

George Beebe: The Peace Plan with Russia the West Ignores

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#Glenn

Welcome back. Today we have the great privilege of being joined by George Beebe, former director for Russia analysis at the CIA, and now the director of grand strategy at the Quincy Institute. So thank you for coming back on.

#George Beebe

Thanks for having me.

#Glenn

Well, in response to the inability to find a peaceful settlement in Ukraine, you recently quoted Eisenhower saying that, well, if a problem cannot be solved, enlarge it. In this term, you do not refer to escalation, but enlarging it in terms of, I assume, taking a step back and addressing the larger picture. I was wondering if you could flesh out what you mean and how this applies to the Ukraine war.

#George Beebe

Yeah, well, you know, you'll recall a few weeks ago, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, in talking to the press, said, you know, the peace process, the U.S. mediation effort between Russia and Ukraine, has really stalled, and we're in need of some new ideas. The things that were discussed at the Anchorage summit are essentially failures because the Ukrainians wouldn't agree to it. And so he said, "We're looking for new opportunities to reinvigorate this process. We're looking for new ideas, and stay tuned." Well, my proposal here is that they need to think about enlarging this peace process, not escalating the conflict, which there are many people in Washington and in Europe that are more than willing to do.

But understanding that this is not just a bilateral conflict between Russia and Ukraine over territory and other things that are bilateral matters between those two countries. It is, I think, first and foremost, a broader geopolitical conflict between Russia and the West that has actually been going on since the very, very early days after the fall of the Berlin Wall. And it's over what the parameters of European security are going to look like. What are the foundations for European security? And in particular, what is Russia's role in Europe? And that's something that the West and Russia have disagreed on in profound ways.

And I think if we're going to find a way out of the bilateral conflict that's being waged between Russia and Ukraine, we have to zoom out and say, what about this broader conflict between Russia and the West over European security? That's not something that's going to be settled on the battlefield in Ukraine. The Russians, theoretically, could capture all of Ukrainian territory; they'd still be left with that bigger problem, facing a NATO that has actually doubled its membership since the fall of the Berlin Wall, with a lot more territory, a lot more border with Russia, and a Europe that is rearming and very, very hostile toward Russia.

That's a problem for the Russians, and they can't solve that problem just by defeating the Ukrainian army. So what's the incentive for the Russians to engage with the West on some new ideas? I think the incentive is: let's talk to the Russians about European security. They've been asking us to do this for decades, 30 years, and we've been quite reluctant to do so. They've actually put draft treaties on the table and said, "Let's talk." And we've said, "Well, no thanks." So, you know, if you want to reinvigorate this process, I think the United States ought to say to Russia, you know, "This is an issue we have to talk about. Let's start doing it."

#George Beebe

And I think that...

#George Beebe

may cause the Russians to think about the bilateral conflict with Ukraine in a different context and open perhaps some new possibilities.

#Glenn

Yeah, well, I saw also Marco Rubio making the point that, well, if you do longer-range strikes deep inside Russia—or we, I mean Ukraine, but, well, at the same time, it's Western weapons. And according to Politico, there's deepening intelligence now between the US and Ukraine, so it is our strikes in this regard as well. But anyways, that long-range strikes would make Russia more flexible, right, reduce some of its demands. But this is premised on the assumption that Russia—the war is about Russian opportunism. That is, let's expand our empire. Let's see how much territory we can get. If this is the case, then yeah, sure, they will have more room for negotiation.

But if this is about the European security architecture and the Russians genuinely see this as an existential threat, there's not much more to give. That is, the long-range strike isn't going to change the Russian calculation. They might be willing to have to prepare to sacrifice more, but at the end of the day, they must reach their war objectives. But this is what's strange to me, because we never discuss actually what is peace. And if we discuss peace, it's only what Ukraine wants. That is, they need a deterrent, they need security guarantees, all of which is reasonable. I mean, they do face an existential threat as well. So I understand why this has to be part of the conversation.

But by not discussing the Russian aspect, we seem to miss a big part. But what does the European security architecture entail, though? I mean, again, this is the main issue to be resolved. This is the main concern for the Russians. And you can add, it's a disaster for all. Europe divided at war is horrible for Europe. It's not great for Russian security, even for the Americans. I mean, they see this will push the Russians closer to China. So, and of course, the risk of nuclear war—you know, there's so many layers to why this is a horrible idea. But what has to be done with the European security architecture? What is, I guess, the solution here?

