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QI Panel:

Does Peace Have a Chance in Ukraine?

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Kelley Beaucar Vlahos

Hello, everybody, and welcome to the Quincy Institute for Responsible statecraft. We got a big audience moving into the room, so to speak for today's program, so I'm going to let a couple more in and then begin. Okay. Thank you so much for joining us. My name is Kelley Vlahos, and I am the editorial director of the Quincy Institute's Foreign Policy magazine, Responsible Statecraft. I am honored today to be moderating this important panel: Does Peace Have a Chance in Ukraine? I think you will all agree that this is much more than a tongue in cheek question with a John Lennon twist. After deteriorating conditions on the ground for Ukraine in the first half of 2024, this is the most serious query of the day. How long can Ukraine hold out militarily and economically? And is it in the best position right now to start negotiating, or, as others in Washington have proposed? Does Ukraine have to get into a better battlefield position before it can think about talking? What about Russia? Despite the Kremlin's declarations about being ready to talk? What incentive do they have right now to go there? And is the US in coordination with other Western countries ready to start encouraging Kyiv and Moscow in this direction? Or are they holding out for some perceived turnaround on the battlefield?

We have an all star panel today that is well equipped to shed light on these important questions. I'll be it with varying opinions on where we are now and whether negotiations are even a realistic prospect. So before we get into that, I hope what which I hope to be a rich 55 minute discussion with the chance for audience q&a. Let me formally introduce the panel. Liana Fix is a fellow for Europe at the Council on Foreign Relations. She is a historian and political scientist with expertise in German and European foreign and security policy, European security, transatlantic relations, Russia, Eastern Europe. She is also the author of a new German power Germany's role in European Russian policy that was published in 2021. Dr. Fix's work focuses on German domestic and foreign policy, the European Union transatlantic relations and Europe's relations with Russia and China. Samuel Charap is the Distinguished Chair in Russia and Eurasia policy at the RAND Corporation. His research interests include the foreign policies of Russia, and the former Soviet states European and Eurasian regional security, and US Russia deterrence, strategic stability and arms control from November 2012 to April 2017. Charap was the senior fellow for Russia and Eurasia at the International Institute for Strategic Studies. George Beebe, last but not least, is my colleague and director of the grand strategy program at the Quincy Institute. He spent more than two decades in government as an intelligence analyst, diplomat and policy adviser, including director of the CIA's Russia analysis, and staff advisor on Russia matters to Vice President Dick Cheney, his book, The Russia Trap, How our Shadow War with Russia Could Spiral Into Nuclear Catastrophe, published in 2019, warned how the US and Russia could stumble into a dangerous military confrontation. So I'd love to I love to welcome

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our esteemed panelists to the discussion today. I'm really looking forward to this. And just as a reminder, to our audience, if you have questions for the program today, please put them in the q&a at the bottom of the screen. And I'm going to try to get to as many as I can as they fit into the discussion we're having, which will close out and a little less than an hour. So George, I'd like to start with you to sort of set table if you will. Can you talk a bit about what the battlefield conditions look like today on the ground in Ukraine, whether they have improved through Ukraine since the first of the year. And most importantly, whether you think the infusion of new aid that was just passed by Congress, expected to be signed by the President today will change anything, to change the conditions and trajectory of the war.

George Beebe 5:29

Well, thanks, Kelley, I think we could spend the entire panel talking just about battlefield conditions and trends that we're seeing right now. But I'll briefly summarize this by saying that momentum in the war right now is on Russia's side. The Russians have corrected many of the problems that beset their approach to the war. Earlier after the invasion, they've succeeded in turning this into a war of attrition. I think that's one that maximizes the advantages that Russia has and population and sheer military manufacturing wherewithal, and is aimed at over time exhausting Ukraine's reserves of men and weapons, and exhausting the West's patience for continuing to support Ukraine. The Russians have not made an enormous effort to take a lot of territory on the map. We haven't seen big changes in the frontlines over, you know, over the last more than a year, actually. But Russia has succeeded in making significant advances in exhausting Ukraine's manpower, using up its supplies of air defense missiles, and taking advantage of its greater stores of artillery ammunition and manufacturing capability. The question really now is, will the momentum continue to stay on Russia side? Or can this new aid package, buy some time for Ukraine and for the west, to regroup, to to hold off Russian advances while Ukraine builds up its manpower again. And the West ramps up its military manufacturing capability, so that Ukraine can take another go with the Russians on the offensive? Sometime in 2025? or beyond? And that's really an unknown question. And we also don't know what the Russians are going to do in the interim? Are they going to continue to focus on this slow war of attrition? Or will they launch some sort of big arrow offensive, in an effort to break through Ukrainian lines and wrap this world up more quickly, before the West can really ramp up its own support for the Ukrainians? Those are big unknowns right now.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 8:11

And the aid specifically, do you see that in the short term, giving Ukraine, the shot in the arm so to speak, that it needs to change the momentum?

