

Jennifer Kavanagh: A Historic Shift in Asia & Ukraine Is Defeated

Jennifer Kavanagh discusses the weakening position of the U.S. in East Asia, and why it does not seem possible for Ukraine to "turn the tide". Kavanagh is a Senior Fellow and Director of Military Analysis at Defense Priorities and an Adjunct Professor at Georgetown University's Center for Security Studies. Buy Diesen merchandise: <https://diesen-shop.fourthwall.com/en-nok> Books by Prof. Glenn Diesen: <https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B09FPQ4MDL> Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: <https://glenndiesen.substack.com/> X/Twitter: 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 Go Fund Me: <https://gofund.me/09ea012f>

#Glenn

Welcome back. We are joined today by Jennifer Kavanaugh, a senior fellow and director of military analysis at Defense Priorities. You've been on the program previously, so it's good to see you again.

#Jennifer Kavanagh

Yes, thanks for having me back.

#Glenn

I want to ask you about the stability of the internal politics in Kiev. But first, I really want to start with a different topic. That is an article you recently published in The New York Times. Because as the world looks towards the horrific wars in Iran and Ukraine, and of course the regions adjacent, we also see that the security architecture in East Asia appears to be changing very fast, which is what you wrote about. I was wondering, what exactly is happening now in East Asia? Because, well, the U.S. was supposed to focus primarily on China. This was the pivot to Asia. Not necessarily that that's a good idea, but we kind of lost focus a bit. I was just wondering, how do you see the situation now in East Asia?

#Jennifer Kavanagh

Well, I think that the Trump administration came in, like many administrations, saying that they were going to focus on the U.S.-China competition. And actually, Trump was the one who introduced this concept of strategic competition with China into the mainstream D.C. debate. That was his Trump one policy, was focusing on China. And so I think people expected a continuation of that and

a real effort to pull away from Europe, pull away from the Middle East, and double down on Asia. And that's just not what we've seen. We've seen very little change in Europe. We are now in a war in the Middle East. And I think we see the consequences of those decisions, as well as Trump's approach to allies in Asia. The Trump administration has pulled back from competition on China, looking for a more stable relationship.

And that has meant focusing much more on economics than on security. And that has led to things like talking about the G2 and balance of power, wanting a decent peace. And this makes allies in the region very nervous, especially combined with Trump's return to real strategic ambiguity over Taiwan, his withholding of arms sales, and his pressure on allies to keep spending more on defense. So I think that increasingly, allies in Asia like Japan and Australia and South Korea are starting to fear U.S. abandonment and starting to arm and to align with each other much more closely to build the defense cooperation networks that they don't have, so that they could work together more effectively without the United States.

Like, this is never going to be a NATO. They're too diverse. They're too far apart. But trying to build some sort of infrastructure to bolster their security. I think there's two other factors that's driving this. One is obviously, you know, China's increasing assertiveness in its region. In Washington, this is typically described as Chinese aggression, right? Sometimes I do think it crosses the line into something that does seem to be intimidating and is military pressure. But I see this as really not surprising. We should expect a great power like China to be assertive in its home region, just like the United States is assertive in the Western Hemisphere.

So we cannot like that behavior, but I don't think that we should expect it. It's not something that I think U.S. policy can change. And then the second factor is the war in the Middle East. And the war in the Middle East has pulled U.S. military power away and distracted the United States diplomatically. Hegseth keeps talking about how the United States is going to stand with Asia, that we're going to do more in Asia than any previous administration has done. But we see the opposite happening. We see the THAAD leaving South Korea. We see the Indo-Pacific Command talking about reducing exercises. So we actually see the opposite.

And I think allies in Asia are starting to understand, watching the U.S. military in the Middle East, that U.S. military power is less than it was in the past. What the U.S. can do is less than it was in the past. And they're responding to this. And to me, this is a really positive trend. I think the U.S. has to pull back. It has to burden shift in Asia, just like everywhere else. So I'm very happy to see allies step up. My only concern is that they focus much more on the defense side and not on the diplomacy side. And countries like Japan are never going to be secure if their model is military competition with China.

#Glenn

Yeah, the abandonment—well, that's become a common theme, I think. As you said, the war against Iran probably increased this concern. That is, I think many probably already had a bit of worry about to what extent the U.S. would be able to have the same security guarantees in a multipolar world as opposed to the unipolar. But, of course, as you said, with the THAADs and Patriots pulled out of South Korea, the limited focus—I mean, you have some worries in the Gulf states about the ability to defend. You see this in East Asia.

You can also apply it to Europe, I guess. That is, as a lot of the weapons is redirected to the Middle East. And also, I guess Washington is more open about its disinterest in spending too much of its resources on Europe. You don't hear this about East Asia, but is this—how do you see China being able to, well, and the region adjusting to this reality? Because, again, it's not as if, as you said, it's not as if the Chinese will then take over the role as a hegemon. But definitely, it will be something different.

#Jennifer Kavanaugh

Yeah, well, you know, I... A lot of people ask whether U.S. distraction in Iran will lead China to take advantage of this opportunity to seize Taiwan. I think that's really unlikely. I think what U.S. distraction does do, though, is open space for China to push harder in the gray zone and normalize a new status quo of what its military will do on a day-to-day basis in the region, including military naval patrols and air patrols and how it interacts with other countries in the region. Because the United States, to be realistic, can't push back that hard on these activities. They cannot have a war right now with China. It's already fighting a war in the Middle East.