#George Beebe

Well, I was laughing as you were describing the reasoning that's been going on in the West about the potential impact of escalation against Russia. And I remember when President Trump was meeting with Ukrainian President Zelensky in the White House just a few weeks ago, he said, "Yeah, what's going on here is an escalation." But then he said, "And we're hoping this is an escalation that will lead to peace." In other words, the rationale in the West is escalate to de-escalate. And I think it followed exactly the logic that you just laid out here, that this is largely a bilateral conflict.

If you increase the pain level on the Russians, they calculate, well, you know, it's not really worth it to us to continue this war. Let's find a way to make peace. But in fact, you know, if you zoom out and you acknowledge where the Russians actually see this as a bigger geopolitical conflict over Europe and over the relationship between the West and Russia, then that kind of escalation only reinforces Russia's conviction that that's exactly what's going on here, that this is not a bilateral conflict with Ukraine. It's a conflict with the West that's using Ukraine as a proxy to weaken Russia. So it exacerbates the sense of existential threat in Russia.

Now, I think that's a dangerous thing in and of itself. But if you're going to break that cycle of escalation and further counter-escalation, which is in fact what's going on, the Russians have responded to these long-range Ukrainian drone attacks by escalating their own strategic air campaign against Ukraine and then closing the port of Odessa, which, as you have had several guests acknowledge, is devastating for Ukraine's future. If you're going to break out of that, I think you've got to sit down with the Russians and say, let's talk about what Europe's security architecture ought to look like. What's in our mutual interest?

Now, what the Russians have argued for many, many years is that there is a principle that we first discussed during the Helsinki negotiations way back in the Cold War. That was codified in the Helsinki Final Act. Then it was explicitly reaffirmed by the Paris Charter for a New Europe back in the early 1990s. And that was the principle of indivisibility of security. And it's really a simple concept. It basically acknowledges the security dilemma that international relations theory talks about: that one side in a particular relationship can advance its own security interests in a way that threatens the security of another side.

So, to minimize the potential for that kind of security dilemma to spark an escalatory spiral, you've got to acknowledge that other sides have security concerns that you've got to take into account when you're trying to enhance your own security. That we can't be secure in the West if Russia is fundamentally insecure, and vice versa. Now, what's interesting about Russia's pleas, really, to talk about this principle and to find ways to operationalize it is that we've not been willing to do that. The Russians put a treaty down back when Dmitry Medvedev was president, back during the Obama era, that basically said a European security treaty ought to have as one of its primary foundations this principle of indivisibility of security.

And then when Putin and the Russian government put two more draft treaties in front of the United States and NATO in late 2021, prior to the invasion of Ukraine, that principle was also highlighted in what they put on the table. Now, to me, this is the heart of a diplomatic process. It has to be a central focus of discussions between the United States and Russia over our mutual concerns in Europe. And that's: how do you balance principles that are in conflict with one another? And the principles that are in the Helsinki Final Act, the principles that are in the Charter of Paris, they are inherently in tension with one another. If you apply any one of them absolutely, you undermine other principles that are also important. So you have to find a balance between them.

The principle of territorial integrity is in tension with the principle of self-determination of peoples. So how do you reconcile these tensions? To me, that's what diplomacy is about. And so what I would argue is, what do we talk about with the Russians? The first thing we ought to talk about is we recognize explicitly that these tensions between these principles are things we have to be discussing, and we have to find pragmatic balances among them. Now, that's a very different approach than what the United States has taken. What we've basically said is, the principle of territorial integrity, it's absolutely sacred. Can't violate it in any way. It's almost absolute. The principle that states get to choose their own military alliance, absolute. You can't violate that in any way. And the Russians have been arguing, you know, hey, wait a minute.

We also have to balance those principles against this question of indivisibility of security. And simply acknowledging that and saying to the Russians, we've got to talk about how to reconcile these tensions, would be, I think, a sea change in how the U.S. has approached this. And that by itself might help a lot in moving from what Churchill referred to as war-war into jaw-jaw, you know, talking, which would be far better for everybody involved, I think. Now, the other thing that I think, when you get specific about what Europe ought to look like, we're going to have to acknowledge [is]

that European security can't be NATO-centric. NATO can't be the pan-European security organization, and it can't be for a very fundamental reason.

