

QI Panel:

Can Americans Agree on How to Settle the Ukraine War?

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12:30-1:30 PM ET

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 0:04

I'd like to welcome everyone here to the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. My name is Kelley Vlahos. I am a senior advisor at QI, but I'm also the editor of our online foreign policy magazine, Responsible Statecraft, which I hope you are all reading and writing for me.

So I'm very excited to be hosting this event with my colleague George Beebe this afternoon. I see a lot of familiar faces in the room and a lot of new faces too. I've been talking with a lot of you previously about the Ukraine war, and I know it's been a major part of your professional lives for the last 32 months since the Russian invasion in February 2022. Many of you are researchers, scholars, diplomats, congressional staffers, or like me, journalists who have been reading, writing and editing, reporting and analysis on the war for years. It's very consuming and unfortunately seemingly unending. But there seems to be a new spirit in the air today, a sense of urgency and maybe just an acknowledgement finally, that time is running out, that if Ukraine is not winning on the battlefield, then it is time to truly focus on the alternatives to fighting and to start negotiating a pathway to peace. Many of us, including my esteemed panelists today, have been aware of and if not promoting actively that pathway for a long time. Is Washington catching up though, or is a diplomatic end to the war even possible without a hands-on American engagement with all interested parties? And what about the bitter partisanship in Washington? Will there ever be a time when the political stars are aligned so that the US can take the steps necessary to steer this conflict toward a resolution deploying words and not weapons?

So we have a lot of ground to cover today, so I'd like to formally introduce our panelists and then we can get on with the discussion. Tom Graham, Graham in the center here, has worn many hats and has had extensive experience in US-Russian relations. Early in his career, he was a foreign service officer with assignments in the US Embassy in Moscow. He also worked on Russian and Soviet affairs on the policy planning staff at the State Department. Later he served in the George W. Bush administration as a special assistant to the president and then in two roles on the national security staff, including senior director for Russia and director for Russian affairs. Early on in the administration he served as the associate director of policy planning on the staff at the Department of State. He's the author of *Russia's Decline in Uncertain Recovery* and co-author of *US-Russian Relations at the Turn of the Century*, and is a co-founder of Yale University's Russian, East European and Eurasian studies program. Charles Kupchan, to my right has served at the State Department on the policy planning staff. Then he went to work for two democratic administrations. He served as director for European Affairs on the NSC during the first Clinton administration. And then from 2014 to 2017, he served as special assistant to the president and senior director for European Affairs on the NSC in the Barack Obama White

House. Today he's professor of international affairs at Georgetown University in the Walsh School of Foreign Service and Department of Government, and is the author of several books including his latest, *Isolationism: A History of America's Efforts to Shield Itself from the World*, and *No One's World: The West, the Rising Rest and the Coming Global Turn*. And finally, my colleague George Beebe is director of Grand Strategy here at the Quincy Institute. He spent more than two decades in government as an intelligence analyst, diplomat and policy advisor, including as director of the CIA's Russia analysis, director of the CIA's Open Source Center, and as staff advisor on Russian matters to Vice President Dick Cheney. Prior to joining QI, George was vice president and director of studies at the Center for National Interest and he is the author of *The Russia Trap: How Our Shadow War with Russia Could Spiral into Nuclear Catastrophe*.

So thank you to all of you for being here and sharing this time with us, and I'm really excited about this conversation. George, I would like you to set the scene for us for this discussion today by talking about the potential role of the United States in helping to end this war in Ukraine. The Biden administration has essentially said that it's up to Ukraine to decide whether, when and how to seek a settlement. Do you believe that Washington should have a role in steering the warring parties toward a compromise? And also before we start, I'd want to say we will leave about 20 minutes for Q&A from the audience. Looking forward to that and each of the questions that I ask, please if each of you would like to follow up, please do. Want to make this more of a conversation.

George Beebe 5:46:

Great, thank you, Kelley. Just a little bit of an echo in... Sounds okay? Okay. So very briefly, I think yes, the United States has to play a role in steering this war toward a compromise settlement, and I'll lay out a few reasons for that. The first is that this war is not going to be settled on the battlefield. I think it's quite clear that Russia is not going to be able to conquer all of Ukrainian territory. It's not going to be able to occupy all of Ukrainian territory, even if it were able to conquer it all. And were it to occupy, it would have an enormous amount of difficulty actually governing the territory that it was attempting to govern. So Ukraine is simply too large territorially and the Russians don't have a large enough military force to conquer, occupy, and govern that territory. They would require an occupation force several times the size of the entire Russian military as it is now constituted. So that's really out of the question. And the Ukrainians aren't going to be able to drive the Russian military off of Ukrainian territory that it now occupies. That question I think was answered last year when the Ukrainians attempted to mount what they called then their counteroffensive. They prepared extensively for that counteroffensive, the United States and Europe provided an awful lot of support planning and as well as weaponry training. That was their best shot at driving the Russians off of that territory and it failed and it didn't even come close to success. It was not a close call. So this war, if it's going to end, is going to have to end in a diplomatic compromise.

Second thing, the United States has to be involved in that process of steering this war toward a compromise, and that's for several reasons, but the biggest is that this war is about more than simply bilateral relations between Ukraine and Russia. Part of this is about where that border is

going to be drawn between Russia and Ukraine. Part of it is about issues like the treatment of cultural and ethnic minorities in Ukraine. Part of it involves trade issues. It involves specific aspects of the fighting, prisoner of war exchanges, war reparations, reconstruction issues. Those are largely bilateral issues between Ukraine and Russia.