You know, and it's kind of silly, in my view, to even talk about a U.S.-China war right now, because we've seen how severely U.S. missile and munition stockpiles have been depleted in Iran. Clearly, the United States is not ready for a war with China. So this means the U.S. will have to be more accommodating, and it gives China space to push much harder. And for other countries in the region, I do think this drives them to band together more. Like, that's what we should expect to see, is that they will try to balance against growing Chinese power. I don't think they can really balance China on their own, which means that they have to also think about diplomacy.

They have to think about an inclusive security architecture that's also built with outreach to China. They have to improve their relations with China. And that's, I think, the mistake that we've seen made over and over again in Europe, and actually over and over again in the Middle East, is this idea that countries can be secure by building a bloc against the country that they see as an adversary. And that inevitably leads to conflict. So, you know, as countries in Asia start to think about what their security architecture looks like with less U.S., I think it has to include more diplomacy with China that's not mediated by the United States. And I don't think we see that yet.

So that's why I think the transition is a positive one over the long term. But in the near term, I think it does bring risks of instability, as you have countries like Japan and South Korea and Australia building up their arms, and you have China building up its military capability, and you don't have a dialogue between the two sides. It obviously creates the risk for miscalculations and unintended escalation. And that's potentially a role the U.S. can play, is working with allies to help them see that a world with less U.S. has to be a different type of security architecture, not just the security bloc model that the U.S. has relied on in the past.

#Glenn

I guess it is reasonable that the countries will seek to defend themselves or build up their military budgets if the security architecture is changing, that is, the U.S. reducing its presence. But of course, ideally, as you said, you should pivot into this more inclusive security architecture that builds on concepts such as indivisible security. But do you see anything towards this end, though—the ability of China to, I guess, come up with a new format for the region?

#Jennifer Kavanagh

I think not yet. It is still a little bit early. So I guess I'm still optimistic that we could get there. I think my biggest worry right now is China-Japan relations. And I actually worry about that more than I worry about Taiwan these days, just because I think the U.S. pullback and Japan's fears about abandonment and historical grievances between China and Japan have really fed into a situation that's quite negative. And the attitudes on both sides, both at the political level and among the public, are quite negative. Each side reads the other as militarizing, as intending to be aggressive. They have ideas about the other's designs on the region.

And I think this is, like, a very negative trend. You know, I think that it will take time as the security architecture shifts to stabilize and to develop into something else. I guess I am concerned about the trends in the sense that I see them moving towards more of a security bloc model. And, I mean, it's not only on allies to reach out. It's also on China to think about how it can balance its desire to be assertive and to be the most powerful country in its region, even if it's not playing the sort of hegemonic security guarantor role that the U.S. has, how it can balance that with positive relations with other countries in the region. And we have models of how this could work.

I mean, I think China's relationship with Southeast Asia is a pretty good example. And it's one that I talk about in the article, just in the sense that those countries, especially, like, Vietnam and China, have a history of conflict as well. But they've come to a place where, you know, Vietnam can have a strong military and the two sides can get along. They don't agree on everything, but they're able to engage in sort of a productive way. And I think that that, along with ASEAN—ASEAN has lots of flaws—but one of the things that it has done is to sort of create peace and stability, even as disagreements arise, persist, and to live peacefully alongside a very powerful neighbor.

And that's sort of the reality for countries that are, you know, quote-unquote middle powers or small powers, is that when you're on the border or near a really powerful country with a huge military, you have to think about how you can defend yourself while also accommodating this really powerful neighbor that you have. I think most of the countries in Northeast Asia haven't had to grapple with that because they've been protected by U.S. security guarantees. And this is why I think U.S. security guarantees generally are quite distortionary, because they allow countries like Japan and South Korea to live in this world where they don't actually have to grapple with their geopolitical reality. And so, you know, in that sense, a removal of U.S. security guarantees, while destabilizing, could be productive over the long term.

#Glenn

It's also a challenge if you're a smaller country, you know, close to the United States, Russia, China—like one of the great powers. Historically, you would have some challenges with your sovereignty. But of course, only looking at deterrence, that could be quite dangerous if you only invite conflict. But again, the American position—I can see why it would be difficult to discuss in the U.S., because their position in Asia would reflect the wider position the U.S. takes as the world continues to drift towards multipolarity. But how do you see the Europeans responding to this?

Because they have a tendency of, well, let's say, overplaying their hand, and also they're not quite ready to give up on the 1990s—that is, the unipolar moment and their role as the junior partner of the U.S. So how do you see them responding to, for example, the Taiwanese issue? Because if we were to accept a larger role for China in East Asia, it doesn't look like we have much of a choice. The Taiwanese issue seems to be written in stone. There's no way the Chinese are going to give up the One China policy. So how do you see the Europeans responding to this shifting distribution of power?

