

# George Beebe: Europe-Russia War as the U.S. Pulls Back?

George Beebe is the former CIA Director for Russia Analysis and currently Director of Grand Strategy at the Quincy Institute. Beebe discusses how the US pulling out of Europe makes a Europe-Russia War more likely. Read Responsible Statecraft: <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/> Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: <https://glennDiesen.substack.com/> X/Twitter: [https://x.com/Glenn\\_Diesen](https://x.com/Glenn_Diesen) Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/glennDiesen> Support the research by Prof. Glenn Diesen: PayPal: <https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/glennDiesen> Buy me a Coffee: [buymeacoffee.com/gdieseng](http://buymeacoffee.com/gdieseng) Go Fund Me: <https://gofund.me/09ea012f> Books by Prof. Glenn Diesen: <https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B09FPQ4MDL>

## #Glenn

Welcome back. We have the great pleasure of being joined today by George Beebe, the former CIA director for Russia analysis and currently the director of grand strategy at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. So, yeah, let me first say thank you for coming back on the program. Thanks for the invitation. So you and I have spoken before about how the U.S. has to adjust to a multipolar distribution of power. That is, it can't be everywhere anymore, and it must prioritize some regions. And the U.S., I guess logically, prioritizes the Western Hemisphere and East Asia, where its peer competitor is located.

So for the first time, Europe is not the first priority. Indeed, it's a distant third, it appears. And this requires the U.S. to pivot out of Europe, irrespective of who's the president. I think this is a trend we can expect to continue even after Trump. But you recently wrote an article about how pulling the troops out of Germany makes sense. However, it can have some unforeseen consequences, or some predictable consequences as well. How do you assess this situation? Because this came a bit all of a sudden, the way the U.S. is pulling some of its troops out of Germany.

## #George Beebe

Right. Well, my point is that in order to retrench, to reduce its involvement in Europe, which I think strategically is necessary, the United States needs to prepare the ground for doing that. It needs to do so strategically, in a managed and orderly way, not in a way that leaves Europe in disrepair and unstable and conflict-prone as it is right now. So when the Trump administration decides rather abruptly and suddenly to draw down militarily from Europe, I don't think that actually enhances the long-term prospects of a reduced U.S. presence and a rebalanced transatlantic relationship. It probably increases the chances of instability in Europe.

And unfortunately, the reality is unstable regions tend to draw the United States in and make it very difficult to disentangle itself. So I think on the surface, the announcement that the United States is withdrawing a couple of battalions from Germany—and I think the more important part of this announcement was the decision to reverse the Biden administration's decision to put intermediate-range missiles on German territory—that looks on the surface as if it's a step toward retrenchment and reduced involvement in Europe. I'm afraid that it is going to end up being a step toward greater instability and thus a much more difficult situation for both sides of the transatlantic relationship.

## **#Glenn**

Well, on the growing instability, it appears that one of the consequences of the U.S. pulling back, given that the Europeans aren't ready to give up on the Ukraine war, is that the Europeans appear to be escalating. That is, they're very proudly announcing how they're doing mass production of drones to strike deep inside Russia. So there's no pretense anymore that they won't supply weapons, they won't help pick the targets. So it's starting to look very much like a direct war against Russia. So as the Europeans respond in this way by escalating, the Russians, of course, come under even greater pressure to restore deterrence by retaliating. And as the United States is also pulling back, it looks—I'll be careful in my choice of words—but it looks like an opportune moment to retaliate and restore Russian deterrence. Indeed, the failure to have done so over the past four years is seen as having—well, its restraint has been interpreted as weakness and seen as emboldening its adversaries.

## **#Glenn**

So it looks as if.

## **#Glenn**

Unintentionally, possibly or likely, but nonetheless, we could head into a direct war as a result of this.

