed. And by the way, just to go back to the Iran war, if you look at what's happening there, we've basically given up on the military option. And once again, we're back to sanctions and economic strangulation. The idea is that we're going to be able to strangle the Iranian economy, and that will get them to throw up their hands and surrender. And that's analogous to how I think we were thinking about dealing with the Russians for probably about the first two years of the war. Everybody was saying it's just a matter of time before those sanctions really hit home and the Russians are forced to surrender.

But of course, that didn't work at all. And that, coupled with the shifting balance of power on the battlefield, right? Again, this is the Milley argument that you reach the high-water mark in November 2022. But from then on out, right, the Russians are going to mobilize. Remember, Putin mobilized 300,000 troops in September of 2022. Milley saw the writing on the wall. And so the balance of power on the ground shifts over time. And number two, the sanctions don't work. And once you're at that point in the war, the Russians are going to win. They're going to win an ugly victory. It's not going to be a decisive victory like World War II, but the Russians are going to win. We have no cards to play here.

#Glenn

Well, this is why I very much agree with what General Mark Milley said back in November of 2022. Because, as you say, what we saw happening then was that the Russians had begun to recognize there would be no negotiations. So they started building an offensive army. They pulled back from Kherson and Kharkov, which we interpreted as a victory: “Look at them running.” But what they saw was that there was going to be a long war. What do you do in a long war? Do you have these long, unprotected logistical lines? No, you tighten it up. You create a wall.

And based on this wall, they were able to hold the line in a war of attrition, and they began bleeding out the Ukrainians and depleting the NATO weapons that were being sent in. I just feel like we—I mean, the Western politicians, the media, the military—began to believe our own propaganda: this was a retreat. The way I saw it, they were converting from an army that was supposed to do a bit of shock and awe to impose a new peace settlement to an army that would have to conquer and defeat the Ukrainians, who had NATO support.

#John Mearsheimer

Just very quickly, before I forget, remember the Wagner Group? Remember the Wagner Group, which did a lot of the fighting in the early stages of the war? Why did the Russians have to rely on the Wagner Group? Because the army was so weak. There's no Wagner Group now because they've built the army up. It has significant offensive military capability. But they had a small, defensively oriented army at the start of this war. They did not do very well in the first year of the war, and therefore they had to rely on the Wagner Group. Just think about what's going on there. You know, when these people talk about this finely tuned equivalent of the Wehrmacht, they had to rely on the Wagner Group. And once the buildup takes place, you no longer need the Wagner Group. And that's why the Wagner Group has disappeared from the story. So this just reinforces the basic narrative that you and I are painting here.

#Glenn

Yeah, well, as you mentioned before, the Russians are now going after energy, transport, logistics centers, and industrial capacity, essentially making people leave the major cities. It's quite dramatic what we're seeing. And as you also said, Zelensky said the Russians are now trying to cut the country in two. I assume that's a reference to knocking out all the bridges along the Dnieper River, which would then leave all of eastern Ukraine isolated, meaning it could fall very easily without proper logistics. I'm just thinking, if you're sitting in Kiev and you see this happening, and you notice that the Europeans are in no rush at all to even talk to the Russians...

They're talking openly about extending the war to buy ourselves some time. You see the Americans—if Trump is genuine, he doesn't seem to have support from the intelligence agencies, or maybe even the military. Why not engage in direct talks with the Russians? Because, much like in Istanbul four and a half years ago, the Russians and Ukrainians realized they would bear the cost of any war. They would be the ones who had their youth bleeding out on the front lines. Why aren't there any direct talks between Kiev and Moscow? How do you see this? That would make a lot more sense, it seems, unless we buy the premise here that Washington is a mediator. As you said, it's laughable.

#John Mearsheimer

Glenn, if you're the Europeans and the Ukrainians and you enter into talks, it's a waste of time unless you're willing to concede defeat. Exactly. You can talk to the Russians until you're blue in the face about security guarantees, but they are not going to accept Ukraine having a meaningful security guarantee—an Article 5-type security guarantee from the United States and the Europeans. It's just unacceptable. There's no bargaining space here. That's the problem. So what I'm saying is that the Europeans and Ukraine—Zelensky and company—have to be willing to make major concessions to the Russians. They have to accept the fact that the Russians have won an ugly victory, and they cannot bring themselves to do that. They are so invested in this war at this point in time that the thought of doing a 180-degree turn is categorically unacceptable. This is the basic problem. And this is why I say this one will be settled on the battlefield.

#Glenn

I'm reminded of back in April—I think it was in 2019—when Zelensky was initially elected. People forget it now, but he was elected on a peace platform. You know, 73% of Ukrainians voted for this. He was going to make peace with Russia. He was going to talk to Donbass. I mean, all these things. And what I thought was funny was that it was not just the nationalists who opposed it, but also this huge group of NGOs who then signed this joint letter setting out red lines for what he was allowed or not allowed to do—just a long list. And it even included things like, "You're not allowed to negotiate with the Russians without the EU and NATO in the room."