Russia is not a part of it, and Russia believes that a pan-European NATO is fundamentally a security threat to Russia, that it violates this indivisibility of security issue. So we're going to have to say to the Russians, we need to find some understanding that, yes, preserves the NATO alliance. I think the United States has not reached the point where we're comfortable dissolving that alliance, but also takes into account Russian concerns and finds a mechanism for Russia to have a voice in European security that does not get funneled through NATO, which is the arrangement that we had proposed for much of the post-Cold War period, where we were saying to the Russians, yeah, you can have a voice.

You can have a voice through the NATO-Russia Council. And what that enables you to do is talk to us about how you think about decisions that NATO has taken. But, by the way, you can't change those decisions. Those decisions are our sovereign right. We're going to make those decisions. We'll tell you about them. We can discuss them, but you can't change them. And the Russians essentially said, "Yeah, no, that's not our vision of what the European security order ought to look like." So we're going to need to find some new mechanism, and that's going to have to be a subject of discussion.

But my guess is we're going to need some sort of relatively small equivalent of the Security Council in the United Nations that would apply to Europe, in which the Russians would have a seat and a voice, and would be that mechanism that would enable an ongoing discussion about how to balance these principles in practical ways. And I think that's an issue that we ought to start talking to the Russians about now. It will be a long discussion. You can't resolve these things quickly. It will take years. But beginning that discussion and laying out, essentially, some principles that you think ought to govern these discussions, I think, would go a long way toward changing the context in which the Ukraine war is now being fought.

#Glenn

But it's not as if we have to start from scratch, though. As you said, how to organize relations between the East and the West—the foundational structure was laid at the Helsinki Accords in 1975. And indeed, this was, you know, this laid the foundations for Gorbachev's vision of this common European home. As you said also, the Helsinki Accords laid the foundation for the Charter of Paris for a New Europe in 1990. This is how to have a common Europe. And again, the OSCE establishment in 1994, also all on the principles of indivisible security, how to avoid the dividing lines. One side should not enhance its security at the expense of others. Sovereign equality.

I mean, a lot of these key issues were discussed for decades. And then, in the words of William Perry, in the 1990s he considered quitting because he was opposed to NATO expansion. But he was making the point that other people in the administration realized this was a mistake—no, not a

mistake, but they would alienate the Russians and be seen as a threat. However, because Russia was weak, it doesn't really matter. We're no longer doing great power or managing great power competition. They're not a great power. They were seen as a declining third-rate power, so it doesn't matter anymore. But as Perry argued, as well as George Kennan, one day the Russians will rebuild their strength, and they're not weak anymore.

But it's just, I wonder, how can we go back then? We can't just skip the last three decades, go back to the '90s and pick up the book again and go, okay, let's look at indivisible security because, well, you know, we human beings, we're people, we're not so pragmatic. And I was just wondering, what is the pathway here? Because you mentioned this concept: do you have territorial integrity or do you have self-determination? These are competing perspectives, ideas. Well, in the hegemonic era, we had the luxury. We didn't have to discuss these things with the Russians. We could pick and choose. So in Kosovo, we'll go with self-determination.

And with Crimea, we'll go with territorial integrity. So, you know, we can pick and choose. But what you're talking about is essentially rediscovering diplomacy then. But that goes against liberal hegemony as well, because the whole idea is—you know, liberalism has to be elevated above, you know, these issues of sovereignty. So, for example, democracy promotion is necessary by our NGOs, of course. And suddenly, you will, you know, all the things we've been talking about building the past three decades, putting a question mark behind all of it and going back to the '90s. It's going to be very difficult. So on one hand, we have a formula, but it has to be updated, it seems.

#George Beebe

Well, yeah, I think that's true. But I think we're not going back in time. What we're doing is returning to principles. And those principles are actually enduring principles. International relations was not invented in the past century. The relations between nations and sovereign states go back many, many, many centuries. And the principles that apply are—there's nothing new under the sun, really, when it comes to how these nations interact and the principles that apply. So, are we rediscovering diplomacy? Do we need to rediscover diplomacy? Yes, we do. Absolutely. Now, why? Why? Because that liberal hegemony that you described, something that we were pursuing for the bulk of the post-Cold War period, failed.