George Beebe 8:25

Well, I'm not sure that the the aid in the volumes that we're talking about, and the timeframes within which it's likely to be provided, is going to make a dramatic difference in Ukraine's fortunes can slow Russia, this momentum possibly can lead to victory, certainly not anytime

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soon. And it's a big unknown whether it will buy enough of a breathing spell that Ukraine can take another run at driving the Russians back sometime in the future. The other big unknown is can the West sustain this kind of aid for a long time to come? You know, \$61 billion, of which 14 billion is for new procurement of weapons for Ukraine doesn't take you very far down the road, they're going to have to be many more large infusions of aid to the Ukrainians for a long time to come for that sort of, you know, hold and rebuild strategy to work. And frankly, the controversies that we saw on Congress over this package, and the trends that you're seeing in American public opinion over time, suggests to me that the viability of large long term largesse from the west to Ukraine is very much in question.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 9:47

Thank you. Liana, I know last year you had published an article for foreign affairs with Michael Kimmage, in which you said that Ukrainians should accept and prepare for a multi year war and a long time or a long term commitment of Russia, instead of hoping for either a quick Ukrainian triumph, or absent that and imminent negotiated solution. Can you talk a little bit about that aid that was passed last night? And it's expected to be signed by the President today? Do you? Do you think that that will help in this long struggle? And what do you think about George's assessment of the battlefield conditions today? Are they as dire or do you see an opening for Ukraine with this aid? And, you know, in the long term?

Liana Fix 10:51

Yeah. So the aid that has just been passed in Congress is obviously absolutely essential. I mean, there's just no way around the United States continuing its military commitment to Ukraine, because Europeans need to build up their own defense industry to be able in any way to replace the kind of military commitment that the United States makes to Ukraine. And they are not there at that point. So what the Europeans are doing is they do support militarily, but primarily financially. But the US military commitment here is absolutely central. It is also essential, because the lack of Western support, and the dying down of ammunition supplies to Ukraine are one of the ways that was the main reasons for why she was slow advanced in Ukraine. In the last weeks and months. Of course, you can also have mobilization problems, that that just passed a new law to reform mobilization in Ukraine, they need additional manpower. But with this package, there's definitely a very real chance for Ukraine not only to solidify those lines, but also to solidify the its manpower problem this year, and to have the potential to make of and to go on the offensive last year, I think we do have to move away from this idea that there will be one big victory, either for Russia or for Ukraine as my document and I argued that Battlefield victory is not necessarily the framework that is really helpful to think about this war, we need to think about what does victory mean in political terms for Ukraine, and in political terms, it means that Ukraine will have a future in the West, both of the European Union and NATO, and that is a future outcome, which can and probably will, at some point, be part of negotiations with Russia, but to to have these negotiations on Ukrainian terms. The military aid will be necessary, not only for this year, but probably for the next year and the year after, why can we expect any Washington concessions this year? Obviously, because of the US

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presidential elections, there's just no way from Russia's perspective why it would make sense to make any concessions even if the aid package has passed, and we see quite a few as response from Moscow to the passing of the aid package. So it does hurt that this aid package is kind of going to Ukraine. But it is very unlikely that there will be any willingness on Russia's side to move before the US elections. And so far the question who sort of does peace have a chance and Ukraine also invites the question, who does who does not give peace a chance in Ukraine. And the Kremlin has tried to advance the narrative that it is the West that does not want peace in Ukraine, that has pushed Ukraine into abandoning negotiations. Sam has more detail about the Istanbul talks? This is a narrative which is obviously tries to camouflage Russia's real interests, which have not changed since the beginning of the war to get Ukraine and its political control and to define the future of Ukraine as part of Russia. And if we take these Russian interests in as the baseline, that has not changed, then it is very difficult to imagine how this war can end in the near term, because the West has leverage to force Ukraine to a lot of things because it is so dependent on Western support. But the West does not have a lot of leverage to force Russia into compliance with anything. And this level, which can only be created through military strength or through economic sanctions. That would be the other options, economic sanctions, for instance, on Washington oil. But apart from that, we've seen in the past that getting Russia to an agreement that it actually complies with it's incredibly difficult and that is why I do see the course of the war continuing along the path that we see now for at least this year, probably next year, too.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 14:52

I think we're gonna get more into that later because I'm sure particularly George probably has a Uh, a little bit of disagreement with that. But I wanted to go on to Sam. Because Liana you brought up the Istanbul talks and Sam's recent article that just really hit like a bomb in Washington. He byline co bylined it with Sergey Radchenko. It was in Foreign Affairs entitled The Talks That Could Have Ended the War, the article gives more detail to the 2022 talks between Russia and Ukraine than than we've ever seen before. So kudos Sam for that fantastic reporting. In it in that article, you write a final reason the talks failed at that time, is that the negotiators put the cart of a postwar security order before the horse of ending the war. The two sides skipped over essential matters of conflict management and migration, the creation of humanitarian corridors a ceasefire troop withdrawals and instead tried to craft something like a long term peace treaty that would resolve security disputes that had been the source of geopolitical tensions for decades. It was an admirably ambitious effort, but it proved to be an ambitious. To be fair, Russia Ukraine in the West had tried it the other way around in the Minsk agreement signed in 2014, following Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of Donbas covered minutiae, and it did cover minutiae just as the date and time of the secession of hostilities in which weapons systems should be withdrawn at what distance both sides core security concerns were addressed. Indirectly, if at all. You say the history suggests that future talks should move forward on parallel tracks, with the practicalities of ending the war being addressed on one track, while broader issues are covered in another. So a lot to unpack there, especially in against the backdrop of what Liana was just raising. I think our audience first and foremost, would love to hear whether you think that scenario of talks running on parallel tracks

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would work today. And maybe you could give us a little context of how you first how you perceive these parallel tracks and why the 2022 setup didn't work because it was absent those parallel tracks.

