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QI Panel:

Should Trump Disengage From Peace Efforts in Ukraine?

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Kelley Beaucar Vlahos

My name is Kelley Vlahos, and I am the editor of Responsible Statecraft, the daily news and views magazine of the Quincy Institute. I am honored to be hosting this important discussion on behalf of the Quincy Institute. Today, if you are not yet familiar with our organization, we are an action tank dedicated to realigning US foreign policy with American interests by prioritizing diplomacy over military solutions, cooperation and productive engagement over coercion and war. I am especially excited today to moderate what I am calling a friendly debate between colleagues at this critical juncture of President Trump's efforts to broker a peace between Russia and Ukraine after three and a half years of war.

If you haven't noticed, President Trump has expressed increasing frustration with the pace of the negotiations for someone who declared he would come into office and immediately work to end the war, it is, no doubt wrangling him to have every parry and thrust by Putin and Zelensky aired publicly and in the press, meetings have been planned and postponed. Declaring a ceasefire has become a test for Putin, while the Russians insist they want demands met before they stop their attacks. Zelenskyy and the Europeans are calling for more sanctions. Meanwhile, the missiles and drones keep firing, civilians and soldiers are dying, and Ukraine's economy and ability to continue the war is sinking deeper into a hole. At one point a month ago, Secretary of State Marco Rubio said, if we're so far apart, this won't happen, then the President is ready to move on. This was after one of the Sunday shows that he was angry and, quote, pissed off at Putin. He has shown his frustration with Zelensky too, saying you don't start a war against someone 20 times your size, and then hope somebody will, people will give you missiles. More recently, Trump has trained his fire on Putin, calling him crazy. That's a quote for the weekend. Missile barrage against Ukraine and also threatening sanctions.

Our guest today, Jennifer Kavanagh thinks it is time for Trump to walk away by way of introductions. Jennifer is a senior fellow and the director of military analysis at defense priorities. Previously, she worked with the American statecraft program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and at the RAND Corporation as a senior political scientist. She also teaches Security Studies at Georgetown University. On April 24, she published a piece at Unherd where she made her case, which was essentially that, and I'm quoting here, America has accomplished its wartime aims in Ukraine. It kept Russia from seizing control of Kiev with generous military support, and forced Moscow to pay a high cost for its invasion in the form of hundreds of 1000s of casualties and the loss of 10s of 1000s of missiles, 1000s of tanks and valuable warships. Ending the war is a desirable objective, she says, but not an important one

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for the United States. Saying, while it is true that Russia might gain additional territory, this will not increase the threat Moscow poses to the United States. This if we walk away. Second, Washington can continue to work bilaterally with Russia on issues like arms control and sanctions relief, even if peace talks end with no deal.

My colleague, on the other hand, George Beebe, absolutely disagrees with this take by way of introduction. George is the director of Quincy grand strategy program, and more than his two decade career in government, he served as an intelligence analyst, diplomat and policy advisor, including as director of the CIA's Russia analysis, director of CIA's open source center, and as a staff advisor on Russia matters to Vice President Dick Cheney, before coming to Quincy, he was vice president and director of studies at the Center for the national interest in Georgia's view, extricating from the Ukraine war talks, especially if the US completely discontinues its intelligence assistance to Ukraine, would leave it up to the Europeans in Ukraine. Iranians to negotiate with Russia directly, which by all accounts, they are not equipped or willing to do, even if the US continues some insistence, absent a peace agreement, Ukraine is headed for collapse, leaving a gaping security hole in Eastern Europe. Chances for a rejuvenated U.S.-Russian relations under these circumstances, he says would be close to impossible, and he did this all in a responsible statecraft article, or at least posed these points in responsible statecraft, which was also co published in the American Conservative this morning. So check that out.

So I'm going to let George expand on these elements now for about five to seven minutes, and then let Jennifer rebut with her own points, then George can address her remarks. Please remember to put your questions into the Q and A so we can address them later. And for this webinar, why don't you post where you might be personally on the issue for staying or for walking away, or if you're undecided, and let us know as the program moves along whether you are being persuaded otherwise. I'll report back on what we're seeing in the Q and A at the end. So now, George, over to you.