But there's another dimension to this war too that goes well beyond that bilateral Ukrainian-Russian relationship. It has to do with the overall shape of Europe's security order. It has to do with the balance of power between the United States and NATO on the one hand and Russia on the other hand. Those are issues that Ukraine can't deal with by itself, nor should the United States expect Ukraine to negotiate on those bigger European security matters that are a big part of this conflict being fought in Ukraine. Those are issues that affect America's own national security and one of the biggest dangers that we face, of course, is that this war could escalate either intentionally or accidentally into a direct military confrontation between the United States and Russia. That would have a profound effect on the national security of our country, on the safety of Americans, and the United States government has got to make decisions about those issues to minimize the prospects for a direct military confrontation with Russia. I don't think there's any issue that is more important to the security of Americans than to avoid getting involved in what Joe Biden has called World War III. That is something that our elected officials, our government representatives, are entrusted to safeguard and we should not outsource American security to Ukraine to make those sorts of decisions.

Then the last thing I'll say in this is I think if there's going to be an end to this war, Ukraine needs our help in navigating toward a compromise that will be sustainable and stable over time. They need our help in a couple of different ways. One is to put pressure on Ukraine to steer this war toward a compromise because if we don't play the bad guy in that process, then the Ukrainian government itself may come under rather severe internal political pressures, and I think we can help the government in Kiev to deal with those pressures by pointing out that this war has to move toward a settlement. Then they can blame the United States, at least to some degree. They can then say, "We've done our best, but the reality is we can't continue this war." "The United States is putting pressure on us to steer towards a compromise." That could help the Ukrainian government navigate the political circumstances that it will find itself in inside Ukraine.

But the other part of this is we have to provide Ukraine with the confidence that if it does reach a compromise settlement with Russia, that it will have our support and our backing and ensuring that the terms of whatever deal are struck are complied with, that Russia respects those terms and that Ukraine can be confident that it will not be left alone at Russia's mercy after some sort of compromise is struck. And that's an important element in all of this as well, and I think that's part of the reason why the United States needs to be involved in all of this.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 12:13

Let's talk about the Washington politics for a second. Charlie, on September 20th, Robyn Dixon and Michael Birnbaum of the Washington Post published a very interesting piece that set up the

current debate that we're having right now. Basically they said that Putin's aggression and the apparent failure of the White House to stop it heretofore is, quote, "vexing Washington." That, quote, "Washington has yet to define a longer-term strategy to deal with a resurgent Russia, which for more than 20 years, a succession of presidents hope to befriend or write off as irrelevant." Sorry. But unlike the conversation we're having here today, which would be to try diplomacy, I'll quote here, "That fear and the inability even of Western diplomats with decades of experience dealing with the Kremlin to see a viable path forward has revived calls for Cold War-style containment, restricting contacts with Moscow to essential issues, and bracing for conflict by boosting Europe and Ukraine's military capacity. That was the thrust of the peace was for a new containment strategy."

Charlie, Kamala Harris has not spoken very much in detail about how she might approach the Ukraine issue other than to say that she opposes the kind of deal making with Putin that Trump likes to talk about. How do you think she might approach this issue, is making permanent this present approach of arming Ukraine and isolating Russia viable over the long term and might Harris pivot if elected towards some effort to settle the war in Ukraine?

Charlie Kupchan 14:01

Thanks and thanks, thanks to you guys for having this conversation. It's one that needs to happen more regularly in Washington. And my short answer to your question, Kelley, is it will happen more often after the election no matter who wins, and that's simply because it has to happen. We can't avoid it, and I would take issue with the two authors that you just quoted in saying that our policy has been a failure. I think our policy has been a stunning success. Ukraine is still standing. Yes, it's only 81% of Ukraine or 81.5%, the front line keeps moving. But that a country of 40-plus million people has been able to rebuff Russia's effort to subjugate it is by any measure in my mind, the success of US policy, and I credit Joe Biden for getting out in front of this and organizing a coalition that has withstood the test of time. The second point is that I fear that right now we have a policy but we don't have a strategy and because of that, we may end up letting the perfect become the enemy of the good. And what I mean by that is the good being that the 81% of Ukraine that is still Ukraine turns into a success story because it's defensible, because it's democratic, because it's independent, and because it's sovereign. That should be our aim and then we kick the can down the road on what happens to that portion of the country that is still occupied by Russia. It's conceivable to me that one day it may return to Ukraine, but that will happen at the negotiating table when Putin is dead, probably not before.

And so I think that we are now at a point where we continue to have a policy but we don't have a strategy and that's not sustainable over the long run, and I think this coming election will give us a government that one way or the other will bring about a conversation about a diplomatic endgame. I think Trump's strategy is the wrong one. What he doesn't understand is that we're going to get to that endgame by continuing to support Ukraine so that it can deny Russia the ability to make further gains. And when that ability to keep coming has been denied, I think the Russians may, I would say may because we don't know... Go to the negotiating table. And in that sense, I think Harris is more likely to say, "Well, I'm going to keep supporting Ukraine, but I

am going to try to bring this war to an end before Ukraine turns into a failed state," which in my mind is the likely outcome if this war just drags on for years.