Samuel Charap 17:27

Thanks, Kelley. I think if we take as a premise that this conflict this war is, at least in part, it's useful to think about it as a nested one. In other words, there are multiple levels of conflict here. Clearly, there's the most direct conflict and the two belligerence the Russia Ukraine level, but there are broader issues at stake. And broader, a broader Russia West dynamic and a broader European security dynamic that is layered on top of that, purely bilateral Russia Ukraine conflict. And in that context, looking back on the Istanbul talks, which ended up focusing on the content of a potential treaty on Ukraine's permanent neutrality and security guarantees, we you know, without addressing any of the sort of practicalities of the ending of the war, it seemed in retrospect, that, you know, it was a lot to go from being in the midst of a brutal conflict where you had Russian forces, you know, not too far from the outskirts of Kyiv, to a, you know, big sort of set of political arrangements that would have addressed these thorny issues that had been dividing, you know, not only Russia and Ukraine, but Russia and the West more broadly, for decades, really, you know, without any of these sort of interim steps. As you mentioned, we referenced the the Minsk agreements for 2014 and 2015, which sort of had the the opposite problem that they were very focused on the minutiae of conflict management and not on the broader disputes. And, you know, I think we now have a record that suggests that exclusively focusing on one level and not on the other, we have a good reason to suspect that it won't lead very far. So just the idea that in the future, we're likely to succeed if these issues are addressed in parallel, that both are, you know, will be extremely important to any end game, and that, therefore, there's likely to need to be a sort of broader dialogue involving both Russia, Ukraine and other players in European security as Russia and Ukraine and deal with the sort of concrete issues of ceasefire modalities and so on when the time comes.

Kelley Vlahos 20:03

Sam, I'm gonna like break my little protocol here and ask you a question from the audience. While we're on this topic of the assemble talks, there is a viewer by the name of Ratchet Watsky, Raja Watsky. I'm sorry, if I butchered your name. He wants to know that when you talk to Ukrainian and Western sources about those talks, did any of them regret or express regret at abandoning or ignoring respectively a deal that would have been far better than what Ukraine might get in the future? More importantly, did any of them say that if and when another such opportunity comes, they won't show a cold shoulder again, and instead do what they can to make it succeed? Like, what did you get in terms of like the vibe from the sources, you talk to their feelings about what happened and their projections of what might happen in the future?

Samuel Charap 21:03

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So I think it's fair to say that as a general matter, and I'm going to speak elliptically here, because I don't want to, you know, we spoke to all the sources that we spoke to on the basis of anonymity. But, you know, the, the people directly involved in an event like this are likely to be those who are most invested in having seen it through to a successful outcome. So I think that naturally, some of the people who are directly involved do, you know, have a sense of not exactly regret, but they, they, they thought it was close. And some of them at least, and, and, you know, I'd hoped that it turned out differently. We didn't really broach the subject of, in our, in our conversations with those current and former Western officials who were dealing with it at the time about whether and how they would react differently this time around. One of the things we tried to do in that piece, and I hope this came through was, I mean, you know, while we did derive some lessons for the President, you know, I think regardless of what you think about where we are today in the war, or what prospects there are for future negotiations, clearly, the circumstances have dramatically changed, or significantly changed since the spring of 20, to the first weeks of the war. But getting to history, right, really understanding what happened and why is important, really, no matter what, no matter how things proceed going forward. So we tried to divorce the sort of trying to establish a better understanding of that past now, you know, two years ago history with projections for the future.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 22:52

Thank you quickly on what you're saying. I think I mean, there are reasons to believe that Ukraine will be able to have a better deal than than it had back then. And that's what what Sam said, we're very much at the beginning of the first weeks of the war, where Ukraine sort of barely managed to, to keep the line to defend Kyiv and to drive Russian forces back since then, we had the full year of 2022, when we have seen quite significant Ukrainian advances and the liberation of territory, we have major parts of territory, that would that have been a deal in April would have been under Russian occupation. And we all know how special occupation looks like in those territories, right. So at least sort of from a very human perspective, those people who are live on these territories that have been liberated in 2022 by Ukraine, certainly have a better future now than under Russian occupation. And I think the other question that that to some extent, the the article leaves unanswered and perhaps difficult to answer, it's really how much backing the negotiations back then had from Vladimir Putin. I mean, it's unclear if these negotiations were sort of directly with sort of direct backing from Putin, it was very clear that this was on the highest level, it is less clear how much support the delegation actually had, especially the Russian delegation leader. So that is something I think which we should all we should also keep in mind that these negotiations back in April, that this is a question which we cannot answer in hindsight, if there would have been a deal, if that is actually something that Putin would have wanted and curious to hear what Sam has to say to that, or if that was just something that was negotiators pursued, for for other reasons to get in time to see what at the moment they can get out of Ukraine. And I think the assumption that Russia went in these talks with full seriousness that'd be put in would accept any outcome is at least questionable. And again, I do think with continuous military support the liberation of major parts of Ukrainian territory, and the continuation of Western support, there will be in the future a better deal to have for you quite well.