It held out a vision that was not achieved and is not realizable. And I think we have to acknowledge that it is not possible for European security to be NATO-centric, to be run by the United States and its allies, with Russia on the other side more or less acquiescing passively to this situation. The question of whether Russia will acquiesce willingly or unwillingly to this NATO domination of Europe has been answered. And the answer is a resounding no. Russia has shown it will go to war to prevent this. It did so in 2008 in Georgia. It did again in Ukraine, first in 2014, again in 2022. So we know the answer to whether Russia will go to war to prevent this.

#Glenn

And I also think American interests have changed in very profound ways.

#George Beebe

We're not in a unipolar world anymore. The world that was created with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union is over. The United States faces a peer rival in China, and many other formidable great powers and middle powers that have a lot more freedom of maneuver in the world today than they did in the early 1990s.

#Glenn

And that means the United States needs to approach the world with a different strategy.

#George Beebe

It is profoundly counterproductive for the United States to undertake policies that actually encourage a close security partnership between China, Russia, and Iran. This was something that former U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski warned explicitly about in his book, *The Grand Chessboard*. He said that development, a Russia-China-Iran alliance, is the worst possible strategic outcome that the United States could face. And yet, I think it's almost inarguable at this point that the United States has taken steps over the past several decades to make that kind of close entente among these countries even more likely. Now, that makes no strategic sense. I think everybody should understand that. So that, in turn, means we have an interest.

The United States has an interest strategically in not driving Russia toward China, in not encouraging Russia and China to partner with Iran against our interests. And that has to start with Europe. I think it has to start with addressing what Russia believes is its biggest security threat. That is in Europe. That's a threat that is very much related to the war that's going on in Ukraine right now. And I think the United States needs to recognize that strategically it's not in our interest to pursue the kind of liberal hegemonic policies that we pursued in the post-Cold War period that both failed to achieve their goals but actually proved counterproductive to the strategic interests that the United States faces in an increasingly multipolar world.

#Glenn

Well, Brzezinski is very famous for *The Grand Chessboard*, but he also wrote, I think it was in 2012, a book called, I think it was, *The Choice*, where he outlined kind of that, you know, as the unipolar moment was going away, he was arguing the U.S. has two paths. One, you can, well, seek to facilitate a new multipolar world where the U.S. is essentially the first among equals, or has a very privileged position, at least—a multipolar world which the U.S. would still be in a position to shape—or it could hold on to the unipolar moment, but then the rising powers would then likely create a multipolar system in opposition to the U.S. So he was kind of making the point that we should go

with the former. But yeah, that argument is less referenced, probably for these reasons, that they don't want to give up the unipolar moment.

But I will withdraw my comment. You have a good point. There's no need to go back in time. Indeed, a lot of what was done in '75 in Helsinki originates from 1648 in Westphalia. So we do have a formula. So I'll take that one. But otherwise, yeah, it's a good idea to step back, because I think: which country does Kherson belong to? Is it Ukraine, Russia? How big should the Russian buffer be in Kharkov and Sumy? I mean, the security guarantees for Ukraine—it all seems like minor, very zero-sum ideas, but symptoms of the larger problem of a collapsing pan-European security architecture.

If you could fix that, essentially everyone would benefit. But do you see something similar with Iran? Because, you know, if we take that a step back there as well, you know, if the problem can't be solved, enlarge it. What is the problem with Iran? Because it's a bit similar with the Russians. We don't talk that much about their security concerns. Again, we tend to dismiss it as being, you know, irrational hatred by radical mullahs. You know, but what is the problem here? I mean...

#George Beebe

Well, yes. Obviously, Iran has very serious security concerns. The United States and Israel actually attacked Iran, decapitated its leadership essentially, and quite explicitly sought some new regime there. It doesn't get much more existential from the Iranian point of view than that. Now, what's the solution? I would argue that we ought to think about the Helsinki process in a different way as it relates to Iran. Now, one of the things that happened during Helsinki was we discussed putting in place, codifying the borders of post-World War II Europe. And that's something that the Soviet leadership was very concerned about.