#Jennifer Kavanagh

Well, I mean, I think you're right that the Asia conversation is very unique in Washington, D.C. You know, it's been okay to talk about burden shifting in Europe for a long time. Not always popular, but okay. But talking about burden shifting in Asia, about doing less in Asia, is a new conversation just in the past couple of years. So it is still, like, a very different sort of discourse in D.C. when you talk about Asia. I mean, I guess I see the Europeans are still clinging to the old order and hoping that it can be saved. And I think that you see this in their efforts to do more outreach to Taiwan.

So, you know, a couple—it was like maybe in late June—the E3 issued a statement condemning Chinese military activity and saying, like, to me, this was sort of a signal that they're trying to show the U.S. that they're like, you know, we're supporting you. Don't give up. It's the same thing that sort of the Japanese especially have done, is to try to, like, encourage the U.S. to keep its leadership role, to show that allies are going to do more. Like, you can do this. You can stay. But the reality is

that there's not that much the Europeans can do to affect the balance of power in Asia. Like, Asia is important to Europe economically, but militarily, they don't have the power projection capabilities to make a difference.

You know, they could provide intelligence support and, you know, maybe some types of, like, other combat assistance, military aid, things like that. But they're not going to make a difference in any type of war. It would be a fool's errand for the United States to depend on them in some kind of military conflict. I also think that for the Europeans, there's a real ideological angle here, like the idea of defending democracy and global norms. And they see this as an example of the principle of sovereignty and territorial integrity. And these things are, you know, very foundational to their worldview in a way that they're increasingly less so in the United States. And I think they see the region through that lens.

They have their own problems with China, too, right now, economically and otherwise, that create challenges for them in terms of how they deal with the region more generally. China is very important to them economically. They see the U.S. pulling away. They have zero ties with Russia. They can't afford to alienate China. So I think they're in a very tricky position in Asia. And I think they see that they've benefited for a long time from being like, you know, the favorite child of the United States. U.S. hegemony has been very good for Europe. So I think they see any decline in U.S. hegemony, whether that's in Europe specifically or elsewhere, as quite a negative trend to their ability to have relevance. Because without the U.S., Europe is much less relevant, especially in Asia.

#Glenn

Yeah, I often get the impression that Europe's position on the Middle East with the war against Iran, or East Asia and the conflict with China, that a lot of the positions they take are aimed at increasing their own market value for the United States. That is, to be seen as a reliable ally, a force amplifier, in order for the U.S. not to abandon them in Europe. I guess that's a card Trump is able to play quite often. But overall, I think the shift to multipolarity, the Europeans kind of have a dilemma.

Either you try to revive the unipolar moment, but then you have to commit to the U.S. and cut yourself off from the Chinese and take a tougher stance, or you adjust to multipolarity, but then you need to diversify your ties and work with other great powers such as China. Again, I don't think the Europeans, because there are too many countries, have agreed on a position, so they're trying to sit on both chairs at the moment, it seems. So take that tough line against China, but still diversify in the fear that if we can't win over the love of the Americans, we have to prepare for being abandoned anyway. I don't know. It's a bit of a strategic vacuum. I'm not sure if you see it the same way.

#Jennifer Kavanagh

Yeah, I mean, I think Europe's in a very tough position for just the reasons that you articulate. I mean, if we're shifting to a multipolar world, what's Europe's place? Is it hedging between the U.S. and China? Is it becoming its own pole? That seems not impossible, but, like, a very long way from where it is right now. And if you're going to hedge between the United States and China, like, what does that look like? And it's especially complicated in the tech space, I think, because the U.S. and China both want you to pick their technology.

The U.S. is going to restrict the technology it offers if you use Chinese technology. But the U.S. technology is expensive, and they're going to kind of extort you as they give it to you. The Chinese technology comes with its own risks. And Europe doesn't have its own. So you're kind of stuck in this place where it's hard to decide. Is it better to hedge between the two? Is it better to try to be independent? Is it better to go all in on the U.S. and just pray that you get through the next two years and whoever comes after Trump is different? I think that's a bad bet.

But there are people in Europe who still think that's the way to go. You know, so I think it's like, I don't envy—I think Europe is in a very difficult position, you know, because not only does it have this challenge of dealing with sort of the U.S. pullback and China, but also has the war in Ukraine, which it sees as very important, and it has its, like, escalation with Russia. So it's in this kind of position where it faces security threats from a lot of sides. It's interesting because, you know, in the U.S. there's this narrative that this is, like, so—the world is so dangerous, and I don't see it that way. I see the U.S. as very secure. But if you were in Europe, you could kind of make a story for why, like, there actually are a lot of maybe not, like, invasion threats, but a lot of challenges.

#Glenn

No, indeed. I do think there's a bit of the same dilemma there, though, with the war in Ukraine, because on one hand, the war in Ukraine, if we double down on it, it seems like the objective for many of the European leaders is, if we intensify it, then we're able to bring the U.S.—if we can bring the U.S. back into the Ukraine war, that would cement America's position in Europe going forward. On the other hand, as the former head of the German army, Harald Kujat, suggested three years ago, you know, this war, we're destined to lose it. And when we lose it, the U.S. will likely pull back, and then we'll be left all alone facing a very angry Russia.