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Samuel Charap 25:18

So if I may, on that question, you know, I mean, at the end of the day, the Putin seriousness was never tested, because the the talks broke off without the the agreement being finalized. So to say, we know for sure, one way or the other would be, you know, basically conjecture. As far as the you know, obviously, the Russian delegation leader has kind of a notorious reputation, because of some of the things he's been associated with. That is certainly true. But he does have the same ranking as Putin's foreign policy adviser in the Russian system, right? He's not. So, you know, we we have to also think about what we heard directly from the Ukrainian negotiators, which was not they did not have the view that, that their Russian counterparts were disempowered. So for what it's worth, but you know, of course, I don't exclude that either side was using this, at least in part as a means of buying time. That's, you know, I think we none of us are inside of the heads of the people ultimately making the decision that we only have the evidence that we can go on. But there is a lot of evidence to suggest that at least, during the time, when these were ongoing, they were being there was some quite high level political engagement. As for whether Ukraine could get a better deal now than what it could have gotten back then. I mean, I think we shouldn't assigning normative values to that is difficult, it will be a different arrangement. And while there will be potentially less area under Russian occupation, there will be a whole lot more dead Ukrainians. And there are a lot of Ukrainians who have been killed in the intervening two years. So I mean, you know, we're not dealing with easy options where you've got like one set of arrangements that could be reached now that would have a universally humanitarian higher value than those that could have been reached, then there are trade offs here. And to suggest that there haven't been any humanitarian losses, I think, in the last two years to go along with the humanitarian gains of of less area of Ukraine, being under Russian occupation, will also not be doing justice to everything that's occurred.

George Beebe 27:37

Just To comment on this question of can Ukraine get a better deal, I think the answer is clearly no. Ukraine's leverage in any negotiation, so they agreed to enter into a negotiation, which is still an uncertainty, is diminishing over time. Why. Not because it's losing a lot more territory. It's not, at least not yet, but it is losing men and it can ill afford to do that Ukraine has now got, if not the lowest birth rate in the world, then it's certainly one of them. And it is in a demographic crisis that is going to get worse, the longer this war goes on. Its prospects for rebuilding its infrastructure and resurrecting its economy are diminishing by the day, for as long as this war continues. Ukraine is not going to have a vibrant economy, if it does not get refugees returning to Ukraine, in large numbers. Many of them fled to Russia, they're not going to go back to Ukraine, the bulk went to Europe, but they're not going to go back to Ukraine in large numbers, if they don't believe they're going to be jobs and security awaiting them there. And the Russians have, I'm sorry to say, a major voice and whether Ukraine gets reconstructed or not. Because, you know, I doubt that Russia can take care of I doubt that it can or even wants to conquer the bulk of Ukrainian territory. Because trying to govern and pacify, it would be an enormous problem. And the Russians are smart enough to recognize that, but they can keep Ukraine in a

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state of dysfunction for a long time to come. If they believe that that's the only lever they have to keep Ukraine out of NATO or out of some sort of bilateral military alliance with the United States. And I'm quite convinced that they will do that. And that means that Ukraine is going to suffer increasingly over time for as long as we don't have a compromise deal that we're working toward.

Kelley Vlahos 29:53

George to follow up on that I'd like you to respond to what Liana said about her misgivings or her lack of confidence that Russia really wants to engage in negotiations. And we have a question in the q&a, from Gera slaw. Martina I'm sorry, again, by mispronouncing that. But you know, he says, based on the history, to what extent can you trust Putin and Russia to even stick to any agreement that may be reached? I think that's a that's a major question that I hear echoed throughout Washington: A.) Do they really want to talk? Or is it a bluff? B.) Can they stick to any agreement that they make? Can you talk a little bit about that? Like how you feel about that?

George Beebe 30:47

The the question of who it was to whether they really want to talk or not, I agree with Sam on this, you know, at this point, we haven't tested it. The Russians say they want to talk, but you don't really know until you say, okay, you know, let's sit down and talk. And then they've either got to follow through, or admit they were bluffing. So I think it's in our interest, actually, to test their willingness to talk number one. Number two, on the question of, can we trust them to a hearing to win a deal? It's a good question to ask. But I would argue that you don't simply trust the Russians out of the goodness of their hearts to adhere to any agreement, because that's what gentlemanly states do. I think what we have to do is set up a situation where the Russians see it as in their interests to uphold the terms of whatever compromise is reached, the Ukrainians do it as well for their own reasons, and so does the United States and the rest of its Western allies. You want a point in the negotiations, where the Venn diagram overlaps enough that all of these states see it is in their self interest to adhere to the deal. But you don't just leave it at that you also have mechanisms for monitoring and verifying compliance with the terms. And we've done this before. We have a history throughout the Cold War, and even after the Cold War, of putting together arms control deals, and various other kinds of state to state arrangements that include monitoring and compliance elements. We know how to do this. You don't just trust you have as as Ronald Reagan used to say, and as the Russians themselves, say you trust but verify. And I think that's the approach we would have to take in Ukraine.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 32:47

Okay, I'm going to shift though a little bit. This is something that Liana had raised in her last comment, but George, you actually raise this somewhat obliquely, but straightforwardly in your recent brief for the Quincy Institute with Anatol Lieven entitled, The diplomatic path to secure Ukraine, I recommend it to everybody who's on on this call today. But you mentioned the US

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elections. And you say the Biden administration for its part is trying to sustain Ukrainian defense and what has become a war of attrition while deferring any serious talk of negotiations. The hope is that this strategy can succeed until at least after the US elections, when it is likely either Joe Biden will be reconfirmed in office and be in a stronger domestic position to negotiate with Putin or Ukraine will be Donald Trump's problem. And Liana raise the issue of the elections as well. I want to ask all three of you. How, how important are the November elections to the Biden policy on Ukraine today? Is Biden buying time? Is he playing a dangerous game and which things could really fall apart before November, which would really hurt his election chances? I now I know this sounds awful. Because it's this should be all about the Ukrainian people who are dying and suffering there. But this is Washington and this and there are political considerations here. Can each of you talk about what role the elections are playing in all of this? George, do you want to start?