George Beebe 6:20

Thank you very much, Kelley, and thanks, Jennifer, for your willingness to debate this issue. I think is a very important one. I think we agree that President Trump's efforts to settle this conflict are well intentioned. And I think we agree that we have already accomplished some very important things in this war, in that Russia is not going to capture the Ukrainian capital. The vast bulk of Ukrainian territory is not going to be conquered and occupied by Russia. And I think we agree that if Russia gains marginally more territory than it currently holds, that is not a matter of vital national security interest to the United States, but I think the United States does have a dog in this fight, and I do think the implications of walking away from the peace process right now would be quite dire, not just for Ukraine, not just for Europe, but for the United States and Russia as well.

Why? Well, fundamentally, I think that's true, because my understanding of the nature of this conflict is that it is not, first and foremost, a fight between Russia and Ukraine over Ukrainian

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territory and over what kind of government rules in Ukraine, it is first and foremost a geopolitical tug of war that has been going on since the early 1990s between Moscow and Washington. That tug of war is over. Europe's security architecture, Russia's role in that architecture, and Ukraine's role in that architecture, the United States is attempting to make Europe essentially NATO centric. It's attempting to bring not just Ukraine, but all other European countries under that NATO umbrella, and Russia would remain outside of it. And it has been our belief that not only Russia has no legitimate stay over the shape of that architecture, but Russia is ultimately going to have to live with the reality that it's going to be on the outside of this NATO centric Europe.

Now the Russians have said no that that vision is fundamentally a security threat to Russia, one that not only are they not content to live with, but one that they are willing to go to war to prevent. So a settlement in this war in Ukraine is not fundamentally between Ukraine and Russia, it's fundamentally between Washington and Moscow, and if the United States walks away from that process, then we're going to be in some sort of long term security confrontation with the Russians over our respective force postures in Europe, over the rules of the game that govern the security relationship between NATO and Russia, and that it will inevitably, absent some sort of compromise over Ukraine, be quite an unstable and volatile security relationship between Russia and the United States and Europe over the long term, one that will be highly prone. To new crises, each of which could spiral into a direct security confrontation between the United States and Russia.

And I don't believe it is viable for the United States politically to pursue an improved political relationship with Russia without first resolving that war in Ukraine, or at least putting that war on a clear path toward a settlement, because politically, there's there would be no support for that rapprochement in Washington, and certainly not in Europe, and the kinds of steps that we would have to take in arms control, in easing sanctions, in other steps that would be necessary to improve the relationship with Russia would simply be politically impossible for the Trump administration to undertake, even if it wanted to do so, and there is no way we can walk away from that problem. We can't simply say, not our war, not our conflict. It's up to the Europeans, the Russians and the Ukrainians to figure a way forward. Let us know how things go, because the United States is inextricably entangled in European security through nuclear weapons and other issues, we can't simply walk away and tell ourselves we've got an ocean between us to protect us from the fallout of a confrontation in Europe that could well turn very bad in the future.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 11:42

Thank you, George. Jen, I want you to both you know, answer, or at least reply to some of the things that that George has just said, but maybe first state your case, maybe expand upon your unheard piece where you said that it's time to walk away?

Jennifer Kavanagh 12:03

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Yeah, I think I can do both. I think I can intertwine them. And I want to say first, thanks to Quincy for having me today, and to Kelley and to George. I'm really looking forward to the discussion as it unfolds. So I think George did a good job of laying out some areas where we agree. And I think listening to him lay out his case, I think where we really disagree is on the order of operations and how entangled the Ukraine war is with questions about the US, Russia relationship and the US role in European security. And he sees them as very entangled, and I see them as possibly separable, and I see the risks of staying involved in peace negotiations as considerably higher, I think, than he does. So I think those are some areas where we disagree.

But let me sort of lay out, you know, how I see the situation. I see the administration as having three main priorities. The first is to get the United States out of Ukraine, to cut involvement. Peace is one way to do that, but it's not the only way walking away is the is another way to do that. Second is to renegotiate the transatlantic relationship and reduce U.S. forward presence in Europe. That's something that Russia may want, but it's also something that the that the Trump administration wants and has made clear. And the third is to reset relations with Russia. Those are the three priorities that they have in this space. And of these goals, my reading is that the second two are really of higher priority to people in the administration. They're not that concerned with Ukraine. Ukraine needs to be addressed because it is a little bit of an impediment to making progress on the first two issues. However, I don't think that walking away would rule out progress on either transatlantic burden sharing or burden shifting or making progress with Russia on a number of issues. It makes it harder, but it doesn't rule it out, and in some ways, working on those issues separately, could actually pave the way to a peace agreement between Russia and Ukraine.

