Answering John Mearsheimer: Solving the Ukraine Security Dilemma

In his latest video, Prof. John J. Mearsheimer argues that there is no resolution to the Ukraine conflict because of the inevitability of the security dilemma. While he is right about the dilemma itself, I am arguing in this video that there is a way to deal with the dilemma and that's a negative security assurance for Ukraine through a double security arrangement with both the Europeans and the Russians. I'm using the example of the Franco-British and Prussian-British security treaties of 1870 as illustrations for how a double security arrangement about the neutrality of a small power worked to produce 44 years of stability for Belgium. Referenced Video: John Mearsheimer — No Guarantees, No Peace for Ukraine | Episode 15: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tdDLnVkRR7k Neutrality Studies Links: Neutrality Studies Substack: https://pascallottaz.substack.com Support Neutrality Studies: https://neutralitystudies.com/donate Neutrality Studies shop: https://neutralitystudies.com/shop Time Stamps 00:00 Responding to John Mearsheimer 02:36 The security dilemma 04:03 Belgium and the precedent of 1870 05:43 The British–Prussian treaty 08:48 The mirrored treaty with France 13:17 Belgium as the object of the guarantees 13:41 Applying the model to Ukraine 20:30 Political feasibility and credibility

#Pascal

Hi, this is Pascal from Neutrality Studies, and today I want to reply to a video posted yesterday by Professor John Mearsheimer of Chicago University, in which he discusses the security dilemma that the Europeans, the Ukrainians, and the Russians are facing at the moment, and why he believes that, under his theory of offensive realism, there is no solution to the current quagmire in Ukraine. The video in which he discusses his thesis is called “No Guarantees, No Peace for Ukraine.” And Professor Mearsheimer does something very important here. He actually spells out why the so-called security dilemma in realism would predict that there is no solution to what the Americans and the Russians are currently trying to do in Abu Dhabi.

As you know, yesterday and the day before yesterday, there were tripartite talks between the Americans, the Russians, and the Ukrainians in Abu Dhabi, and all sides went in with vastly different kinds of expectations. The Americans were basically trying to talk the Russians into a ceasefire, which would then, of course, solve the problem that Ukraine is currently losing on the battlefield. The Russians, on the other hand, want to talk about what they call security architecture and security guarantees for all sides, themselves included, and what they call indivisible security. So, on the level of great power politics, what is happening right now is, of course, just the latest stage of this four-and-a-half-year war in Ukraine, soon to be five years.

And Professor Mearsheimer takes this pessimistic view that no solution is possible because the security dilemma will prevent it. His argument is very, very important and very cogently put together. I recommend that you go and listen to that one first. But the answer I want to give here is that there is indeed, even theoretically, an actual solution to the problem. And the solution, in short, is Belgium. The solution to the entire problem is called Belgium. And let me explain this. We actually have proof—historical proof—that a solution in a similar type of situation is possible. And it has to do with negative security guarantees. It has to do with the promise of one of the great powers to actually support both sides. Let me show you how that works.

Now, John Mearsheimer first lays out this principal issue, and this needs to be understood: the security dilemma says that if one party increases its security by arming itself or by increasing its number of allies, that will automatically lead to a decrease in the other side's perceived security. Then the other side will try to level up again in one way or another, which will lead the first side to believe that the other side is evil. Therefore, both of them will level up, and in the end, we end up with a system in which everybody is worse off than in the beginning. That's the security dilemma. Everybody is trying to increase their own security, but the system then leads to a decrease in overall security.

And John Mearsheimer argues that Ukraine is right now in such a situation. There is just no way to square the circle. If the Russians actually agree to a ceasefire and then the Americans and the Europeans go in and rearm Ukraine, that will decrease security for the Russians. If, on the other hand, the Russians do not stop and actually incorporate Ukraine or parts of Ukraine, then that will lead to a decrease in security again in Europe and for NATO, and so on and so forth. There is no way to square this circle. Hence, he predicts that all of these negotiations must fail. However, there is a way to approach this, and I would like to show you this with the following documents.

There is this precedent, and it goes back to 1870. We have to go back over 150 years. What was going on in 1870 in Europe? Well, it was the beginning of the Franco-Prussian War, in which the Prussians and the French were about to start a war in August, in the summer of 1870. Now, this was very significant for one of the neighboring countries, namely Belgium. Belgium lies right between these two—I mean, today's Germany and France. It lies right between them, and it is flat. It's easy for either army to just use the territory to go through it. This is why, 30 years earlier, back in the 1830s, Belgium was actually declared neutral.