George Beebe 34:38

Well, yeah, no, I do think that the Biden administration is playing a holding game. They're they're providing the Ukrainians with what they see is enough defensive capability to stave off a collapse between now and the end of this year. At which point, you know, either the White House will have a little bit more domestic political flexibility to consider some sort of diplomatic approach to all this, where it will be some Republican administrations problem. Do I think that's dangerous? I do. I think the chances of the Ukrainian collapse are somewhat diminished as a result of the aid that's going to be coming their way, but not entirely eliminated. I think the Ukrainians are indeed in a precarious situation. The Russians do have some formidable obstacles, taking the big cities, for example, will be slow and very bloody if the Russians have to mount a direct assault and engage in in house to house urban combat. They'd rather not do that. I think they'd rather just wear the Ukrainians down to the point where they collapse and then then you demand control of those cities in some sort of negotiation thereafter. But would the the Russians consider talking to the Biden administration part of the election? I think we have probably mistaken, mistakenly ruled out the possibility that Russia would engage with Biden now. Why? Why are they did they have an incentive to? Well, part of it's the devil, you know, problem, right. They, they certainly believe that Biden is, you know, quite hostile toward Russia. But they also think he's in control of his own government and can deliver on whatever deal might be struck. I don't think they have that kind of confidence in Trump. I think they see him as more erratic, more unpredictable. The first four years of his presidency, certainly did not give the Russians confidence that he could deliver his own government to uphold any kind of deal that he might strike with the Russians. And so, you know, Putin himself, in his infamous interview with Tucker Carlson said he'd rather deal with Biden, and from from some of the Russians that I talked to, that's not entirely spin there, there is indeed a perception in Moscow, that they'd rather deal with a hostile but stable and predictable Biden White House on this.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 37:25

Liana, I see you smiling over there.

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Liana Fix 37:25

I just don't I just don't think that if Putin says to Tucker Carlson that he prefers Biden, this is something that I would believe face value, I think there's much reason to think to believe that Vladimir Putin wants to prevent the impression that could either Trump is a Russia candidate, and therefore twice, everything to deflect from, from the office preference and the obvious sympathies that Donald Trump has for washer and also from the very obvious disdain that Donald Trump is from Ukraine in a much less optimistic that. For Donald Trump, Ukraine is linked to his own history of having investigations in the United States losing the presidency, he has no interest in Ukraine whatsoever. He has a very difficult relationship with the blood, we will login with the Lensky. So there are a lot of reasons to believe that Donald Trump would try a deal over Ukraine with Putin, which would be everything but on Ukrainian on Ukrainian terms. I'll want you to go back on two points, because I think these are important, and again, on one side are more optimistic and one side less optimistic.

I do agree that an outcome of the war needs to align with a situation where Western interests are met, but also sort of where doesn't watch us interest to end the war, but also where we need mechanisms. But I'm unfortunately much less optimistic just because arms control mechanisms and strategic stability have worked in the Cold War that cannot be easily transferred to a conflict mechanism. And if we look at conflicts in the positive in space, if you want to call it this way, after 9090, there has been no conflict where Russia has complied with agreements that have been struck and it has started in Georgia, where there was a humanitarian mission that is supposed to monitor both lines. Russia has agreed to that under President Medvedev, not under Vladimir Putin, but has not led the monitoring mission monitor the Washington, the Washington controlled side, the same with the Minsk agreements, major non compliances. So I think the the question that we have to ask ourselves is, how to make it in Russia's interest and how to make them comply, and that it does not only need incentives, it does need sticks and these sticks need to come through military strength and through Washington fears that they might otherwise lose the war. If they don't start negotiating. If we don't have this as a stick, but just believe that we somehow magically will come to a point where Russia has an interest in ending the war and whether it will comply with mechanisms. I think that history tells us in the positive in these conflicts in the last season, this is much less the case.

And I mean, from Ukraine's perspective, if we look at the question of other trade offs, humanitarian trade offs between continuing the war and having an earlier deal, I think Ukrainians have made that choice. And in the end, it is their choice, and it is the agency. And they have made that choice that a compromise deal from their perspective, and that's what all opinion polls still say, is not something that they believe in, it's something that they felt has not worked in 2014. And they don't want to try again, for fear that a compromise deal, which cannot be upheld, will lead to another war in a couple a couple of years. Down the line. And I think we that's also a choice that we have to respect in terms of in terms of agency. One last point about the question would put in be willing to negotiate before the elections. I think that is something if we look at the statement that that are coming out from Moscow in the run up to the elections, and also on the negotiations. There are many statements that very clearly stated, it's not in

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Russia's interest. Why should Russia negotiate if Donald Trump can come into the White House in November, that's something which is discussed in Russia talk shows. And I think this idea that Donald Trump might be more unpredictable, it's fair, he is certainly unpredictable, and follows his gut instincts in a way which makes it difficult to have coherent policy choices. But then on the other hand, one of his gut instincts is that he wants to struggle to strike a deal with Vladimir Putin, and that he really has no interest in Ukraine are in upholding Ukraine's independence and sovereignty, and questions, the security of Europe with his threat, and if Europeans do not spend 2%. So I think if these are the gut instincts of Donald Trump that we can rely on, then we can end up in a negotiation situation with Donald Trump as the president, which is dangerous, not only for Ukraine, but also for the Europeans.