## **#George Beebe**

Well, I think that's exactly right. I wish I could disagree with your analysis, but I think your logic is difficult for me to argue with, which means we're headed toward a very unstable and crisis-prone period. Just to elaborate a little bit on your logic, I think one of the reasons why the Russians have really held back from employing a lot of their military firepower in Ukraine—and I know that characterization strikes a lot of people as odd, but I think it's nonetheless true—the Russians have an awful lot of air power that they could employ against the Ukrainians. They have not done so, at least not to the extent that they could, in part because they don't want to get into a direct conflict with NATO, and in part because they want to keep the door open to a compromise settlement and a normalization of the relationship with the United States, which I think is important to Putin for a variety of reasons, largely geopolitical.

But if we're headed into a situation where Putin judges that normalization of the relationship with the United States is just not going to happen—it's not in the cards—the Trump administration is not capable of normalizing relations. Now, I don't think he's quite there yet. I think he still has not given up hope that there can be a normalization of the U.S.-Russian relationship. But should he conclude that Trump is just too weak, that he is domestically hurt by both the war in Iran and the domestic situation, which are interrelated, he may well conclude that Trump is simply not strong enough to orchestrate a normalization of relations in a Washington, D.C. that is still very hostile to Russia overall.

And in that kind of situation, the incentives for him to teach the Ukrainians a lesson, to restore deterrence, as you put it, go up. And I think Putin is under a lot of pressure domestically to do something. They want this war over, but not at any cost. Either they want a reasonable, compromised settlement of the war, or they want to see Putin really take it to the Ukrainians and drive them out of Russian-claimed territory. And it's quite clear that that pressure is growing domestically on Putin. Part of this is a reaction to the crackdown on the Internet, which in turn was related to not wanting to allow the Ukrainians to exploit those channels for drone targeting. Part of this also is if Trump is pulling back from Europe and signaling to the Europeans that, you know, we are not going to be there if they provoke a conflict with Russia.

## **#George Beebe**

That also, I think, increases Putin's incentives to do something quite decisive, perhaps even against the Europeans themselves, although I don't think he would start out that way. I think he would start out by doing something quite severe against the Ukrainians themselves in the hope that this didn't escalate into a broader European conflict. But I do think that we're headed into a very dangerous situation. And unless the United States can, I think, use its remaining influence to steer the Ukraine conflict toward a compromise very soon, I think by the fall we're probably headed into a danger zone where the Russians will feel both a lot of pressure to do something and less concern that they would wind up in a direct conflict with the United States.

## **#Glenn**

I was hoping you would disagree with my pessimistic outlook, but it does appear there is a move towards war, which essentially nobody would want. But I had an interview recently with Sergei Karaganov. As you know, he's advised Putin, Yeltsin, Gorbachev, and others. He was also key in influencing the Kremlin to change its nuclear doctrine. And his argument essentially was that the spirit of Alaska was not only dead in terms of the diplomatic path forward.

Of course, he doesn't represent the Kremlin, but nonetheless, he made the point that his view is that there's a need to essentially strike the Europeans because he considers this to be a war in which the West fights against Russia using Ukrainians. And for this reason, initially first do something like an

Oreshnik strike against Germany or something, but otherwise also not rule out the use of a tactical nuclear weapon against Germany just to, well, essentially punish the Europeans there. Which, again, his point was that he used to represent a small minority voice only two years ago when he was pushing through changing the nuclear doctrine.

But now he says that the overwhelming majority is on his side, and the pressure is essentially mounting on Russia, on Putin, not to fall in line but to begin to take a more hard line, as you indicated. But how do you see the escalation ladder going here, though? Because you said you would expect Russia to first escalate against the Ukrainians. And last night, I couldn't help but notice the Russians used about 1,600 drones and missiles, which is by far a new record in this war. But how would they go after the Europeans? Would they do it with some kind of strategic ambiguity so they can deny it, or would they go direct and claim it? I mean, how do you see them going forward?