So Belgium was made a neutral state in order to function as a buffer between these two. Now, the problem that neutral states have is that although they do often have militaries, their military capabilities are very constrained, very small. Now, the question then is: can Belgium get security guarantees in order to solve that problem and beef up its own security? Now, for a neutral state, that's of course impossible. Neutral states cannot enter into a military alliance; otherwise, they are

not neutral anymore. However, there is something that third-party great powers can do. Third-party great powers can give security guarantees by not giving them to the neutral state, but giving them to the others.

So what happened in 1870? Let me show you this. It's very important because this was an actual treaty, an agreement concluded back in 1870. So, on August 9, 1870, the British—the UK—called over the Prussians, the Germans, to join them in London to sign a treaty. Now, let's look at this treaty together and read it together. This was concluded between Her Majesty—and Her Majesty here, of course, refers to Queen Victoria, who was reigning at the time—and the King of Prussia, relative to the independence and neutrality of Belgium. And again, it was signed in London on August 9, 1870, and later ratified, by the way, by the British Parliament. What does this treaty say? Let's read through this and let it sink in.

"His Majesty, the King of Prussia, having declared that, notwithstanding the hostilities in which the North German Confederation is engaged with France, it is his fixed determination to respect the neutrality of Belgium." In short, the Germans promised that although they now have a conflict with the French, they agree with the British that the neutrality of Belgium should be maintained. So again, this is the British talking about what they had established in previous negotiations with the Germans. They agreed that, as long as the French respect the neutrality of Belgium, the Germans will respect it as well. And by neutrality, of course, what we mean is not using Belgium as a launching point to attack the other side, right? Do not go into Belgium.

"So long as the same shall be respected by France. Her Majesty, the Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, on her part, declares that if, during the said hostilities"—so, during the war between the French and the Germans—"France should violate that neutrality, she"—Queen Victoria, representing the UK—"will be prepared to cooperate with His Prussian Majesty for the defense of the same in such a manner as may be mutually agreed upon, employing for that purpose her naval and military forces to ensure its observance and to maintain, in conjunction with His Prussian Majesty, then and thereafter, the independence and neutrality of Belgium." So, Queen Victoria promised the King of Prussia that if the bloody French go and try to attack you through Belgium, then, well, we will join you, the Prussians.

We will join the Prussians in order to fight back against the French. So we will give you, Prussia, a security guarantee that we'll come to your aid to fight the bloody French if that happens. Now, this would, in and of itself, not be that eventful if it weren't for the next document. So this was signed on August 9th, 1870. Now look at this. On August 11th, 1870, what does Queen Victoria do? Well, she calls over the French. "Please, French, come." And what do they do? They create a new treaty and actually, I think, show here that copy-paste is much older than the computer age. They literally copy-pasted the previous treaty from two days earlier and reversed the order of the belligerents here. "Treaty between Her Majesty and the Emperor of the French relative to the independence and neutrality of Belgium," again, dated August 11th.

Now let's read it. “His Majesty the Emperor of the French, having declared that, notwithstanding the hostilities in which France is now engaged with the North German Confederation and its allies, it is his fixed determination to respect the neutrality of Belgium, so long as the same shall be respected by the North German Confederation and its allies.” Again, the treaty starts by laying out what has already been concluded in negotiations with the French. The French agree that as long as the Germans keep the neutrality of Belgium intact and do not attack the French through Belgium, they are willing to maintain the neutrality of Belgium. They are willing to promise that, okay, we will not invade Belgium if the Germans do not invade it either.

Fine, so we both agree that Belgium's neutrality—Belgium as a buffer state, as an in-between land, as a no-man's-land—will be maintained as long as the other side promises it too. Now, of course, what does Her Majesty do? “Her Majesty, the Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, on her part, declares that if, during the said hostilities, the armies of the North German Confederation and its allies should violate that neutrality, she will be prepared to cooperate with His Imperial Majesty for the defense of the same country.” Exactly the same, right? So the promise is that if the bloody Germans should try to attack you, the French, through Belgium, if they should violate the neutrality of Belgium, then I, Queen Victoria, and the Brits will go to war alongside you against the Germans. There you have it.

There is nothing in international relations that says that a great power can have a defense agreement only with one side of a conflict. In fact, we have quite a lot of examples in history in which exactly this happens. In this case, the Brits were the greatest power in the Concert of Europe. However, they were not completely dominant. They were not the super-hegemon of Europe. The other powers also mattered. But they were important enough to say, “Well, if you attack, then I will throw my weight into your camp.”