And so we have to choose there as well. Do we adjust to new realities and find a deal with the Russians? Or do we double down on the war and hope that America will—well, essentially, we'll go back to some Cold War scenario where the U.S. commits fully to Europe? But on that topic, I did want to ask you as well: What is going on now in Ukraine? Because there's all these reports now of the political tensions within Ukraine's leadership. Of course, we saw the tensions, or the split, between Syrskyi and Fedorov, and Zelensky ended up cutting both, essentially. So what is it that we're actually observing here?

#Jennifer Kavanagh

Well, I mean, it's always hard to know what's going on in any country's sort of internal politics. But I think, to me, I see this as just part of a bigger trend. This isn't the first time Zelensky has reshuffled his government at sort of an odd time in a kind of clumsy way. To me, it seems to be mostly about him consolidating his own power, trying to remove people that he sees as threats and put in place people that he can control more easily. But that's, like, that's part of the story. And I think this suggests that he feels increasingly under threat as the war continues and is concerned about his political future, which is interesting because we hear all the time that, like, Putin needs this war to keep going for his political survival.

But I think the same is true in Ukraine, that the war becomes sort of this self-generating thing that Zelensky needs to keep him in his political position. But I think there's other aspects to this. I think one is, like, it tells us something about what's happening on the front lines and in the military. For several months now, there's been this narrative that Ukraine has turned the tide and is winning the war. But if you're winning the war, you don't change your military leadership. So it tells me that things are maybe a little bit more difficult than it seems. And there's this debate not only about the country's future, but the military's future.

Is it going to be sort of a drone-based, robotic-heavy military, or is it going to continue to be more conventional? There are questions about how to deal with manpower shortages, how to reform the force structure of the military. And then there's all the questions about procurement and corruption and who's getting the contracts. And, you know, corruption, I think, is a constant in Ukrainian politics. You can never count it out. It's, like, always there. And I think all of these things together paint a picture that is, like, much more unstable and much more sort of under pressure from inside than the narrative that's projected externally.

#Glenn

Yeah, well, that was probably the same logic as when he got rid of Zaluzhny. Well, got rid of him, sent him to London. But how stable do you think Zelensky's position is, though? Because he's quite popular in the West. I mean, he's treated like a rock star, especially in the European capitals, but not so much in his own country anymore. He's struggling a bit because of the tolls of the war, the busification. A lot of these issues are problematic. Do you see, though, also him getting rid of Fedorov has weakened him more or strengthened him, because it wasn't a very popular decision?

#Jennifer Kavanagh

Yeah, I mean, I do think overall the episode leaves him looking weaker for a couple of reasons. I think first, because he removed this really popular leader, and it's not really clear why. And now he can't get him to come back into any government position. And then second, because he gave in to the public pressure to fire Syrskyi as well and had to make all these overtures to Fedorov. Now, the

Ukraine supporters would say that this shows Ukraine's democracy at work, that, you know, the protesters demanded something and Zelensky, you know, listened to their demands. Maybe. But to me, it seems much more like a leader who's indecisive and doesn't know what it is that he wants and created a mess and had to triage it.

And, you know, maybe the new leadership in the Ministry of Defense will have new ideas, and the new commander in chief will make positive changes. But I guess I'm not sure, because I see Ukraine as being limited by structural factors more than, like, individual decisions, right? Like, no, it doesn't matter who you have leading your military. There are going to be manpower shortages, and that's, like, unchangeable and only going to get worse. It doesn't matter who you put as your prime minister. You're still facing a winter in which you have basically no Patriot missiles, and Russia has doubled its production of ballistic missiles. Like, these are structural factors that you can't change.

So it seems like a lot of moving the chairs around to try to make it look like he's doing something to improve the situation. But he faces these structural challenges, and personnel decisions aren't going to make a difference in those situations. So ultimately, you change the personalities, but I don't think you change the trajectory. I think it remains to be seen a little bit, like, what happens over the next month or two. How does this new government coalesce? What do they change? Does the popular pressure decrease or increase? But I think Zelensky's political position is probably okay through, like, through the rest of this year. I think the question is what happens this winter? Like, how bad is it, and how much, like, social pressure does that create on the government for something different?

#Glenn

Yeah, to look, I guess, indecisive, concerned about opposition, authoritarian, but then at the same time showing that if the Ukrainians want any political changes, they need to take to the streets. It's a very dangerous message to send out in a country which is undergoing so much social stress. But you mentioned all these structural factors which can't be changed. Obviously, the manpower problem is a big problem. They can try to increase their conscription, but that would create even more social tensions and more desertion. I mean, I'm not sure if there's a solution to this. Perhaps the Europeans can start deporting all of these millions of people.

Ukrainian refugees, but it doesn't look like they will be very reliable soldiers either if they have to be, you know, forced into the front. But on the ballistic missiles, though, this seems to be something that Zelensky wants to counter. He just met now with Trump in Washington, and apparently, well, from what I've seen in the media, Zelensky had requested a meeting with Elon Musk because he wanted to use or expand the use of Starlink to also strike Russia's ballistic missiles. But apparently Musk even declined a meeting with Zelensky. How do you see the plans of Zelensky to start to go after the ballistic missiles of Russia and possibly increase his own air defense system?