## **#George Beebe**

Well, I think step one would be something much more destructive against the Ukrainians. And one of the things that I think Putin has wanted to claim is that what the Russian military is doing in the Donbas is liberating regions from the so-called fascist neo-Nazi rule that the Russians claim is being imposed by Kyiv. But when you're talking about liberation, what that also means is you don't want to leave in your aftermath complete destruction. They don't want to turn the fortress cities that the Ukrainians now control in Donetsk into rubble. You can't do that and also maintain that you're liberating the populations that are living there. But as pressure goes up on Putin to do something decisive and to retake this Ukrainian-occupied territory, I think the first step that Putin would take would be to use air power in a much more destructive way and turn those fortress cities into rubble.

Now, at that point, the Russian ground forces could occupy them with relatively low casualties. And the Russians could say, okay, you know, we now have military control of the territory that we claim in the Donbas. At that point, the Russians would have to make a decision: do we go after the two other regions that we have annexed but don't fully control? Right. Or do we at that point say, you know, we're imposing a unilateral ceasefire, we're digging in, and not actually settle the war with a full peace deal with the Ukrainians, but ensure at that point that the rest of Ukraine could not be reconstructed absent concessions to Russian demands.

Now, whether the war escalated from that point into a more general Russian-European conflict would depend largely on what the Europeans do. Do they at that point decide they want to punish the Russians by employing drone attacks, for example, from Ukraine, for a much bigger campaign of deep strikes into Russian territory? If that is the response, then I think the Russians would escalate even further. And I think the next step would probably be massive bombing and missile strikes on Kyiv itself, perhaps other population centers in Ukraine, which the Russians really have not done on a scale that they're capable of doing.

And so we have a very, I think, dangerous situation in that the Ukrainians don't have an air defense system that's really capable of preventing that kind of more massive airstrikes from the Russians. And they have very little prospect of acquiring one from the United States or Europe anytime soon. So there's going to be a window for probably many months to come where the Ukrainian air defense system will essentially be non-existent, and the Russians could inflict a lot of damage on Ukrainian territory. Now, if the Europeans respond by trying to escalate even further, then I think the Russians would consider attacking supply chains and factories that are in Europe itself, on NATO territory, so to speak, that have been providing this capability to the Ukrainians.

And not all of the drones that are being produced by the Ukrainians are being produced on Ukrainian territory. There are other things that are going into this from Europe that the Russians don't want to have to strike because this would be escalatory. But in that kind of scenario, I could see the Russians going after those sorts of facilities. That would, of course, create a crisis within the Transatlantic Alliance. At that point, you would have allies turning to Washington saying, look, the Russians have now attacked us. We want to invoke Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. And that will be a very interesting situation should that arise, because then I think the Trump administration would have a fundamental choice to make.

Do we want to get into a direct military confrontation with the Russians? I don't know how that's going to turn out. That would be a very, very difficult decision, I think, under the circumstances, particularly because there's a perception in Washington—and I think the perception is justified—that the Europeans have not been working to bring peace to Ukraine. They're not in favor of a compromise with the Russians; they seem to be very staunchly in favor of increased pressure—military, economic, and diplomatic—on the Russians simply to capitulate. And given that perception, I'm not sure there's going to be a lot of sympathy in the Trump administration for getting involved in a conflict with the Russians.

## **#Glenn**

You more or less just summarized the key headlines across Europe these days, which is, now is the time to mount more pressure on Russia, which is, well, it sounds like a suicidal and crazy thing to do. But that's why I guess it's good to also shift focus and look at the European part of this, because, I mean, when you look at the future of Europe, it doesn't necessarily look very bright. You can measure many things of a declining region in terms of economy and military, but also, when you see countries in decline, you often see political instability and a very changing mindset. And I get the impression our leaders in Europe are becoming much more radical. There is this obsession with taking war to Russian territory without recognizing that the Russians could respond in kind.

Indeed, the idea of seeing these German leaders arguing for how we have to mass-produce long-range missiles to bring pain to Russia—I mean, I don't think they appreciate how the blood is boiling over in Moscow at the moment. I'm just wondering, how do you see what's happening in Europe?