Kelley Vlahos 42:15

Sam, do you want to follow up on the election commission question, or anything that Liana just said about what Ukraine might be willing or not willing to do in terms of compromise and negotiated settlement? Any of that, or I can move on and ask another question?

Samuel Charap 42:33

Well, just briefly, you know, I think there's a lot of logic to the assumptions we're making about Russia's unwillingness to engage given the prospect of a potential Trump victory, but the bottom line is that, you know, ultimately, this is all speculative until someone tests the proposition. So we can say it's unlikely that they will agree but you know, that's just it becomes a sort of analytical exercise divorced from reality of no one's actually trying and seeing it fail. So I think that those are, we need to separate I think the two, there are good reasons maybe to be skeptical about that. But you know, until there is an attempt, it's, it's ultimately speculative. And I would just also, I guess, differentiate between the question of assessing humanitarian impact and the question of Ukrainian agency, which do seem to me to be two separate questions. If we're asking the question about whether there has been, you know, a humanity and objective humanitarian costs of the last two years of war, that's something we can judge, you know, without reference to the question of whether Ukraine should have done X, Y, or Z. Ultimately, that's up to them. But there are of course, consequences and costs, and that's something as analysts that we should be keeping in mind.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 44:08

Okay, we have a ton of questions, and I'm gonna try to dovetail a few of them. Anne Swift asks, when panelists talk about negotiations, can we be a little bit more concrete about what that would entail? Specifically, John Mueller, from Cato has asked as it makes sense to concentrate almost entirely on getting a ceasefire in place, and then worry about the rest later, perhaps much later. And then there are a few questions in the queue and in my mind about the issue of neutrality and whether or not it's true that both sides were more amenable than we have given a credit to for to Ukraine, accepting neutrality to move forward and a peace agreement. So can

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you make maybe all three of you want to touch on those questions as they relate to each other, but also relate to the bigger picture of what wouldn't negotiations actually look like?

George Beebe 45:13

On this question of should we just focus on ceasefire, I think that's unrealistic. I don't think the Russians are going to agree to a ceasefire under current conditions. They believe that momentum is on their side. Why should they arrest that momentum in pursuit of something that may well be quixotic, from their point of view, some sort of bigger strategic deal with the United States in Europe over Ukraine's neutrality and the broader European security structure? So I think that Sam is correct on this is a nested conflict, and we can't exclusively focus on top down, you know, big strategic issues, and hope that the minutiae of, you know, specific disengagement, and that sort of thing will flow from that. Nor can we start from the bottom up and say, Let's just agree to stop shooting each other. And then we'll start tackling the bigger strategic issues, we're going to have to do both at the same time in parallel. And there is in my mind, absolutely no question that there will not be an end to the fighting, if there is not an understanding on Ukraine's neutrality. That is a fundamental prerequisite. It's been true since the the origins of this conflict, which will predate February 2022. And it was certainly a prominent aspect of the Istanbul talks, as Sam pointed out in his Foreign Affairs article.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 46:47

Liana?

Liana Fix 46:49

I think neutrality is dead, honestly. And the reason for that is that with wash wash leadership, that pursues Russian foreign policy in the way it pursues it now as an imperialistic project, there is no space for real neutrality that we would accept as a country being able to choose between different partners, and not coming under pressure from washer that only political economic pressure. And we've seen that in Ukraine play out since since the 1990s. But also under military pressure and military intervention to remain in Russia. spheres of sphere of influence is too mild in this case, and we do see that countries that have traditionally they would not fill, it would never call itself mutual, but would have not been aligned in an alliance, like Finland and Sweden, believe that watch as the change in Russian foreign policy towards a more imperialistic foreign policy is dangerous. And that's why being part of an alliance or not being part of an alliance is a crucial it's in the end also crucial for the question of Ukraine's future. And by that I mean, NATO membership, which is certainly a distant perspective. Now that the work still ongoing, because Article Five and other Member States being drawn in, but certainly a ceasefire would be would be would be sort of stabilized lines frontlines would be something that one would need to even think about NATO membership, or a NATO model that follows, for example, the German East West model. So I don't I don't believe that mentality being on Russia's border with the current Russian regime is possible at all. I think the main question here in terms of negotiation is sort of is there harm in trying? Or is the no harm in trying and I think

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that's, perhaps we're with them. And I disagree. I do think there's value in trying when the conditions are wise for trying it. But I do think there can be harm in trying when the conditions are not wise. Because trying sends signals of willingness to make concessions, it can lead to a situation where you have to accept preconditions from the Washington side. And it can lead into a situation where Washa drags you into a negotiation process where you have not enough leverage to force Russia into certain positions. And that leverage can again only come from military power, and military strength, or it can come through an increase of economic sanctions. These kinds of sticks are needed to to get any negotiation wide and without the sticks being in place before you enter negotiations. I do think that can be hard to define

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 49:35

George, a two finger that you're putting up there.