#Jennifer Kavanagh

Well, I mean, I think there's a number of air defense issues here. I think first, there's the question of the Patriot licenses. I think this was always something that seemed really unrealistic to me, just because Patriot missiles are one of the most sensitive technologies the U.S. has. And I just can't imagine that Ukraine's security systems are up to par to be able to safely take this information, or that Ukraine's manufacturers could produce the systems, or that U.S. companies were going to invest in factories in Ukraine in the middle of a war. I think we've already seen this run into several roadblocks, including the president saying just today that, you know, they were still looking at this. He hadn't made any decisions. So we've kind of already backtracked on that.

I think that's to be expected. In any case, getting Patriot licenses wouldn't help Ukraine in the near term. It's like it would take five years, maybe more, to get that up and running. Now they have their own air defense system that they've been talking about. They're hopeful, according to reports, that this will be sort of ready by the end of this year, beginning of 2027. It seems very unrealistic to me, looking at the details of the system now. It's pretty complex. The actual launcher and missiles aren't that complex, but in order to work, it has to be paired with a lot of foreign technology, and getting all those things to work together and talk to each other is going to be quite hard. So I think we're at least a year, maybe more, away from having that.

And so then we get to this issue of, you know, Elon Musk and whether or not it makes sense to start hunting the ballistic missile launchers that Russia has. You know, I think, first of all, Elon Musk is going to be hesitant to do this. He's been hesitant to get involved in the war in the past. He's made comments about, like, this is a commercial technology. He didn't want to be making decisions about war. I think he'd probably also have to coordinate with President Trump. And Trump's comments about the Patriot missiles was like, "We want peace, not more missiles." So if that's the mindset he's in right now, it's hard to see him escalating to increase U.S. involvement.

And he's been very hesitant recently to do anything that would, um, like, significantly increase the risk of a U.S.-Russia conflict. Um, and, you know, if you're letting Starlink work over Russia to fire targets inside of Russia, seems like a pretty big escalation to me. I mean, I've been accused of thinking that everything is escalatory, but that to me really does seem escalatory. So I guess I'm a little skeptical that that's something that would be approved. But more broadly, like, the U.S. plan in Iran was to hunt the missile launchers, and it was not very effective. You know, the U.S. struck something like 13,000 targets, and still Iran has more than 50% of its ballistic missile launchers and ballistic missiles. And that's—the U.S. systems are better than Ukrainian systems, even if Ukraine has access to better technology.

So this idea that this is the solution, to me, seems operationally wrong, putting aside the questions about whether or not this is the right decision for the United States. It seems like it probably won't work. There was an op-ed in the Washington Post today that suggested a different strategy for going after the launchers, which is to give Ukraine's F-16s a different, more advanced missile and a different type of launch technology so that they could fire at longer distances and target more

effectively. But this, to me, has the same problems. Like, maybe it's less escalatory in the sense that the U.S. involvement would be a little bit less, but it still has the same problems in terms of the effectiveness of, like, trying to hunt mobile missile launchers. It's something that countries always think they can do and it never works.

#Glenn

You've been following the shortages in U.S. weapons stockpiles. How severe is this? I mean, what is it that we can expect to see change in the U.S. weapons deliveries to Ukraine? I know Trump said that they're not doing weapons deliveries; they're selling them to Europeans, and he doesn't know what the Europeans are doing with it. I mean, but, you know, I get the language is supposed to not provoke further escalation, but how do you see the shortages? Because Trump made some comments that, yeah, we have all the weapons in the world, but most of the reports we see suggest that there's some real problems, not just from all the weapons they sent to Ukraine, but now also with the war in Iran, which doesn't seem to have any end in sight, at least not yet.

#Jennifer Kavanagh

Yeah, I mean, this is a sort of complex question. And the administration's narrative has been, like, very confusing because, on the one hand, they tell us that there's no problem, we have all the missiles we need. But then we see the budget requests, which are enormous, and they're talking about missile replenishment. So if we have all the missiles we need, like, why do we need a 1.5 trillion defense budget? That's the question I always ask. I think that the U.S. is not running out of munitions. I've seen people frame it that way. I think that's wrong. The U.S. also has plenty of munitions. If it wants to keep fighting in the Middle East for several more months, even a year, it probably can. The question is just, can the U.S. keep fighting in the Middle East and also meet all of its other global commitments?

And there are specific weapons platforms where the shortages, I think, are concerning. So, like, on the offensive side, I think the questions and the concerns are rather minimal. You know, the U.S. has used like a third of its Tomahawks. That's a lot for a short war, but it still has two thirds left. It's used like 25 percent of its JASSMs. It used all of its PrSMs, but that was a new missile, and they didn't have that many missiles. And the other piece of this is that they have very deep, like tens of thousands of less precise weapons. And they can use those now that Iran's air defenses are degraded to stand-in attacks, like just dropping the bomb over the target. So on the offensive side, I think the limits are quite narrow, but the U.S. isn't providing those weapons to Ukraine. So it's sort of irrelevant to the Ukraine question. On the defensive side, I think the questions and the concerns are much more real.

And I think there's two platforms that everyone talks about, which are the most important, because they are the best ballistic missile interceptors: the Patriot and the THAAD. And I think the latest data, or the latest estimates, are that the U.S. has used about 60% of its stockpiles of both of those.