And again, all these NGOs—we call them non-governmental organizations, but they all have a donor page, and it's just Western governments. It's essentially using the NGOs as little proxies out there to hijack civil society. And I thought it was fascinating. Even back then, they had a key role in throwing a wrench into any diplomatic efforts, you know, back when Zelensky was considering it. How do you see Europe after this war, though? Because, as you just said, they bet everything on this war: their economy, the preservation of NATO, their political legitimacy. What happens now if, again, Ukraine is cut in two and they suffer a humiliating defeat?

#John Mearsheimer

Well, a couple of points. One is, as we were talking about before, you're going to have poisonous relations between Russia on one side and Europe on the other side for as far as the eye can see. Now, it is possible that you'll get governments or ruling coalitions in places like Germany and France that want to make nice with the Russians. So that's a possibility. But there'll be lots of countries in Europe that never have any interest in making nice with the Russians. That's certainly true, I think, of the Poles and the Brits. I hope I'm wrong. But it'll be interesting to see what happens with the French and the Germans on this count.

But anyway, I think, generally speaking, we'll have poisonous relations between Russia and Europe for as far as the eye can see. The other major factor that really matters is that I think the American military footprint in Europe will be greatly reduced once this war is shut down. And I think, to put it in slightly different terms, NATO will be badly weakened. I think it's quite clear that the Trump administration wants the Europeans to do much more to provide for their own security and to help countries like Ukraine. The United States is passing the buck to the Europeans to deal with Ukraine.

And furthermore, the United States is just not that interested anymore in being the American pacifier in Europe, deploying large forces to the continent and keeping the American security umbrella firmly in place over Europe's heads. You just don't see a lot of interest in that anymore. And the Americans seem to be saying to the Europeans, “Do more for yourselves.” So the question you then have to ask yourself is: What happens once the American role in Europe undergoes a significant reduction? The Americans are much less influential. What you'll then see is the centrifugal forces go to work. Many

people think that as the Americans pull out, that will force the Europeans to come closer together and work in a more cohesive way.

I don't believe that for one second. It will have exactly the opposite effect. These are separate nation-states. Europe is comprised of separate nation-states that have some overlapping interests, but also some different interests. And it will be very difficult to keep the European states united in the sort of cohesive state that they have been in since the end of the Cold War, if you're talking about all of Europe, and since World War II, if you're talking about Western Europe. When NATO was intact and the United States was the dominant force in Western Europe, from 1949, when NATO was created, to 1989, during the Cold War, Western Europe was a place where the various states all worked together very well.

There was no threat of a Franco-German war. The United States was the pacifier in Western Europe. And then the Cold War ends, and the United States and the Europeans expand NATO and the EU eastward. And you have a situation where the United States serves as the pacifier across almost all of Europe. And this creates a situation where there is remarkably little conflict and a great deal of cooperation among the various European states—unprecedented in the historical record. And the European elites understand this, which is why they don't want the United States to go home.

They understand that the United States served as the pacifier in Western Europe during the Cold War and in all of Europe during the unipolar moment, and really up to the present, putting aside the Ukraine war, of course. But anyway, what happens when the American role in Europe is greatly reduced, when the American military footprint is reduced, when NATO begins to fracture, when more of a burden is placed on the Europeans to provide security for themselves, and they have to coordinate among themselves without the Americans sitting on top of them? I think you're going to see the centrifugal forces in Europe come into play. So Europe is going to have two huge problems to deal with.

One is the problem of poisonous relations with Russia, and the second is the centrifugal forces that will be at play once the Americans reduce their military footprint. And by the way, on top of all that, there's a separate subject of enormous importance, which is the demographic problem. These populations in Europe are all shrinking. The native people don't have lots of babies, and the end result is that you're going to have to allow lots of immigrants, lots of people, to come into the country. That's going to be essential. And that's going to cause all sorts of problems in Europe. So I think demography is working against Europe as well.

#Glenn

I've heard these two competing hypotheses about what happens when the Europeans move out of America's basement and have to stand on their own feet. One would be, well, they have to rise to the challenge. When the US leaves, that's when they will all come together. And the second hypothesis is, no, then the pacifier is gone, and they will begin to fragment. I tend to lean towards

the second option, like yourself. And I couldn't help but notice this morning that Jared Kushner—I mean, again, not the statesman of our time, but nonetheless, I thought it was interesting—made a comment in a news conference. He was making the point that if the Europeans could identify one person who could speak on their behalf, that would be a much greater achievement than getting the Russians to include them in the negotiations.