George Beebe 49:39

A two finger on this because in principle, I agree with Liana that you need leverage in the negotiation. You need both carrots and sticks you need incentives and you also need course of tools. Where I disagree with her is her belief that the only type of stick that we can use the old leverage that we have with the Russians is military, or economic sanctions, coercion. They are a necessary ingredient in negotiating strategy. But they're not the only form of leverage that we have. And if we exclusively focus on military leverage, in attempting to steer this conflict toward an acceptable end, we're going to be in trouble. Because right now, the Russians, I believe, have the military advantage, and they're likely to continue to have that advantage over the long term. So, you know, if you're saying, well, the only way we can negotiate or be successful or reach a deal is if we have the upper hand on the battlefield over the Russians, we're going to be in for a very sobering I think, and tragic outcome in Ukraine in which the Ukrainians themselves are condemned to state failure, essentially, over time, that's not a good situation for anybody, but particularly not for the Ukrainians.

Kelley Vlahos 51:12

Sam, Is neutrality dead, like Liana has suggested?

Samuel Charap 51:17

Well, you know, if it is to be alive or dead, it's that is a choice for the Ukrainian leadership to make and did in the spring of 2022, as we described in the article, make one set of decisions about this issue where they embrace the possibility of permanent neutrality by a UN Security Council Resolution, following the Russian, you know, annexation of four Ukrainian regions in the fall of 2022. President Zelensky changed his position on that, and has pursued, you know, a much more accelerated integration with NATO in the meantime. I think though, so if there has to be a return to the previous policy, that's that's up for the up to the Ukrainian leadership to decide it's not really for others, but regardless of what Ukraine decides, there are some limitations here.

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And that is the reality that the war will end and Ukraine, regardless of its aspirations will be de facto non aligned. Right, like the prospect of actually joining the Alliance before the war is over, or are non realistic? Right. And so the question is whether the prospect of eventual membership is more of a, you know, security benefit for Ukraine, or poses more security risks for Ukraine. And, you know, I don't think I think we should, perhaps remain agnostic about that. There are good reasons to suspect it will be, it will potentially be the, you know, the elec, there's evidence that, that it could go either way, we have a long track record of Russian views on this set of issues and a potential reason to suspect that they might keep on fighting if that prospect were to remain on the table, as George suggests, but you know, things might change over time.

Liana Fix 53:27

Just as a clarification on permanent neutrality, if I remember correctly, was sort of in exchange for Western for credible Western security guarantees, which would be sort of more than Budapest, which the West was sort of not a not able or willing at that point to give white. So it's like not reality, which someone would have to make sure we maintain, real neutrality, which would be sort of the precondition to that, if I'm not mistaken, right.

Samuel Charap 53:58

That was what was talked about in Istanbul, but that regardless, even before the war, as late, as you know, I can recall the Zelinsky speech in Munich a couple of weeks before the full scale invasion when he put that question on the table as well. So, you know, I think that it is clear that the question of alignment was viewed differently in the in the spring of 2022, than it was in, you know, from fall and onwards. But the point I'm making is more, I do think that, you know, is Ukrainian policy changed? The question is, could it change back? I don't know the answer to that. But regardless of whether it changes, right, it will end the war, in all likelihood, de facto non aligned. That is not a member of a an alliance. The question is whether the prospect of eventual membership serves to its security benefit or detriment and they're, you know, I think that their arguments on both sides And I think that that discussion is one that will have to come in the context of actually moving towards that outcome. You know, I think that the challenge with where we are today in terms of negotiations, both at the Russia West level, and at the Russia Ukraine level, though, you know, if Reuters is to believe be believed, the Russians and the Ukrainians were, in fact, talking about specific arrangements in this context of Black Sea, the security of Black Sea civilians shipping as late as like last month.

In any case, they don't really acknowledge publicly the fact that they are we're talking, they certainly have been talking about pow exchangers and so on. But that is not true on the Russia West level, is that we, you know, we should never have stopped talking. And as a result, and that's not, that doesn't mean a formal negotiations with like flags on a table, and so on. But keeping channels of communication open. Throughout this conflict would have been, I think, in the interests of both Ukraine and the West. And that, as a result, returning to the, you know, keeping those channels open and publicly acknowledging, at least in the Ukrainian case, that they are, in fact, talking is going to be viewed as a concession. But it should not be that, you

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know, in fact, these are ways of pursuing your interests, not IP, by any means that concession in themselves. And as far as leverage is concerned, you know, you don't really know how much leverage you have in a negotiation until you're actually at the table. In the meantime, it's just sort of virtual leverage is something where pressure is converted into results through a bargaining process, by definition. So, you know, I don't know exactly what could be accomplished if the leverage that currently exists. We're exercise right now. It's not being exercised, because the only way you can do that is through a negotiation, some bargaining process.

Kelley Vlahos 57:12

George, you seem to have a two finger up earlier, but has that moment passed?