And that's a lot for a war that lasted only six weeks, to go through, like, 60% of your stockpiles. And so that means that the U.S. has something like 800 Patriot missiles left in its stockpile. And we hear Zelensky saying that he wants like 300 for the winter. I mean, that's like half of what the U.S. has left. It's, like, just not possible. Production is only 600 per year. We have like 250 THAADs left, according to estimates.

Like, these are just rough numbers. They're done by, like, trying to estimate how many are used and how many the U.S. has. The actual numbers are classified. But I think what this says is that in terms of what Ukraine actually needs from the U.S. right now, ballistic missile interceptors are the number one thing. They don't need a lot of other stuff from the U.S. They can get it from the Europeans, or they can produce something similar themselves. But when it comes to air defense, they are still very dependent on the United States. The European systems just aren't as good for intercepting ballistic missiles. And the reality is that there just isn't a lot of stock to give Ukraine. Does that mean that they'll get none?

Probably not. But does that mean that they're going to get, like, a lot? No, it's probably, like, in the dozens, like less than 100 for sure over the course of an entire winter. And if Russia's firing, you know, 50 ballistic missiles per attack and there's two attacks per week, like that lasts you one week. So I think that's where the shortage is really most severe and where I think Ukraine will feel it the most. Now, other countries will feel other things. Like Japan will feel the Tomahawks because they're waiting for U.S. Tomahawks, and the U.S. isn't going to sell them until they replenish the stockpile. So other countries maybe experience these effects in different ways. But for Ukraine, that's the biggest issue.

#Glenn

How much would be required? I mean, on the whole narrative of Ukraine turning the tide, I spoke to George Beebe, the former CIA director for Russia analysis, and he essentially dismissed the whole thing as NATO war propaganda, that there's no tide being turned at all. But how much does Russia actually lead or dominate on the battlefield in terms of what actually is required if one actually wanted to turn the tide?

#Jennifer Kavanagh

For Ukraine to turn the tide?

#Glenn

Yeah.

#Jennifer Kavanagh

I mean, I agree mostly with George that there's been no tide turned. I think the war feels different because Ukraine's long-range strike attacks have been quite effective at hitting high-profile targets and causing disruption inside of Russia. And people see that. But I think it's also true that every time Ukraine has any sort of success, it's amplified, and any positive news for Russia is dismissed or not covered. So in the West, the coverage is very skewed. But I think, like, what's, you know, the real story is sort of now what's happening. You know, I guess two things. First is that Russia still just has a significant advantage in the air domain because Ukraine doesn't have air defense, or that much air defense.

And Russia has the ability to produce hundreds of ballistic missiles. So that is a real deficit for Ukraine. And the only way they could counter that is to have hundreds of air defense missiles or some kind of very superhuman effective strategy for taking out missile launchers, or both. Now, those things are possible over the medium term, but probably not in the short term, which is when Ukraine needs them. And then they're sort of on the battlefield. And I guess, you know, Russia's gains have slowed down. They gained like maybe 25 percent as much territory this year as last year. But they're still gaining territory, and they are consolidating territory in key places. And at some point, you'll reach a tipping point in the sense that not necessarily that Ukraine's lines collapse.

I think that's less likely now that they've been able to use defenses like mines and expand the kill zone and use drones. So I don't worry about the lines collapsing anymore. But I do think that if Russia is able to consolidate its territorial gains a certain amount and get closer to it, it will have an advantage, and it will be quite easy for them to take, or easier for them to take, Kramatorsk and Sloviansk. And after that, they will have control of most of the fortress-bound cities. And that will make taking the rest of Donbas something that's achievable. Now, like, it's not achievable this year, but it's maybe not even in 2027, but it's achievable over, like, you know, maybe 18 months.

If Ukraine wants to be able to counter this, they need to be able to basically freeze the front line. Drones aren't going to do it. You need more personnel, and they don't have personnel. And this is one of the gaps, I think, in Fedorov's strategy, is that, yes, drones can do a lot, but they aren't the answer to everything. You can't fight this type of war and hold territory with a robot army. You actually need people. And so I think that's sort of the gap. So I guess this is why I say I see Ukraine's problems as sort of structural. You need more people, and you need some kind of collapse on the Russian side, which seems kind of unlikely because Russia could still mobilize again, in which case that would pose, like, really significant challenges for Ukraine.

And I guess the final point is that I think you see evidence in Russia's ability now to sort of stabilize this, like, mid-range area, stabilize their logistics, stabilize things in Crimea, as evidence that they're already adapting to some of the things that have made Ukraine successful. So this idea that Ukraine has turned the tide—maybe they've gotten momentum—but we already see Russia sort of adapting to it. And we've seen in this war the momentum shift back and forth, like, multiple times. So I would expect that it's not too long before the momentum shifts back in Russia's favor, which is why I think this sort of triumphant transition narrative is quite damaging.

#Glenn

Well, this is very common in war, though, that is to exaggerate the successes of your own side, or here the Ukrainian side, while ignoring the Russian successes. But we also saw the champagne corks being popped across European capitals when Ukraine was hitting all these Russian ships in the Sea of Azov and along the Black Sea coast. But then, of course, the Russian retaliation came and, well, essentially bombing all the ports all along the Black Sea coast. There's something on this scale they haven't done before, and effectively making Ukraine now a landlocked country if they continue along this path. How severe do you see this in terms of impacting, you know, the logistics? Because this is, you know, economic, it's military, you know, supply lines. How much do you think this might affect Ukraine?