And if the other one attacks, then I’ll side with the other one. So actually, what the Brits did was take a neutral position themselves and say, “Well, you two, as long as you stay out of each other’s backyard, I will not go to war with you.” And importantly, note that this is not a general neutrality that the British declared here. It is confined to that specific conflict. In fact, after this agreement, the Franco-Prussian War took place for about three years, and they were fighting over Alsace and Lorraine. Prussia then won and got these two territories. But importantly, it did not become an all-out world war.

The world war followed only 44 years later, and as a matter of fact, when the Brits decided to join the war on the side of the French, they cited this treaty as a sufficient legal obligation to do so. So what this shows is not necessarily that this can avoid all big wars, but that the Brits actually lived up to their promise even 44 years later. So this security guarantee, in this sense, did work for the French. It then worked against the Germans, but it was the Germans in 1914 who actually invaded Belgium and wanted to go through Belgium to attack the French. So it actually did what it was supposed to do. It reassured the other side that they would have the help of the British.

Of course, ending with the First World War as a conclusion is not very encouraging. But the point here is not to say that such an agreement will necessarily lead to a world war. The point is to say that it is actually a form of security agreement and a security guarantee that can be given. And very, very importantly, note that in this type of agreement, Belgium, the neutral party, is itself not a party to the agreement. This is not an agreement between the Brits and the Belgians. This is an agreement between the Brits and the Germans and between the Brits and the French about the neutrality of Belgium. Belgium is the object of the negotiations, not a participant in them.

Now, bring this forward to the present, and this is the core of my argument: there is a solution to the security dilemma that John Mearsheimer talks about. That is, again, to treat Ukraine the way that Belgium was treated—as an object, not a subject—and then actually use the Americans, their great-power status, their annoyance with the Europeans, and the rapprochement that has been happening with the Russians to create a similar structure. I am not saying that this is necessarily politically feasible. I mean, we know that Congress has just changed, and the Democrats are going to control Congress in about six or seven weeks. And this will, of course, not be very easy. And we know that inside the United States, there's a big power struggle over the future of the war with Iran and the future of the war with Ukraine.

We know that the CIA is deeply involved and that John Ratcliffe would probably oppose anything like this. But we also know that the White House, for the last two years, has been saying that it wants to look for some sort of agreement, and that the rapprochement with the Russians has happened. And the Americans, at least on one level, are as annoyed with the Europeans as they are with the Russians. They're annoyed with the Russians because the Russians are winning and the Americans' proxy war is failing. So that's annoying to the United States. On the other hand, the United States now has other problems that it also wants to focus on. And it is annoyed with the Europeans because the Europeans are unwilling to budge or move forward.

And the Ukrainians are actually latching on to the Europeans in order to put pressure on the Americans, put pressure on the White House, and influence them to extract more and more information, money, and weapons—although there are not that many weapons around anymore. However, long story short, the United States, at this point, after almost five years of war, has a lot of reasons to be annoyed and to actually consider what its status as the greatest power in this conflict—but not the only one—could allow it to do if the Americans were willing to actually negotiate with the Russians and promise them that, should the Europeans, together with the Ukrainians, try to attack Russia, the United States would come to Russia's aid.

And on the other hand, it promises the Europeans that if the Russians were to try to use Ukraine to attack NATO, or attack them through Ukraine, then it would join on their side. Meanwhile, we have a neutral buffer state in the middle, Ukraine, and the Americans finally withdraw their offer of future NATO membership. If the Americans were willing to say, "Okay, we will rule out NATO membership for Ukraine. We will force Ukraine to be neutral because there's just no club that will take them," well, what would we have? What kind of situation would we have? We would have a moment in

which the Russians would say, “Well, the neutrality of Ukraine was one of our core demands from the very beginning.”

And as Vladimir Putin just repeated on the 1st of October in Valdai, it is still one of the core goals of this entire special military operation. Well, that would be checked. On the other hand, you would have the Europeans, who would be getting a security guarantee. They would get reassurance that their alliance with the Americans is still valid. And third, you would have Ukraine, which would not get what it wanted—not NATO membership—but there would be a treaty in force that would say that if the rest of Ukraine—and we must say the rest of Ukraine—is ever attacked again, well, then the others would be bound to come to its aid, and actually from both sides. If the Russians attack, then the US and the Europeans would have to come to its aid. And if the Europeans attack, then the Russians and the Americans would come to help resolve this.