They wanted essentially de facto recognition on the part of the West that their control over Poland and Czechoslovakia and East Germany was more or less permanent. We weren't going to come right out and say it was legitimate and forever. But what Helsinki allowed us to do was to essentially de facto recognize that these borders weren't going to change, at least not by force. And the Soviets at the time said, "Great, big win." They pocketed that. And then the other parts of the Helsinki process, the so-called human dimension of Helsinki, they wrote that off as principles that didn't really matter: respect for human rights and that sort of thing.

But what in fact happened over the years was a lot of people in the Eastern Bloc, as we called it then, took the principles that the Soviets signed up to under Helsinki seriously. And they started holding their own governments accountable, saying, "Wait a minute, you signed up to this. Why aren't we doing this?" And that actually became a significant political movement, and in fact, I think, contributed to the ultimate breakup of the Warsaw Pact and dissolution of the Soviet Union in ways that the Soviet leadership didn't anticipate at all in 1975. Now, what does this have to do with Iran?

I think one of the best things that the United States could do for the Iranian people is—and one of the worst things for the Iranian theocracy would be—to initiate a diplomatic opening between the United States and Iran, a restoration of normal diplomatic relations. Now, why is that? Well, for one thing, up until fairly recently, when the United States and Israel actually attacked Iran, a lot of Iranians at the popular level, like Americans, have relatively positive views of American society, number one. So they would welcome this sort of opening. Number two, what this sort of opening would do is deprive the Iranians of a clear enemy. This is something that one of Gorbachev's advisors told us back during the end of the Cold War.

He said, "We're going to do a terrible thing to you. We're going to take away your enemy." And that proved quite prophetic and a lot more significant for the United States than I think anybody realized at the time. But if the theocracy in Iran loses that American Great Satan as an enemy in the aftermath of restored diplomatic relations, it's going to have to govern in a different way. The expectations of the Iranian people will start to change. They will start to elevate. And I think that will be a good thing for at least evolutionary change in Iran, if not something more sudden. Now, is anyone in Washington thinking about doing something like that and what that would mean? I don't know the answer to that.

But I think lifting or easing economic sanctions and beginning a process of restoring normal diplomatic relations between the United States and Iran would be profoundly in America's interest. It would be good for the region. It would help us think about this question of opening the Strait of Hormuz and getting some assurances that the Iranians are not going to develop a nuclear weapon in a different context. So it's a different way of enlarging the problem, which we talked about in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war. But I think it would perhaps open up some possibilities for resolving some very difficult issues between the United States and Iran and actually changing the strategic direction of the broader Middle East in, I think, positive ways.

#Glenn

But at the end of the Cold War, though, just as the last question, Gorbachev, he did caution his American counterparts about all the consequences of what they want to do. That is, if peace breaks out, if we are successful, there's going to be a lot of shifts. Both sides will lose a lot of power because the power of the Soviets and the Americans was premised to a large extent on them leading this bloc confrontation. So if the bloc politics comes to an end, both the Soviets and the Americans would lose a lot of power.

And again, as Gorbachev said, if peace breaks out, a lot of our hawks on both sides will push back because, you know, people like power. It's quite reasonable. But would this be a problem, though, in the Middle East? Because if, let's say, there's a new security architecture, let's bring the Iranians on the inside, security with them instead of security against them. Wouldn't that also diminish a huge portion of the U.S. influence over the Gulf states? And given the petrodollar, all these economic interests of the United States in the region, how feasible is it to walk away from the alliance system?

#George Beebe

Well, I think the alliance system is going to walk away from us the way it's actually going. I think one of the things this conflict has driven home is that U.S. military bases in that region are quite vulnerable to attack. And those bases have not brought security to our regional partners. In fact, they've brought insecurity. They've turned the UAE and Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain into targets because of the presence of U.S. military bases there. So that's going to have to change, I think. There's no question that that's going to have to change. So, you know, the notion that we shouldn't normalize relations with Iran because that will undermine the foundations of our alliance relationship in the region—my reaction is, hey, those foundations are already looking a lot more like sand than concrete. So we ought to be thinking about some sort of fundamental change there.

#Glenn

Yeah. No, there is—well, again, with the shifting distribution of power, one can't just have policies based on what one would like to see. One does have to adjust to reality. And I guess, yes, one of the great challenges of our time. Well, anyways, thank you very much for your time, unless you have any final thoughts.

#George Beebe

No, that's great. Always a pleasure talking to you.

#Glenn

Likewise. Thanks again.

#George Beebe

Okay, thank you.