#Jennifer Kavanagh

I mean, I think it could have a big economic impact. Like, if they're able to totally sort of blockade these ports, it will have an effect on logistics. It will cut them off from any sort of, like, sea commerce. It could affect their grain exports. So, I mean, I think it could have a big impact. Yeah. I guess we haven't seen, like, all that much news about the effect that it's having, other than that it's sort of cut off a lot of commerce in and out. But to me, it seems like a big deal. So I guess I'm still sort of, like, waiting to see what happens.

Now, Ukraine does have the advantage of, like, it's not its only—it has alternative routes, right? Like, it can use land routes. It survived, you know, periods of the war where it wasn't able to use the sea, right? So I think it has maybe a little bit of a buffer. But again, as we get, like, further into the fall and closer to the winter, I think it matters a lot more. So I do think it's a big deal. But I think I'm sort of, like, undecided on how big a deal because I haven't seen a lot of—like, still trying to suss out, like, what the effects are.

#Glenn

My last question was just on the diplomatic path, that is, in Ukraine, that is, the United States, after being, well, for good reasons, I guess, focused on the Iran war. It seems to be trying to, I guess, restart its own involvement in the diplomacy. At least you had that very brief 35-minute meeting between Rubio and Lavrov. But at the same time, you saw Marco Rubio making the point that we're not really mediators because we're on Ukraine's side. So the rhetoric has shifted quite a lot since at least early last year, when I think Marco Rubio said they would put pressure then on Musk to cut all ties, to cut Starlink off the Ukrainian army, to put pressure on Zelensky.

And, you know, Trump, of course, had that moment in the Oval Office where he scolded Zelensky: you know, "This is World War III. You're playing with—" I mean, it's very different rhetoric. So it looks like—I'm not sure if Trump bought into the idea that the tide has turned, or if he's just

genuinely impressed by what the Ukrainian army is doing. But either way, the U.S. seems to be now leaning more towards Kiev and, at the same time, also seemingly deepening or restarting some of the diplomatic efforts. How do you read this situation? Is it genuine? Is there any possible pathway? Because on top of the whole thing, the Russians seem to have looked towards the Iranian experience and now have even less faith in any diplomacy.

#Jennifer Kavanagh

Yeah. I mean, I wouldn't say that the Trump administration has shifted necessarily to be more pro-Kyiv. I think I agree, though, that the narrative has shifted. I think that that's true for a couple of reasons. I mean, I think... I think the administration is frustrated with the Russian side. They were hoping that they could get more concessions. They face a lot of pressure from Europe and from Congress to be sort of tough on Russia. And when they don't see sort of any flexibility in the Russian position, it makes it much harder to stand up to those voices. And I think there are influential people around the administration and in the administration who have decided that the best way to get a deal is to increase pressure. And I think that's why you see increased contacts between the U.S. and Ukraine, increased...

#Jennifer Kavanagh

Intelligence sharing, and then the progress of this sanctions bill—like, is this idea that if we can increase pressure, we can force Putin to be more conciliatory. There was a quote from an administration official in an article that said that they were hoping for, like, a more consistent Putin, which made no sense to me because I think Putin has been quite consistent in his position. But in any case, like, they're hoping to influence his calculus here. And I think that's sort of the approach they're taking right now. I think it is a little bit problematic to say that you're on Kiev's side and then try to serve as a mediator. Like, that's a problem.

It probably won't affect the U.S. acting as a mediator because there's really no one else to do it, especially because both Ukraine and Russia want things from the United States. So if the U.S. isn't involved, I see a deal as much less likely. I guess I'm not sure about how serious the effort toward diplomacy is. I mean, I think there is an effort to reset diplomacy. And I think you saw that from Rubio basically saying, like, you know, the Anchorage framework isn't going to work like this. Kyiv didn't like it, and we're starting over.

And that means that we are, like, starting from square one, and we have, like, no framework now to think about sort of like, what is the package or the proposal for ending the war? Since the Anchorage framework isn't going anywhere, maybe that's not a bad thing. But it is sort of like, we spent a year on this, and now we're back to where we were. I still think Witkoff and Kushner are quite distracted with Iran. It's going to be really difficult to find the diplomatic and political space in D.C. for a serious push for an end to the war in Ukraine while Iran is ongoing. And my assessment is that we're going to be in this cycle of, like, bombing, talks, bombing, talks, at least through the end

of the year, which means that kind of then we're in the winter, and Russia has no incentive to kind of negotiate until the winter is over.

You know, that said, I think that President Trump is still very serious about wanting peace. And I think there are lots of people in the administration who want the war in Ukraine to end for a lot of reasons. Not only because it's, like, a horrific war, but also because it's a drain on U.S. military stockpiles. Even if the U.S. isn't giving weapons away, they're still selling them. And there's a lot of other things they want to focus on, rebalancing posture in Europe. I think they hope for a better relationship with Russia. They just don't feel like they can move forward on it until the war ends. So I think there's still the appetite for diplomacy, and there's still, like, people who are behind the scenes, like, trying to get things in place for, like, a renewed push.