George Beebe 57:18

Well, I would certainly say that, you know, the point that it's actually to Ukraine to decide whether us be neutral or not, while true, in principle is insufficient to describe the situation. Ukraine can continue to maintain that its future lies in the NATO alliance. But the NATO alliance and its members have have a say in that, including the United States. And right now, we're in a paradoxical situation where the United States has told the Ukrainians Well, you're not going to be in NATO anytime soon, number one. Number two, we are uncomfortable committing ourselves to some sort of multilateral security guarantee outside the context of the NATO Alliance, which was one of the reasons as Sam's article pointed out that the, the Istanbul accords did not succeed altogether. But we, you know, despite our reluctance to assume a security commitment to Ukraine, we are continuing to insist that the principle of the open door, the principle that Ukraine can choose its own military alliances, is a sacrosanct principle that we would violate at our own peril. And I think that that's just an inherently contradictory position for us to be in. And it's also anachronistic. When Cuba decided it wanted to ally with the Soviet Union, and with its own consent, agreed to host Soviet weapons, including nuclear weapons on its territory. The West did not say, Well, you know, we don't like this and yes, it threatens us. But the principle that Cuba can choose its own security arrangements and give host consent to foreign forces is sacrosanct. Not at all. And I think we need to to look at this question with with a good deal more realism that we have to date.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 59:25

I have so many questions, and we have one minute left. So I think I'm gonna go out on a lighter note. And I hope these people in the audience are still there. Because our first question was from a Jonathan Gould, who said it was from a group of eighth graders watching the panel which I think is really charming during lunch, so I don't know if their lunch period is over. But they say which approach to this conflict makes world war three less likely? How do we prevent what's how happening now from escalating into a regional conflict, ie world war three.

Liana Fix 1:00:11

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I think there is two different readings. And I'm pretty sure we will have all those views on the panel. And the one reading is of the war that if we don't stop this war, we will have some kind of inadvertent escalation or nuclear escalation we will have NATO troops drawn into and then we will have a war with Russia, which sort of argues that we should stop this war early and all at all costs instead of bashing into negotiations. And then there's another take, which would argue that if we solve the war now, in the same way, we have solved Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, then we will embolden Putin to go further because there is a line and a pattern, historically, from 2018, from Russia's invasion of Georgia, to Russia's invasion of Ukraine 2014, to the war against Ukraine in 2024. If you continue this line, this line can continue to if Vladimir Putin feels emboldened and feels he has gotten the upper hand in Ukraine to continue this line to Moldova, and then eventually to a Russian leader, Vladimir Putin, who might think it is in his, it's worth trying to provoke NATO, especially if NATO is weakened with a weak US leadership that does not believe in the article five security given to you. And that certainly is a path that leads us down to a much bigger conflict than Russia, then I believe, than the one we have. Now with Ukraine. And again, the question of leverage is a crucial one, I just don't see part of economic sanctions and military military leverage what other kinds of leverage we actually have towards Russia that we can exert. And I think it's useful to be clear about that before sort of going into negotiations. But yeah, World War Three is not to speak of China in this picture, but it's certainly something where we have to contain Russia's imperial ambitions.

Samuel Charap 1:02:08

Well, I think I think it's fair to say that so long as this war is ongoing, that escalation risks are elevated compared to peacetime. That's should be uncontroversial. You can say that undertaking those risks are worth it for the objectives that we're pursuing by, you know, enabling the war to continue and supporting Ukraine in that, but we have to be honest with ourselves that there are risks, of course, that doesn't mean that, you know, they should therefore determine 100% of your policy, but ignoring the risks would be negligent from the perspective of the United States, at least. I would say one other thing, which is that, you know, we do have some evidence to suggest that, if we were, you know, we're using World War Three as a synonym for any sort of nuclear weapons use. The closest that that we came to that happening in this war was when Russia was potentially on the verge of a catastrophic retreat from the west bank of the Dnieper River in the Kherson region in the fall of 2022. Apparently, if the New York Times is to be believed, again, about the extent to which Russian generals at that time were contemplating the use of a tactical nuclear weapon in Ukraine. Now, that also suggests that there's a paradox here about the extent to which we sort of the challenges of catastrophic success that Russia losing big might, in fact, increase escalation risks, given that that was what did it before. And the flip side of that, which is what we've been seeing recently, which I don't think it's, it's a coincidental that at a moment when Ukraine is in a much less advantageous position than it has been since the very first weeks of the war, is the time when you hear European leaders talking about using their own militaries, potentially on the ground in Ukraine. So, you know, I think that the, the, the prospect of one side or the other dramatically, their fortunes on the battlefield, dramatically shifting could well lead us down, you know, an escalatory path.

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Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 1:04:42

George, we got to wrap it up, and I want to give you the last word.

George Beebe 1:04:46

Okay. Well, I would agree with Sam I think John Kennedy in wrapping up what he regarded is the chief lesson of the Cuban Missile Crisis, said You know, you don't put a nuclear superpower to a position where it has to choose between In humiliation and using nuclear weapons, and Sam is exactly right, the closer that either side gets to a clear victory on the battlefield, the more one side faces a choice between humiliation and escalation in some way, and I don't think either side would be quick to resort to nuclear escalation. But they would be, I think, inclined to do some things that will put us on a potential escalatory ladder, that will be difficult to control under conditions of deep, deep mistrust on both sides for all of this. And to me what that says is okay, if you're if you really are not going to wind up with a clear victory, and neither side if indeed, some sort of clear victory raises the dangers of escalation into World War Three than we ought to set our sights on a compromise settlement. That means you're going to have to sit down and talk.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 1:06:03

Well, thank you, Liana, George, and Sam, and all of our teenage listeners that middle schools today as well as this amazing audience, which was huge. Really appreciate it. I'm looking forward to moderating another panel, please check out Sam and Liana has work in foreign affairs. George has great piece up with Anatol in Harper's, which is annotated from the brief and visit Quincy Institute's website for all of our wonderful work. Thank you.