So it kind of points to that idea that they can't find unity here. I think they've now become too dependent on Russia as a common enemy. But I think that's a mistake as well, because at least in the past, they could also lean into this geoeconomic unity. That is, we'll have collective bargaining power and get the best possible economic deal for our member states. However, you can't do that without putting Russia in the mix. They supply the energy. Without them, you have a security challenge. If you can't have that piece, if the EU undermines the economic and security interests of its member states, it's going to be a burden. Any last thoughts? Sorry, "last words" sounded like a threat.

#John Mearsheimer

I'm enjoying this conversation too much.

#Glenn

Yeah.

#John Mearsheimer

But let me just make a couple of points on the whole subject of demography, making babies, and immigration. The United States, under President Trump, has gone to great lengths to curb immigration into the United States. But it's very important to understand that Americans are not making lots of babies, and we're going to have to open the gates and bring in more immigrants, just like the Europeans are going to have to do. You have shrinking populations in Europe, seriously shrinking populations in Europe, and you have a seriously shrinking population in the United States. And in the American case, we will solve this problem, I believe, rather easily with immigration.

The sluice gates will be opened again. I believe, if you look at the historical record, it'll be a much trickier case, a much more difficult case in Europe. I think, nevertheless, immigration will occur, but it'll be problematic in Europe in ways that it's not in the United States. But we'll see how that plays itself out. All I want to do is emphasize that that's a terribly important subject for all of us to be thinking about moving forward: the whole subject of declining population size and immigration. The second point I'd make to you is with regard to that whole question of whether a greatly reduced American presence in Europe will cause the Europeans to come together or will actually promote all those centrifugal forces that are sitting there below the surface.

Look, we have a rich historical record, a very rich historical record, of what Europe looked like before the American pacifier came. And there is no evidence that the Europeans came together and acted in cooperative ways when they didn't have the American pacifier sitting on top of them. Europe has historically been one of the most fractious places on the planet. Lots of murderous wars, for sure. So what people who believe that taking the Americans away won't lead to trouble have to do is explain why you got trouble in the past when the Americans weren't there, and why you won't get trouble in the future if the Americans go away. I think the only argument you can make is a learning argument, and you can make the case that the Europeans have learned.

But if I had a good hour, I could give you, I think, a quite persuasive case for why you don't want to place much reliance on the argument that states learn. And that's certainly true of the United States. If you look at American foreign policy since the Cold War ended—let's go back to 1989 and run forward to the present—do you see much evidence of learning, learning in a positive way, in the American case? I certainly don't. And anyway, I want to make just one other point here on the whole subject of why the Europeans are having a devil of a time going down the diplomatic road and also making the necessary concessions. Again, I'm not against diplomacy.

I'm just saying, if you want to do diplomacy, you have to make the necessary concessions. And my point to you is that they're so deeply invested in this conflict that they just can't bring themselves to do what you and I think is the obviously correct path. Okay. But what I want to note is—excuse me, Glenn—you see a similar situation with President Trump and his signing of the memorandum of understanding. Remember, the war starts on February 28th. The bombing campaign ends on April 8th. Then, on April 13th, they implement a blockade. That's not working. So, on June 17th, President Trump signs a memorandum of understanding. He signs it with the Iranians.

And as I've said on many occasions, it's basically a surrender document. The Iranians win. And Trump says at the time, "I don't want to be Herbert Hoover. I'm very fearful of an economic catastrophe," and so forth and so on. So he's forced to sign the MOU. But what then happens? He walks away from it. He can't bring himself to concede defeat to the Iranians. So he decides to kick the can down the road and see if, somewhere along the line, maybe he'll find the magic formula. And the situation with Trump and the MOU is analogous to the situation with the Europeans. They are so deeply invested in this conflict that they can't even sign a memorandum of understanding.

I mean, Trump did sign the memorandum of understanding, but then he walked away. But the Europeans are just unable to do that. And all of this tells you—and this is one of my favorite adages that I've learned over the years—it's very easy to get into a war, but it is extremely difficult to get out of a war. And you never want to start a war thinking that, you know, this is going to be an easy win and then you're going to live happily ever after. That occasionally happens. I think the first Gulf War, in 1991, comes close to that. But almost all the time when you start a war...

#John Mearsheimer

It leads to a lot of trouble, even when you win. You might win the war, but nevertheless, the costs are oftentimes very great, and the consequences are not always happy ones. And what happened here is that we, in effect, helped facilitate this war in February of 2022, and we can't seem to get out of it. And if you go back over to Iran and look at what's going on there, Trump just can't seem to get out. He seems to be stuck. And what is he talking about doing now? He's talking about putting economic pressure on the Iranians as if this is going to deliver a victory. I would not bet a lot of money on that. Anyway, those are my concluding thoughts, Glenn.

#Glenn

Yeah, I guess on that topic of learning from history, or the failure to do so, I think there's a quote often attributed to the German chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, who said something along the lines that he knows a hundred ways to lure the Russian bear out of its den, but he does not know a single way to bring it back in. So I think that sums it up nicely. Anyway, John, thank you so much for your time. You're more than welcome, Glenn.