But I guess I'm still pessimistic that, like, the fall is when that push is going to happen. And I mean, I personally think that's unfortunate. I think it would be better if the war ended sooner for everyone rather than continuing on. But yeah. At least for right now, the administration's approach seems to be pressure, like, put things in place for diplomacy, but not all that much progress towards real talks. And I think the U.S. is going to have to be the one to make the move. Like, it's not going to be the Russian side coming and saying, "Let's have a trilateral meeting." It has to be the U.S. side that pushes and gets everyone to the table. So I think everyone's kind of just waiting for the right moment and the right framework to push this forward.

#Glenn

Sorry, let me ask you one last question. How is the strategy of just, let's put some more pressure on Russia, and then they will make more concessions? To what extent could this backfire, though? Because, you know, if I were Russian, or sitting in the Kremlin, and I'm watching NATO countries deepen their involvement in this war, for example, in the form of assisting deep strikes inside Russia, I would perhaps reach the conclusion that we would require more Ukrainian territories as buffers, or at least to make sure they won't fall into the hands of NATO in the future, or at least make a big enough mess in Ukraine so it can't be a reliable, you know, frontline state against Russia in the future.

I mean, I guess, yeah, that escalation, can it not push the Russians the other way? That now it's, well, essentially, we'll need to harden its position because—and also, on another—if you're a Russian and you think that NATO is fighting with Ukrainians, I would think the best—why would you? You would have to increase your demands over time. Otherwise, if the NATO countries and Ukraine can get the same deal in six months as they get today, then where's the incentive for NATO to strike a deal today? So essentially, you have to—I guess a consistent thing in Russia is that they will consistently change the deal in terms of hardening its position over time. Because if they're softening their position, they're only incentivizing NATO to essentially prolong a war where they don't have that much skin in the game.

#Jennifer Kavanagh

Yeah, I mean, I think we already kind of see that. I think we already see the Russian side being disillusioned with the idea of a deal, thinking that the United States can't deliver the deal they were hoping for and isn't going to cut off aid to Ukraine and instead is increasing aid to Ukraine. And that fuels this narrative that this is a war against NATO, which hardens the position and gets more support for the war. Because the war in Ukraine might not be that, you know, that motivating. But a war against NATO, like, you know, that's sort of like this historic battle between the West and Russia. So, you know, I think it's kind of counterproductive.

I think it also, you know, if you look historically at how Russia has responded to cases where it feels pushed into a corner, it's usually by escalation, not by making concessions. And so then the question is, does this raise the risk of sort of Russian hybrid activity in Europe or increased attacks on Ukraine? I think it does sort of harden the demands, makes it seem like there's no point in negotiating because you're not going to get a deal that's acceptable. I also think the increasing integration of Europe and Ukraine, and even NATO and Ukraine, creates a challenge for what the deal would look like.

You know, if Ukraine becomes too closely tied into NATO, is even saying Ukraine won't be in NATO enough? If it's sort of, like, de facto integrated into NATO's planning and intelligence and all of that, I think it complicates, like, the outcome. So I think there are a lot of ways in which this, like, pressure-Russia strategy actually backfires against a deal, because it suggests the West isn't really serious about diplomacy and has a whole range of other second-order effects that are quite negative, not to mention, like, the sanctions and tariffs bill. You know, we in the United States, for the past 18 months, we've been talking about how tariffs are paid by American people and tariffs are bad.

And now Congress is passing a bill that allows the president to tariff more. It seems like now the American people are going to be paying. It's not punishing Russia. It's punishing the American people. So it's just all these contradictory narratives. I think that this conflict is widening, like, geographically a little bit, but in terms of, like, how it's bleeding out into other aspects of economic warfare and intelligence sharing, I think that is definitely happening in ways that are counterproductive to peace and stability after the war ends.

#Glenn

Yeah, because I saw all the Europeans, if I'm not mistaken, want to assist Ukraine in developing this air defense system, the Freya. And this would link Ukrainian military closer to the Europeans. Now, the European thought, I think, is, oh, this will mount more pressure on Russia. But, you know, the other side of that coin, it links Ukraine closer to NATO countries, which makes peace even more difficult because the overarching objective is, of course, to restore Ukraine's neutrality. So it just seems like a lot of the intentions might be based on flawed assumptions.

#Jennifer Kavanagh

Well, I mean, it's worse than that. The Ukrainian air defense system is built to link into NATO's Link 16 architecture. Like, it's built to link into NATO and European satellites. Yeah, it's even worse than just integrating the technologies. So I think it's quite dangerous. It's an interesting platform, but it's quite dangerous from the perspective of, like, me sitting in the United States wanting to limit long-term ties to Ukraine.

#Glenn

Yeah, no, it's—I'm surprised there's not more discussion about this, about what some of these policies are doing, how they can backfire. Anyways, do you have anywhere people can find you or follow your work?

#Jennifer Kavanagh

Yeah, I mean, I'm on Twitter at—or X, I guess is what it's called—@J.E. Kavanaugh. And you can find me on my company's website, which is www.defensepriorities.org.

#Glenn

Well, thank you so much for taking the time out.

#Jennifer Kavanagh

Thank you.