My final point is that I do think that even though the coalition that came together, partly because Joe Biden put it together is not durable indefinitely. Here in the United States, to be blunt, I think the war in Ukraine to some extent makes it more likely that Trump is going to get elected because there are a lot of Americans out there who are having a hard time making ends meet, and they are asking, "Why are we spending \$61 billion to send arms to Ukraine when the Russians are making progress?" I don't like what I see in France, in Germany, the political centers in those countries are eroding. There are lots of reasons, but one reason is the blowback of the war in Ukraine on politics in those countries. The parties in Germany that won the recent elections, the local elections, have explicitly called for an end to aid to Ukraine. So that says to me that time is not on our side, that Putin could wait us out if this goes on for years. And that's yet another reason that I believe it's time to pivot toward a diplomatic effort to end the war. And my prediction is that whoever wins that election, we're going to head in that direction.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 18:37

Thank you. Tom, a compromise settlement of the war would require all interested parties, Ukraine, Russia, Europe, the United States to achieve their most important objectives, to point to achievements that allow them to portray the settlement as a victory of some kind. What does Ukraine need in order to address its most critical requirements? And can you tell us the same for Russia, Europe and the United States in a brief answer that lasts less than five minutes. And how much overlap is there among these requirements or are they fundamentally incompatible?

Thomas Graham 19:24

And let me try take a stab at it. Look, I mean, I think from a Ukraine standpoint, the minimal satisfactory outcome from this is, as Charlie has already said, the emergence of a strong, prosperous, independent and sovereign Ukraine. Not necessarily on all the territory that was Ukraine at 1991, but certainly on the territory that Kiev controls at this point. And it also needs to be a Ukraine that is slowly but steadily integrating into the Euro-Atlantic community.(20:00)So this is not simply a matter of bringing the conflict on the battlefield to an end, it's part of a longer political process that builds those ties between Ukraine and Europe. Your EU accession process is an integral part of this and must be done, I think, with flexibility in order to encourage the types of socioeconomic and political reforms that are needed inside Ukraine in order to become a full member of the Euro-Atlantic community.

It will also require, I think, this is something that Kiev thinks quite strongly, there have to be security guarantees of some sort. Kiev would like this to be NATO membership. I don't think that NATO membership is in the card for political reasons in any time in the near term. It's hard for me to imagine 32 NATO countries agreeing to that step at this point, it's hard for me to imagine two-thirds of the US Senate voting to bring Ukraine into NATO. And so the security guarantees for Ukraine will have to come in a different fashion. I think the appropriate approach is to build

on the bilateral security agreements that many countries have built with or have signed with Ukraine, but make sure that they're properly resourced over the years ahead. And that I think provides an outcome that would meet Kiev's minimal needs.

For Russia, it's a different type of situation. Putin went into this conflict arguing that the main goals were the demilitarization and de-Nazification of Ukraine. He's also had territorial aspirations. He didn't want Ukraine to be part of NATO. He wants sanctions to be eased. All that said, I think it's possible for Putin to spin as a victory if he can retain control over the territory he controls at this point. Can make an argument that one of the things that he has done is protect the rights of Russians and Russian speakers in Ukraine. And this is satisfactory at least in the short term, although he'll look very closely at what types of military arrangements are made between NATO countries, United States in particular, and Ukraine going forward.

For Europe and the United States, I think the minimal goal is the emergence of a stable European security order, which means basically stabilizing this long frontier between NATO and Russia, which now extends from the Barents Sea all the way down through the Black Sea. And that will be done by bringing the conflict, the military conflict in Ukraine to an end. But over the longer term through a series of what I would imagine would be arms control measures that will help ease the tension along this long frontier. That's what I think we ought to be aiming for.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 23:10

Just a followup on that, the Atlantic Council's Matthew Kroenig back in June told an audience that if current military strategy doesn't work, he says, "I think that we need to think about a strategy that would wind the conflict down, bring the western part of Ukraine into NATO and then work diplomatically to bring in the rest later." Now, this isn't a new idea, but it's been batted around Washington quite a bit. Can you talk a little bit about whether or not that might be viable?

Thomas Graham 23:41

Well, I come back to the point I've already made. You have to have consensus within NATO in order to work that. I don't see how you get consensus in NATO at this point. Hungary would be an obvious outlier, Turkey. But beyond that, the President of the United States has made it quite clear that the United States, and I think most NATO allies are not prepared to go to war again with Russia in order to defend Ukraine. The problem with the solution where you have a rump Ukraine inside NATO is that there's no firm border that's drawn at that point, which raises almost immediately the question of Article 5 guarantees. Final point to remember is that Ukraine occupies a very special place in the Russian political imagination, and even a Ukraine that were in NATO would not be fully protected against continuing Russian efforts to subvert Ukraine from inside and possible use of military force. So unlike the other rounds of NATO expansion in the post-Cold War environment where we really didn't think about having to honor that Article 5 guarantee because Russia was weaker, we were trying to cooperate with Russia. If you bring Russia in or you bring Ukraine into NATO, there's an imminent threat of being asked to honor Article 5 guarantee. And I'm not sure that most NATO allies are prepared to do that at this point.

Charles Kupchan 25:21

Can I just add two quick points?

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 25:22

Of course.