So I want to start by setting the stage that I see the US, as George said and laid out as having very little remaining strategic interest in Ukraine. Basically, I see that we've achieved our goals. We kept Russia from seizing Kyiv. We imposed significant costs, even if the US pulls back now and cuts military support and intelligence sharing, I don't believe that Ukraine would collapse. I believe that Ukraine has sufficient industrial capacity in its own defense production to carry out this war for some time, and I think that Russia itself is struggling under the weight of continuing to fight. So I think that the war would would continue, and that things would shift against Ukraine, but that it wouldn't collapse, and that ultimately Ukraine would surrender or come to a settlement before. A collapse happened. I think that at that point, Ukraine and Russia would come to their own deal, and that deal would be less favorable to Ukraine than what's on the table now, but doesn't really matter for the United States. I think Trump could easily spin that he hadn't lost Ukraine, that this was Biden's fault or zelenskyy fault. And I think that a better deal for Moscow isn't going to mean that he invades NATO next.

So I think that walking away and letting the conflict play out would ultimately result in some kind of settlement between Russia and Ukraine that dealt with some of the issues, not the big, grand strategic issues that George mentioned, but I'll come to those in a minute. But it would come to some kind of deal that would be just fine for the United States, but that it depends a little bit how this plays out. Depends a little bit on how Trump or how the administration walks away. If we do so, I think we should do so completely. That would mean, you know, cutting aid, military aid will

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run out basically in the summer, so that's sort of taken care of. It would mean no more military aid. It would mean no more participation in mediations, mediation between the two parties. The US is already kind of an awkward mediator in this conflict, because we're not neutral. We took a side. The US has been arming Ukraine for three years, so it's kind of strange that now the US is trying to be a neutral mediator. It's not necessarily well suited for that role. And then over time, you could phase out the intelligence sharing and shift gears to focusing on the other two main issues.

One is the European burden shifting, and the other is resetting relations with Russia. You probably need some kind of like time period after walking away before you re engage with Russia for some of the political reasons that that George mentioned, but I don't see that as being off the table. There's a number of ways the US could move forward with Russia. For example, stop impose, stop enforcing secondary sanctions. You may not be able to get political support to lift sanctions, but you could stop enforcing some you could start talking about some of the broader issues about us force posture in Europe. Those are changes that don't have to depend on the outcome of the Ukraine war. You could start working with Europe on shifting us posture and having Europe step up. Those are things that don't depend on the outcome of the Ukraine war.

It would be difficult to have these conversations if the United States is still heavily involved in Ukraine, but once the US has drawn a line and stepped back and is no longer a party to this conflict, those conversations, I think, become easier. But I think there's a number of things that could happen that could take this walk away option that I'm presenting off the table. The first is imposing more sanctions that will drive Russia away. It will make having any sort of bilateral dialogue between the US, Russia, US and Russia very difficult, and would sort of shut that door, and then you're left with not being able to pursue one of your top priorities a second would be if too much more time goes by. I recognize the political concerns that George mentions in his remarks and in his article about Trump being blamed having lost Ukraine, a sort of, you know, Biden's Afghanistan scenario. And I think that's unlikely now, but at some point it becomes more likely, more time passes, and Trump kind of owns the problem.

And so there's a window here where he has where the administration has to make a decision, and I think it's like in the next one to two months, and after that, it becomes much harder to walk away with no consequences. So there's a few options that they have on the table. One is to link these two discussions explicitly. They haven't done that yet. They haven't done what George is suggesting, which is to say, we're going to link the discussions between European security architecture and the US role in it and settlement in Ukraine. They've, they've tried to, they've, they've referenced both, but they've kept the two issues separate so they could try to explicitly link them, but to this point, they've been unwilling to do that. It could be that they see that as giving too much to Russia. And this past you know, in some ways, in some ways, you would have to be careful about conceding too much. They could try to force Ukraine to surrender, as they seem to be doing early on, to coerce it into a bad deal. And that's that's not optimal, because it probably won't last.