Because I've often made the point here in Europe that with these escalations, we're inviting war. But this is considered to be a pro-Russian argument because it undermines support for the war. So it's very black-and-white thinking. All caution has been thrown out, it seems. What is it that's happening here? Because Europe used to be the cautious one. They used to look at the Americans as being the reckless, aggressive ones. But now, especially, you know, the way Bush pushed for membership for Ukraine in 2008, this was seen as being way too reckless. But now the Europeans seem to be much, much more radical, though.

## **#George Beebe**

Well, I think that's right. And I'm not sure I can offer you a very logical explanation for what's going on in European thinking. There seems to me to be some sort of mindset problem. It's almost like a mass hypnosis where people simply believe that the only way they can deal with Russia is through more pressure, more deterrence. And the notion that you would engage at all diplomatically with Russia to try to mitigate threats and reduce the likelihood of conflict and crisis is simply anathema, I think, to the bulk of Europeans right now. And I think it's a major mistake. I think it's a very dangerous mindset to approach this situation with. It increases the chances of escalation and conflict. I'm not going to argue that some element of deterrence isn't necessary. I think it is. That's got to be a part of the equation.

But if you approach this problem solely through the prism of deterrence, I think you end up exacerbating an escalatory spiral that could easily get out of hand. And it's an extremely dangerous way to approach this. So I think there has to be a mix of deterrence and diplomacy. And right now, I'm not sure the Europeans are thinking clearly enough to engage in that sort of approach. It requires pragmatism. It requires some cool-headed approaches and some self-confidence that you can engage with the Russians productively, and doing so won't undermine unity and stability in Europe itself. And I see a lot of fear in Europe—that if they even, you know, agree to talk with the Russians, that very act of engagement will somehow be destabilizing inside Europe. And I think that's a dangerous mindset to approach things with.

## **#Glenn**

It might be true as well, though, that it's destabilizing because when you have 27 countries in the EU, it's very difficult. How are they all going to agree on one foreign policy? It doesn't make much sense because the Irish, the Greeks, the Latvians, they have very different interests and security concerns. It seems like the way we gained consensus in the EU was simply to portray the situation as black and white. This is good and evil. You have an evil Russian empire, you know, the new Hitler coming, and, you know, dissent essentially is now immoral. So by presenting it as good versus evil, they got everyone in line. But once they begin to open up diplomacy, discussing the Russian security concerns, the whole unity might fall apart. Not that I think this is a great idea, but it does make me think sometimes of Walter Lippmann, because he wrote about this.

He argued that when states want to mobilize the public for war, it's common to portray everything as good versus evil. But when it's time to make peace, this same propaganda fails, and then a workable peace is no longer possible, because you can't compromise with evil. And I'm wondering if that's where we are, because we built a lot of our narratives around the idea that this was an unprovoked war, an unprovoked invasion, which means we can't—anything we give the Russians is now appeasement and emboldening them. But also, we put people like Kaja Kallas in place, which meant someone who was talking openly about breaking Russia into several pieces. We can't talk to the Russians. We got some of the most extreme people to lead the EU, and now that it's time to make peace, what's possible to do now? How do you see the narratives, I guess, trapping us here?

## **#George Beebe**

Well, I think your Lippmann reference is exactly right. That is part of the problem here. I think that's a bigger part of the problem than trying to maintain unity within the EU itself. The reason why I say that is what has traditionally happened with Europe has been the big players — the French, the Germans, the Italians. They have been leaders in all of this, and they've not allowed the fundamental engagements with other great powers to be held hostage to the consensus of smaller powers. They're not doing that in this case. In fact, if you look at Germany and France, they are not really pushing very hard to engage with Russia. I think you're just beginning to see talk about talking. You know, perhaps maybe we ought to engage with the Russians, but this is at a very early stage. And there's not a lot of momentum behind this right now.

And if that momentum is going to come, it's not going to come from the Estonians or the Poles. It's going to come from the big heavyweights in Europe. And right now, there's not a lot of oomph behind those calls. And I also think if you look at the U.K., they're not a part of the European Union. They're not held to that requirement for consensus in the common foreign and security policy of the EU. So the notion that they have to be careful about maintaining consensus within Europe doesn't apply. And you don't see the British really pushing for engagement with the Russians. Just the opposite, I think. The British are among the most staunchly opposed to engaging diplomatically with Russia over all of this. That leads me to think that this is much more of a mindset problem than it is an EU rules and consensus problem.