Charles Kupchan 25:23

I do think we will face a debate on this question. There was a good essay by Bill Taylor in the New York Times last week about, Let's Go Ahead for NATO Membership. Charles Kupchan. I would just add two reservations on top of what Tom said. One is that the fact that we are not now fighting in Ukraine is to some extent a statement that we have deemed it not worth World War III. And in fact, I believe the only way that Ukraine is going to win this war is if 150,000 American troops plus allies in Europe show up on the frontline and push Russia out. But our leadership, correctly in my mind, is saying "We're not going to do that." Under those circumstances, it's hard for me to understand why we're making a judgment that Ukraine is not worth World War III, we would then go ahead and give it an Article 5 guarantee which would obligate us to go to World War III if Ukraine were attacked. And the second point, and this is probably heresy for many, I think we need to be more hard-headed about Russia's objections. I get it. I understand why Russia does not want NATO, the greatest military alliance in history, to move next door into a country with which it has a thousand-mile border. We, the United States, spent the 19th century kicking every other great power out of the Western hemisphere, right? First the French, then the Spanish, then the Russians, then the Brits, and now we show up in Ukraine and tell the Russians, "Hey, chill out. Don't worry about it." That flies in the face of geopolitics 101 and I think we ought to be more straightforward about that.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 27:13

Well, in that vein, George, Donald Trump has said that if he's elected, he will settle the war in Ukraine immediately within a day, I think, even before he takes office in January. Yet during his first term in office, he faced considerable opposition from within his own White House and within the permanent bureaucracy to much of his foreign policy agenda, but most particularly on Russia. Wanting a settlement of the war is only part of what is necessary. What would have to happen in Washington in order to make this goal achievable?

George Beebe 27:52

Right. Well, I think that's exactly right. I think the desire to end the war only gets you a very small way down the road to actually achieving a durable settlement that's in the interest of the United States, in the interest of Ukraine, of our European allies, and in the interest of order in Europe more generally.

George Beebe 28:13

You've got to go beyond wanting that to putting together a viable strategy for achieving that end. And that means you have to array your capabilities with your objectives and make sure that you can achieve what you need to achieve. So one of the things that we're going to have to do is to ask ourselves, what cards do we have to play in a negotiation? Carrots and sticks.

And immediately when you ask that question, one of the sticks that comes to mind is either continuing or deepening military support for Ukraine. That is one of the cards that we have to play that can incentivize the Russians to want to strike a deal that actually advances some of our interests and not just those of Russia's. But in order to actually sustain or deepen aid to Ukraine, we need some sort of durable basis of support here in Washington. And it can't just be a single party. I mean, we're going to have to have the kind of resolve in Congress and that will require both sides of the aisle to recognize that we've got to be prepared to do this. If we simply cut off aid to Ukraine, you don't get a compromise settlement there. You end up in a situation where Ukraine is essentially capitulated, Russia's is no longer negotiating, Russia is dictating the terms of a settlement, and I don't think that's a good path toward a sustainable durable settlement that everyone is going to see is in their interests over time.

Conversely, you also need some carrots in a negotiation, one of which is something that Tom had mentioned earlier. The Russians want to see economic sanctions at least eased if not lifted. But in order to do that, let's assume that the Russians are willing to make some concessions in return for easing sanctions. Once again, you get back to that question of is Washington capable of actually easing sanctions? And that requires support on both sides of the aisle here in Washington. Congress is going to have to do some things in order to ease those sanctions. And right now, when I look at the situation in this town, I'm not particularly optimistic that we can generate that kind of action. So there's going to have to be some preparation here in Washington simply to enable any American negotiator, regardless of whether it's a Democratic or Republican administration, to enter the negotiation with some leverage.

Now the third thing is, I think we're going to have to address this broader question of European security. For Russia, as Tom has pointed out, a big part of this war is attempting to secure Russia against what it sees as a threat coming from the United States and NATO. Now, Russia can't address that threat simply by quote-unquote "winning the war in Ukraine." It's still faced with a very capable NATO alliance. It's still faced with a situation where the United States is moving toward putting missile capability in Europe, in Germany that threatens Russia's security. In order to deal with those problems, the Russians have to talk to us. They're going to have to negotiate some understandings. Those are cards that we can play in a negotiation, but we need a basis, a foundation politically here in Washington that will enable us to do that.

And then I think the last thing we have to have here is broader support among the American people. Washington can't be out on an island separated from the center of gravity of American popular opinion. So there's going to have to be some work done to help the American people

understand where we're going, what does the goal look like for American strategy. How we plan to get there, why it's important, why it's something that they should support. Those are I think, all critical parts of reaching an arrangement in Europe that can be durable and sustainable over time and can't just be reversed. Now imagine the converse. If you have an administration that takes office that doesn't have broad support either in the population or here in Washington, how confident would Ukraine be that some new administration would not simply undo whatever gets done and how confident would the Russians be that they could be certain that we will have support for this down the road past whoever is in the White House at any given time? Those are important things for them to know before they're going to be willing to make real concessions and compromises in all of this too.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 33:37

Just a quick followup on that, just to clarify, because I think in order to get some of the consensus that you're looking for, you have to be very clear. You said that we should continue to give weapons to Ukraine, that if we didn't that there would be no real negotiated process because we'd be just basically handing defeat to one side. But can you explain how do we continue to give weapons to Ukraine without triggering Russia and signaling that we are in it for a long war. And we know Ukraine wants long-range missiles and they want to be able to use them to hit at the heart of Russia. How do you strike a balance where you continue to give Ukraine the leverage it needs without escalating with Russia?

George Beebe 34:21

Well, I think what this comes down to are two things. Number one, you have to be talking to the Russians while you're doing this. Right now, we're really not. So this needs to be done in the context of communications so that you're explaining to the Russians what you're doing, why you're doing it, and indicating to them that we're not going to stop providing this aid absent concessions on Russia's part. You need to get something in return for the cards that you're going to be putting down on the table. But the second part of this is the nature of what you're providing matters. And I think the Russians are indicating quite clearly in their public rhetoric that they see a distinction between military support to Ukraine that is meant to defend Ukraine against Russia and enabling and empowering Ukraine to take the offense inside of Russian territory, threatening or damaging Russia's own military infrastructure in ways that the Russians find quite disturbing and have indicated that they would take a retaliatory action against. So there is a balance that has to be struck here, but I think our focus has to be holding the line, enabling Ukraine to prevent Russia from making significant additional advances inside Ukraine rather than military aid that is designed somehow to, quote-unquote, "allow Ukraine to win the war" and in turn dictate the terms of a compromise to the Russians.