Now, of course, you will say, “Yeah, but what about the Donbas? What about Crimea?” All of that is still there. All of those problems are still around. And this grand bargain that I just laid out is not a solution to all of the details. This is not something that can be implemented tomorrow. But it is the framework that the Russians call a security architecture, that they call indivisible security. And the point I wanted to make in answer to John Mearsheimer is that even within the camp of realism, there is a way to square the circle of creating indivisible security: a structure in which the United States had a treaty with the Russians and a treaty with the Europeans about the non-aligned or neutral status of the rest of Ukraine.

Well, under such an arrangement, you have a buffer state, and you have a solution to the security dilemma because neither side could increase its security without triggering the very thing that should then solve it. Again, you would have an equal balance. And that, in my view, is the solution to the security dilemma. It is the squaring of the circle. So what this means is negative security assurances—a neutrality agreement for Ukraine, with or without Ukraine. Ukraine could join a multilateral treaty in which it promises to be neutral. That would be the Swiss model of 1815. It doesn't have to.

The great powers—the Americans, the Russians, and, well, whatever the EU is—could make such an agreement among themselves. The Russians do not need to agree with the Europeans about this. The only thing they need to do is agree with the Americans when they propose that, in order to create that kind of structure. So we don't need a multilateral treaty in which every one of the participants is actually willing to say, “Yes, this is the best solution ever.” The only thing we need is a structure in which none of the participants can say no. That's all that's needed. We need the Russians to not say no. We need the Americans to not say no. We need the Europeans to not say no. And all of them will be dissatisfied, probably.

But if they are not willing to say no, if this is a deal that is too good to actually say no to, then, well, we've got ourselves a structure. And this has worked before. It kept the peace for Belgium for 44 years, which is not a short time. And within 44 years, actually, the entire question of the conflict that

was going on on the continent had changed, and had changed dramatically. Those are things that we cannot foresee, but the same is true for Ukraine. You might argue, "Oh, but it's unrealistic that the United States would ever go to war with Russia against the Europeans." Well, may I remind you that it has been only 80 years since that was actually the case, when the United States and the Soviet Union were part of the same alliance to fight whom? Yeah, exactly, the Europeans.

They fought the Germans. That is 80 years in the past, so we do have a precedent for this as well. It is not at all inconceivable. You might argue, "But Russophobia is so high that never, ever would the Americans promise something like that to the Russians." Well, in 1870, Russophobia was already an old horse that the Brits had been deploying against the Russians forever. But the security interests of the Brits in 1870 were such that promising a deal like this was actually in their interest. Why was that the case? Well, because in 1870, the Brits were ruling the oceans. They were the unquestioned kingpin of the world. So they had every interest in actually being able to maintain trade relations with everybody and just continue their business because they were at the height of their power.

Anyhow, they had no interest in a great conflagration in Europe. Through the weight of their military, and by promising military support to both sides, they were able to keep that conflict—the 1873 war of the French against the Prussians—small enough so that their trading interests and so on were not disturbed. So the question really is: at what point, after five years of a failed proxy war, might the United States also be able, internally, to say, "I'm annoyed with both parties enough to make a deal with both of them about Ukraine"? And then the other question is not whether the United States would live up to that.

That's not the question. The only question is, would the Russians believe it? And would the Europeans believe it? Would they believe that this is a possibility for creating the very structure they want on their side, even if they want different things? Or is it something that is good enough not to say no to? So it's not a question of whether it would ever happen. The question is, would it modify the beliefs of these sides enough for them to actually engage with this discourse? And then how far do they want to go in hammering out the details, verification, observers, and automatic downstream agreements? I mean, there are a lot of questions to answer here. And again, I'm not saying this can be implemented tomorrow.

But as a framework and security architecture, this is something that has happened before. And something tells me that we are getting closer to the point at which no other configuration will be left than something like this, because the powers of all these participants can cancel each other out. Even the Russians can plow on, on the battlefield. They can. But from everything I know, including from John Mearsheimer, who was in Russia, there is no appetite to occupy the entirety of Ukraine, because western Ukraine is a wasp's nest. It's where all these Azov people, all these ultranationalists, are. Trying to incorporate that into Russia would be madness. Nobody in Russia, up to this point, is actually thinking about it.

So even the Russians need to figure out what to do with rump Ukraine, with the rest of Ukraine. Something needs to happen. So this is the point where the balance of forces is such that a stalemate on all sides must lead to some form of agreement, because even with military power, you cannot get rid of all the problems on all sides. So something along these lines is, in my view, inevitably going to emerge somehow. The only question is whether it will be a stable status quo or whether it will be inherently unstable and lead to the next kind of conflagration down the road. So that's what I wanted to communicate to you. Please let me know your thoughts. Thank you for your time.