## **#Glenn**

That's a great point. Of course, the British aren't part of it. I often get the impression they're overcompensating a bit as well, trying to find a new role in Europe after Brexit. I guess the military role, the one confronting the Russians, this replaying of Churchill — I think that could actually make things worse. But how do you see the American interest here, though? Because I was thinking, if I were advising Washington, what would be ideal here? Would it be to put an end to the war in Ukraine because this is preventing the U.S. from pivoting to Asia, the Western Hemisphere? Or would it be better to just outsource it to the Europeans at a lower level? Because now it's a bit too high intensity, and a wider war could break out.

## **#George Beebe**

Well, I strongly believe it's in America's interest to orchestrate a compromise settlement of the war in Ukraine. If we don't do that and we essentially outsource this conflict to Europe and reduce America's involvement, I think the chances of escalation into an extraordinarily destructive conflict between Europe and Russia go up immensely. And I don't think that's in America's interest at all. I think the continuation of a broader Europe-Russia conflict, even if it doesn't escalate dangerously, only encourages the Russians to align themselves more closely with China. I don't think that's in America's interest.

I think it's in our interest to have a more autonomous, more independent Russia that has relations both with China and with the United States and the West. That makes dealing with the challenges that China poses a lot simpler for the United States than if Russia and China are closely, strategically aligned against the United States and the West. And I think, just from the point of view of prioritization, if Europe is conflict-prone and weak, that makes the United States much less able to focus on other higher priorities in the world, much less able to focus on the Indo-Pacific from a military point of view and strictly from a time management point of view.

Our White House, our leaders, cabinet officials only have so much time and attention they can devote to things. And any crisis in the world that in some way touches on American interests certainly distracts from their ability to focus on what I think should be higher priorities. The last thing I would say is the nature of the transatlantic relationship, the purpose of NATO, needs to change. And it needs to focus much more, I think, on facilitating high-technology cooperation between the United States and Europe. I think the nature of the geopolitical challenges that we're going to be facing in the next several decades has a lot to do with things like critical minerals and chips and supply chains and space, quantum computing, artificial intelligence.

China has some advantages of scale that it is bringing to bear in this competition. The United States, working with European allies together, can help to mitigate some of those advantages of scale that the Chinese have, and I think lift all of our boats in the West technologically. I think it could bring greater prosperity to Europe, more economic growth that I think Europe desperately needs right now. So if Europe is essentially in perpetual conflict, that kind of cooperation becomes much less possible over time. So I'm strongly of the opinion that the United States needs to bring this conflict in Ukraine to a compromise settlement to facilitate all of these things that I think are strategically vital.

## **#Glenn**

I would like to see some kind of reconceptualization of the US-Europe relationship because it seems to be always all or nothing. And to be honest, that also is very much in the European mentality as well. That is, either they can't imagine living without the US and everything has to be subordinated,

or they become viciously anti-American. So it doesn't seem... It looks like the goal should be to have a... redefining the relationship for a multipolar era, where the US can't be there to the same extent but is still seeking some benefits from the partnership that's lasted all this time.

Meanwhile, I'm pessimistic at the moment about Europe and Russia because, again, the headlines in Europe now are that, you know, the tide has turned, Ukraine is winning again. So we're going back to this, apparently. The reason why the Russians didn't have any heavy weaponry on May 9th was not to avoid inviting an attack on the parade, but rather it's weakness, that they didn't have any. And, of course, Putin is dying again, apparently, from some disease. So all of these are narratives to build up support for war, it seems.

**#George Beebe**

I think that's a case of believing your own propaganda. That's a dangerous thing to do.

**#Glenn**

Very much so. Anyway, as always, thank you so much for taking the time.

**#George Beebe**

My pleasure.

**#George Beebe**

Thank you.