Thomas Graham 36:05

Kelley, can I jump in here?

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 36:06

Of course.

Thomas Graham 36:07

I mean, because George has just hit on, I think, what is a critical element of all of this. Is we have to find a way that incentivizes the Russians to actually negotiate, and that's not where they are at this point. If you talk to people in the Kremlin, if you listen to what President Putin has to say, they believe time is on their side. They look at the West and they see continuing disarray, Ukraine fatigue, they look at the problems inside Ukraine.

So there are two elements here. If you're going to bring this conflict to a negotiated solution that's satisfactory from the standpoint of our interest, and I would argue from the interest of Ukraine as well. One is what George has been talking about. We actually need to have a strategy. I think we've all been talking about, we actually need to have a strategy that demonstrates we know what we want, we know how to do it, we're prepared to mobilize the resources to get it done. And that's not only within the United States, it's also within the transatlantic community. We have to demonstrate that we're prepared to deal with this problem in the long run in order to bring it to a satisfactory solution, that time is not on Putin's side and therefore that creates the incentive for the Russians to come to the table.

But the second, and the difficult part to do at this point is opening up that conversation with the Russians. We need to have a channel of communication with the Russians. I don't think it needs to be public by any stretch of the imagination, but there needs to be a reliable channel where we're discussing substantive issues. Not only the Ukraine conflict itself, but the broader issues of European security plus those other types of strategic issues that the United States and Russia have routinely discussed over the past 20, 30, 40, 40 years. There appears to be some, I think, resistance to that idea here in Washington that politically it's toxic, you can't do this. But absent that channel of communication, you're never going to be able to convey to the Russians, I think, clearly what you're trying to do, our own resolve and our willingness to in fact engage the Russians in a serious set of negotiations where there'll have to be give and take, that will lead to a resolution of the Ukraine crisis and a broader structure for European security that both of us can live with at least in the near and medium term.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 38:55

You want to add to that?

Charles Kupchan 38:57

The only point that I'd add that I think is relevant here is we don't have a lot of toys to give. And I think one of the reasons that Biden is not approving deep strikes against Russia is they don't have very many ATACMS and we don't have very many ATACMS and we don't have many

Patriot interceptors. So it's not just political constraints, it's stockpile constraints. And given what's going on in the Middle East, given tension with China, I think the Pentagon is justified in saying, "We'll go this far but no further."

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 39:38

We have about 20 minutes for Q&A. Okay, I saw the two I have. I know we have questions. I'm going to try to get everybody. I'll start with Mike here, and everybody, if you do ask a question, can you introduce yourself and any affiliation you have as well for the camera.

Michael Vlahos 40:01

MOh, excellent. Michael Vlahos, Institute for Peace and Diplomacy. The conversations I hear around town, including this one, are doggedly unable to address the urgent dynamic of the war, which is the climax, the approaching climax of a battle of attrition. And it is an urgent issue, and I just put it this way. I mean, Ukraine has suffered over a million and a half casualties. It's losing 50,000 men a month, that's dead, wounded, missing, deserted. 120,000 have deserted from the latest figures that I've seen. You have a battle that's reaching its climax the same way that it did for the Army of Northern Virginia in the late autumn of 1864. Or the Austro-Hungarian army in 1918. Or the Russian army after April, May of 1917.

This is a situation that's coming to a head and the Russians know it. It's also an opportune strategic space for Russia to move without as much hindrance. And so I fully expect a collapse of the Ukrainian army in the late months of autumn or in the winter or in the spring immediately after. And that puts the US in a position that it is wholly unprepared to address. It's thinking about war termination on its own terms according to its own preferences, not to the actual reality that will exist on the battlefield very soon. And it will be such a shock and surprise to Americans who've been strung out all these three years that Ukraine can win. There was an article today in Foreign Affairs whose title was, Ukraine Must Turn the Tide Before Negotiation. That's a fantasy. Ukraine is flat on its back right now, and there's so many details I could give. In fact, Ukraine was not a nation of 40-plus million when the war began. It was a nation of 37 million. It's now the size of the Netherlands, 17, 18, 19 million people. It's a wreck. And so we're going to have to figure out what we're going to do when that moment comes when we've been having a discussion that is completely removed in fantasy land.

So my question, and I should have a question, is what does the US do? How does it negotiate to come out with some shred of its honor or its influence still intact when that moment happens? Okay, you can say it's not going to happen, but what does it do when it does happen, if it happens?

Charles Kupchan 43:06

Let me in some ways respond by posing a question. And the question is why has it been so hard for us to have a realistic debate about Ukraine for the last almost three years And I can tell

you as someone who has tried to push that debate forward, it's been uncomfortable. When I go outside, I put on a baseball or football helmet and pads, and it's a very hostile country to people who speak up, and Tom can testify and George and Jeremy, you say things like you just said and you get charged with treason.

And I don't really have a good explanation for why our debate has been so charged and has been so divorced from realities on the ground. And so my one answer to your question would be we need to have an honest debate. We need to have a political discourse in this country that recognizes some of the things that you just said because otherwise we're going to go hurtling down this highway at 100 miles an hour and run into a brick wall. And so we need to stop saying things and aiming at outcomes that are completely divorced from the real world.

George Beebe 44:35

I agree, and I'll say a couple other things. I don't know when Ukraine is going to collapse, but I don't dispute that at some point it's going to reach that, as current trends are pointing. And the United States needs to be prepared for that in a couple of different ways. One of the dangers is that the shock of that will kick Washington into what you might call do something mode, which is typically our reaction to these sorts of things. We have to do something. And in the context of that shock, we may opt for doing something that makes the situation worse, not better, and makes the chances of a direct military confrontation with Russia that much more significant. So we need to be prepared for that when it comes so that we can handle that situation wisely.

The second thing is I think this underscores the urgency of talking with the Russians now sooner rather than later, not in January of 2025, but now, because I don't think time is on our side on this. And then the third thing I would say though is that even in the situation that you've described, let's say the Ukrainians essentially collapse, there are still things that we have to negotiate with the Russians over. All of those European security issues that I talked about earlier, conventional arms control limits, confidence in security building measures, nuclear arms control, rules of the game that I think are going to have to be necessary to stabilize that situation. They're still all out there now. Now, they're not going to be easier to deal with in the context of the Ukrainian collapse, but they still have to be dealt with

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 46:29

You in the front, sir.

Richard Coleman 46:36

Richard Coleman, CBP retired. The common wisdom, what that's worth, is that any public disavowal of our commitment to Ukraine is a green light to Xi Jinping who's watching us very carefully. What is the extent of our commitment, and what Taiwan's future possibly being in the balance, what do you think of that linkage?

Charles Kupchan 47:08

I would say that if I were Xi Jinping watching what's happening in Ukraine, I would come to the conclusion that I don't want to attack Taiwan. I mean, this has not been fun for Russia. Casualties, according to the recent reports, we're now at 600,000 dead and wounded. Isolation. Unplugged from the Western economy. So I don't see the Chinese watching this story and say, "We too want to go down that rabbit hole."

And the other thing I'd say, and this comes out of academic research, rarely does what's happening on the other side of the world have an immediate impact on the decisions that countries far away take about their own strategic predicaments. So I think Xi Jinping will make decisions about whether or not to attack Taiwan based upon decisions about Taiwan. And to the degree Ukraine matters, it is more a deterrent than an encouragement.

Thomas Graham 48:10

:Let me just add to that. I agree wholeheartedly with Charlie has just said. And the question is what the United States is doing with our East Asian allies in and around Taiwan. That's going to be much more important, I think, in Xi Jinping's calculations of what's happening in Ukraine. And so we need to have an Indo-Pacific strategy that is coordinated closely with our allies and partners, clearly lay out what our interests are and what we're prepared to defend and that, I think, will... And then resource it properly, that'll have much more of an important impact on Xi Jinping's thinking than whatever we do in Ukraine.

George Beebe 48:49

Just one more thing to add on this. I completely agree with what Charlie and Tom have just said, but if you're really concerned about China and the threat that it poses, the challenge that it proposes to the United States geopolitically, one of the last things you want to do is to adopt a set of policies that encourage Russia and China to cooperate more deeply in the security realm against American interests. And that's in fact what we have ended up doing, I think, largely unthinkingly and inadvertently.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 49:20

Ambassador Hunter, back there.

Ambassador Robert Hunter 49:21

I'm going to make myself very unpopular. First, I think one of our biggest problems is we don't have these two people in government. And what I worry about is we're not under either candidate for president, neither of whom has much of a track record for knowledge of foreign affairs, whether they will hire people who can get us back onto a genuine path for strategic thinking. With regard to Ukraine in general, the cardinal error took place in 2008 when for

certain internal US political needs, NATO declared that Ukraine and Georgia will become NATO members. That was the moment of commitment. That was the moment in which we crossed any red line that any country would've had against the Russians, and yet every administration, all the way up to now continues to repeat that'll happen.

I will go along with Tom and go farther. There is no way in God's green earth that there will ever be a consensus for Ukraine to join NATO. It is decided as early as 1997 that in effect Ukraine could be a Western country, but it would be buffer state. We never said it, but that was fully understood by everybody and accepted by everybody, including a lot of Ukrainians. I'll also go, I think it was Charlie who said that if anybody was prepared to give an Article 5 to Ukraine, we'd be doing it right now, doing it right now. It's not a matter of waiting for the end of the war.

Fundamentally, I believe this is about US Russian relations, which both sides screwed up beginning in the early thousands when we abrogated the ABM Treaty, we put missile defenses in Central Europe and the Russians did a lot of stuff too. We lost opportunities, can't go back there. But if we're going to get there, the next president is going to have to move beyond the kinds of people who have been making the policy, certainly for the last X years and look for good people who could think strategically in the broadest geopolitical and European Atlantic US Russia context of which poor Ukraine has suffered, but it's never going to be made whole again to an extent that is acceptable to the Ukrainians unless we can get the other thing right. And right now I see no hope that the next president is going to bring in the people that are necessary.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 52:07

Thank you, Ambassador. Gentleman back there.

Ambassador Szabolcs Takács 52:14

Thank you very much. Excuse me for my voice, I'm a bit sick. I'm the ambassador of Hungary here in Washington, D.C. and I'm very thankful to George Beebe and the Quincy Institute for initiating this debate. And I haven't heard so many sensible sentences in Washington, D.C. for the last four years than only this afternoon or this morning here. So you will not be surprised that I said I subscribe to most of what you have said about the conflict in Ukraine. And I think it's legitimate from myself representing a country which is a neighboring country to Ukraine with a sizable Hungarian community, Ukrainian citizens conscripted to the army dying for Ukraine, why their rights have not been respected that much before the war. But we are not talking about this now because Ukraine is in a dire situation. They have every right to defend themselves. So we are not questioning the legitimacy of Ukraine defending themselves.

The question is what Mr. Graham said, Is there a strategy for the war? We see a policy, we don't see any strategy. It cannot be a strategy that we keep supplying Ukraine with lethal weapons, which we don't do as the only country in NATO, and we get all the criticism, what Kupchan said, just if you have a different opinion, they immediately label you being pro-Putin, autocratic, all

that stuff. We are used to that. But the problem is here with the liberal Western world, it's not only foreign policy problems, but a lot of social policy problems. We are destroying ourselves. Instead of having a sensible debate, and we do agree that we need to have a channel of communication with the Russians one way or the other. It doesn't mean that we should tolerate aggression, which was clear of course, not only now, but 10 years ago when they occupied the Crimea, it was clear aggression.

The question is how we want to resolve it. And you Americans, of course, you have to talk about American interests and we have heard a lot of reflections of what is the interest of America. Certainly I agree with the ambassador that it cannot be the interest of America that Russia and China get too close to each other. They cannot be closer to each other than the US to either of them, I think, that's your interest.

But I have to talk about European interests. And apart from the, of course, the first people who suffer are the Ukrainian people, they are dying in huge numbers, forced conscriptions. They are destroying the country, infrastructure, land, everything. But of course the European economy is suffering a lot, and Europeans are suffering a lot. And you can see the result immediately, inflation, high energy prices. And of course, yes, the Germans built their economy on getting cheap energy from Russia, and suddenly Nord Stream 2 blew itself up. And then what happened there is economic consequences and there is social unrest in Germany, in Western Europe, combined with the unwanted results of illegal immigration. And I don't think another interest of America that you don't need an ally which is getting weaker and weaker and weaker. We are losing competitiveness. We are losing social stability and we need an American president who is sensible, whoever it is. And they, a sensible American president, I don't know if they have foreign policy track records or not, who will they hire or not, we need sensible people like yourself, sensible ideas like yourself.

And thank you for organizing that. Thank for the invitation. And you can rest assured that Hungary is a Western country committed to liberal values, human rights. And if you know our history, nobody will say, man can say that we are very close to Russia. The Russians have never done any good to us in our history. And then anyway, I mean, we could talk about that for a long time. But I just want to be very thankful, Mr. Beebe, thank you.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 55:58

Thank you. Any more questions? This gentleman here.

Speaker Nine 56:08

Foremost, thank you, I'm here from the office of Congressman Byron Donalds. Going to cheat and kind of ask two questions. Number one, yes, we're thinking about Taiwan, but of course the last week was North Koreans soldiers, is this very different from North Korea just sending weapons? And question number two, why is it that the panel believes Putin decided to attack

specifically under the Obama and Biden presidency and not under the Trump presidency? Once again, thank you very much.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 56:48

Thank you. You want to tackle the North Korean soldiers first?

George Beebe 56:55

I will start with the North Korean part, and then I'll allow one of my fellow panelists to tackle the Obama-Biden question. I'm not sure yet that North Korea actually has sent soldiers to fight on the ground in Ukraine. May be true. But I think the evidence right now is still not conclusive. We have reports from Ukraine. We have a report from supposedly South Korean intelligence saying that this sort of thing might happen, but I'm not aware that we have confirmed that it has in fact happened. And the most recent information that I've seen coming from a US official was from Secretary of Defense, Lloyd Austin, saying we can't confirm that this is going on yet. So I would reserve judgment on the degree to which North Korean soldiers are actually involved in fighting in this conflict at this point.

Charles Kupchan 57:53

I would agree with that in the sense that might some advisors show up, are there some North Koreans there already because there are North Korean weapons systems? Maybe. But I would be very surprised if you end up with 20,000 North Korean soldiers fighting for Pokrovsk or whatever the next thing. But let's wait and see. And just a quick comment to Bob, I agree with everything or most of what you said with one exception, and that is that it may be a good thing that neither Harris nor Trump hails from the foreign policy community, right? Because it may mean that they don't bring the templates that you're complaining about. And I love Joe Biden. I worked for the guy, I like him, but he came out of a different era. He cut his teeth on a different world. And so it's conceivable to me that the next president, be it Harris or Trump, may write a new book when it comes to some of the fundamentals. And I think we would agree that might be a good thing.

Thomas Graham 59:06

So no one wants to answer the Trump question, huh?

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 59:08

Yeah.

Thomas Graham 59:09

So I'll take a stab at it. Look, I don't think the US position was decisive in Putin's decisions to do what he did in 2014, nor to do what he did in February 2022. There wouldn't have been 2014 if it hadn't been for developments inside Ukraine. That is a disputed election, a mass protest that led to the ouster of what the Kremlin considered a pro-Kremlin president in favor of a government that was clearly Western-leaning. And Putin believed that he had... One, he needed for this standpoint of Russia's own national interest to do something to prevent the further westward movement of Ukraine. And he did that by seizing Crimea at that point and fomenting unrest in eastern Ukraine. That would've happened no matter who the president of the United States was at that point. It wasn't because of any particular attitude he had towards the Obama administration.

I think if you go back and look at February of 2022, there are a whole host of developments inside Ukraine, between Ukraine and NATO that led President Putin to believe that Russia was facing an unacceptable level of threat. There are also other aspects, clear European dependence on Russian energy, the conclusion of what Putin saw as a very successful modernization of the Russian military that led him to believe that an invasion of Ukraine would actually be quite short and he would achieve his result in a very near term. Again, it had very little to do with what the situation in the United States was at this point. I'll grant you, our chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan may have factored into his influence, but also the lack of solid leadership in Europe would also have factored into his decision-making. But it's more the events on the ground in Ukraine that drove that. Those things didn't obtain during the Trump administration, and therefore there was no need for him to use the military option at that point. So just to sum this up, it's more important what's happening on the ground in Ukraine than it is necessarily what's happening in American politics that is going to be a decisive factor in the way Putin formulates his policy towards Ukraine.

Kelley Beaucair Vlahos 1:02:12

I want to ask the last question because we are out of time. But I am interested because, George, you had mentioned that there needs to be some consensus building in 2025 towards diplomacy in this town. And I know that just before the 2020 election that 100 scholars and former government officials had written a letter, an open letter, urging that we must deal with Russia as it is, not as we wish it to be, fully utilizing our strengths, but open to diplomacy, so focused we can cope with the challenge that Russia poses and strive to put the relationship on a more constructive path. Failure to do so carries too high of a price. Over 100 esteemed scholars, former government officials had signed this, including you three on stage today. It was responded to by an open letter by about 30 former officials and experts who called your letter naive and said that accepting Russia's aggression, kleptocracy and aggression would provide no incentive for Putin to change, and they of course asked for more of a containment approach to Russia.

I think that you lost a lot of those people after the 2022 invasion, but we need to get them back to do the kinds of things that you want to do, that consensus building, what needs to happen. Do you think you can get some of those folks back? Because I looked at that list recently and it's a

wide array of people who were urging a more diplomatic approach. How do we do that? Because as much as you had suggested, let's get somebody out of the mold and somebody to bring a fresh template, you're going to need that firmament to get those things done. And how do you do it? How do you change the minds of those people, bring them back to the fold?

George Beebe 1:04:19

Well, I think we need to recognize that the people that oppose the kind of approach that Charlie and Tom and I have been advocating here are not going to go away, number one. They exist in both parties, in both the Republican and Democratic parties, and they have many, I believe, valid concerns that are driving them. And we need to put together an approach that is a big tent that addresses a lot of the concerns that they're talking about. Now, I personally don't believe we're going to transform Russia into what we would like it to be, at least not in our lifetimes and certainly not in the next four years. So saying we can have a Russia policy, we all agree with when Russia changes what it is fundamentally is not actually a policy. It's not realistic. But I do think that aside from a transformationally-based agenda with the Russians, we all can agree on some things. We all can agree that we don't want Russia to dominate Ukraine, to turn it into some sort of appendage or puppet. We all agree that we want to have some sort of stable balance of power in Europe. We all can agree that we need rules of the game that all decides respect. Now the question is not about goals, it's about how do you achieve that? But those are goals that I think vast portions of our political spectrum should be able to get behind. And then you then move from that broad agreement into a discussion of how you achieve these things.

Charles Kupchan 1:06:07

I would also say that I think those of us who signed the letter you mentioned need to move closer to the 30 than they need to move to us. And that's because Russia invaded Ukraine and is committing atrocities on a daily basis. And I don't see any European security order anytime for the next decade or two in which we don't live with a re-divided Europe in which NATO has to have a capable deterrent on the front line. And that's just the way it's going to be.

But sort of finding that middle ground, I think, you have to end the war. Then you begin to have a conversation with the Russians about what you can, namely arms control, exercise, pre-notification, things to prevent World War III. And then you just kind of edge toward trying to restore a better relationship.

And the final thing I'd say is I think one thing we can do in that direction is to try to forge a better relationship with China because we really don't want to live in a world in which we have pushed Russia and China together. That emboldens the Russians, it makes them feel that they have China behind their back. And so as part of that long-term strategy for having a more constructive relationship with China, I think in some ways that conversation starts in Beijing.

Thomas Graham 1:07:41

I actually drafted that first letter.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 1:07:44

I love that letter.

Thomas Graham 1:07:46

Well, so did I when I wrote it. But obviously the situation has changed. But the point I would make is that for the past 70 or 80 years our policy towards Russia has always been a mix of deterrence and diplomacy. That's the way we conducted ourselves during the Cold War, which actually turned out rather well from our standpoint. I think the problem now is that we have lost the art of doing diplomacy, and we focus too much on the military aspect of this. Diplomacy is not a concession to the Russians. It's not a reward for bad behavior. It's a way of advancing American interest. And we do need to talk to the Russians. I think we do need to talk to them in part because they are engaged in a set of activities that poses grave threats to American interest and to European security. But the absence of a channel of communication, I think, leads or makes a bad situation worse. So diplomacy, not on its own, diplomacy linked to a strong deterrent posture, puts us in a position to influence developments to push Russia in directions that are favorable to the United States. So again, it's not a choice of either or, it's doing both and doing both effectively. Something that we've lost the talent for, I think, in the past decade or so.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 1:09:28

Well, I'd like to also note that the signers of that letter were on both sides of the aisle too. They were from both Republican and Democratic administrations, at least, if I'm remembering that right. So it kind of went along with our trans-partisan spirit that we have here at Quincy, and it was very impressive in that way. So I'm going to end it there. Thank you so much for coming, and thank you to our panelists. But I also want to say thank you to our Quincy staff who put this on, and our CEO, Lora Lumpe, who is in the audience tonight. Thank you, Lora, for helping make this happen. And I hope to see you all again. And please remember to check in with Quincyinst.org for all of our future events, both online and in person, and with Responsiblestatecraft.org for all your wonderful news and analysis. And hopefully all of these three, you'll be seeing them there at Responsible Statecraft at one time or another. So, thank you.