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And so that leaves you, leaves you, then with kind of two walk away options. The first is sort of what I'll call walk away light, and that would be to continue to support the ongoing US Russia discussion, direct communication, to encourage it, to praise it, to say that it's a good thing. Ultimately, the only deal that's going to be sustainable between those two powers is going to have to be negotiated between those two powers. On the side, the United States can continue its discussions with Europe and keep its bilateral track with Russia about dealing with these bigger picture issues, European security architecture, uh. That the future of NATO expansion, how many US forces are going to be where these are conversations that could happen while Ukraine and Russia are talking it's possible that progress on those other tracks eases Putin's security concerns and makes it easier for Ukraine and Russia come to a deal. So that's kind of the walk away light option here at the same time, you know, the US doesn't have to be involved in mediation. It doesn't have to be giving any more aid. So it's kind of taking a hands off approach.

And then there's, like the real walk away issue option, which I think if the Istanbul track, or if they move it to somewhere else, this direct Ukraine, Russia track, if that fails, then I really do think it makes most sense for the US to walk away at that point. It's not clear to me, the US gains anything from continuing to give more carrots to both sides to try to get them to settle the costs and the risks of continuing to be sucked into this conflict, to expend more US resources, diplomatic and military and otherwise become much higher, in my view, than any benefits, and the US is much better off to just cut aid, cut intelligence sharing, and let the military balance, the battlefield balance, determine how the conflict ends up resolving itself and when it does, because ultimately, the two sides will come to a point where they decide it's not worth fighting anymore. Then the US can re engage, if that makes sense. But in the meantime, it doesn't make sense to continue to expend resources. I don't think that that hard walk away option closes the door, certainly not on transatlantic burden shifting that discussion should happen anyway. Europeans have tried to use Ukraine as a way to avoid having that discussion. The current administration should just not stand for that diversion. And then with Russia, I think you'd have to have a longer period, a longer gap period, but you could still then re engage, at least on certain issues. Maybe there are areas of cooperation like Iran or the Arctic or other areas where you could try to begin rebuilding ties while you wait for the conflict to resolve.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 22:07

Thank you, Jennifer. George, you'd like to respond before I get into questions?

George Beebe 22:13

I think there is one issue on which we agree, and that is that it's a very awkward role for the United States to attempt to play mediator between the two sides. I think that's right. And I particularly think it is a mistake for the United States in that mediators role to be pressing the two sides to agree to an unconditional ceasefire. For a variety of reasons, the Russians are not going to agree to a cease fire in advance of substantial progress on what they call the root causes of this conflict. And by that they mean the fundamental security problem that they

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believe NATO enlargement poses for Russia and the broader European security architecture, that NATO centric vision that we have been pursuing for 30 years, poses to their interests, and in particular, Ukraine's role in that vision. So until they believe that we have made substantial progress in addressing those bigger security concerns, they're not going to give up the leverage that they have on the battlefield with Ukraine, because that battlefield advantage is exactly the key card that they have to play in ensuring that their broader security concerns are addressed.

Now, it is quite clear that US efforts to press the two sides to agree to an unconditional cease fire have failed, and I think it's clear that continued efforts to press for a cease fire will fail for exactly the reasons I just laid out. What the United States has not done is attempt to engage substantively with Russia on this bigger question of Russia's broader security concerns posed by NATO enlargement, posed by the broader NATO security posture vis a vis Russia, and posed by what we have attempted to do in bringing Ukraine into the NATO alliance. And by the way, it is still the official position of the United States that one day Ukraine will be a part of the NATO alliance, something we have not formally renounced.

So what I do think is necessary in this case is not for the United States to walk away from peace efforts, but actually to engage with Russia on those central issues that have been so divisive and so dangerous between Moscow and Washington for a period of many, many years now. Could the United States achieve a broader improvement in the US Russian relationship without a settlement in Ukraine? My answer is no, because the politics and Washington are such that it would be almost impossible here to do the kinds of things that would be necessary to make that relationship fundamentally better. But even more important, the heart of improving U.S.-Russian relations is exactly that same set of security issues that are at the heart of the war in Ukraine. So if we want to improve the US-Russian relationship more generally, we have got to grasp the nettle on this question of the relationship between NATO and Russia and the US security posture in Europe. We can't walk away from that, and it doesn't get better if we ignore it. To improve the relationship with Russia, we have to reach an understanding with them, a geopolitical compromise, on that issue, and that's exactly the heart of the question that we're dealing with in Ukraine, too.

So it's better to do it now than to postpone it and hoping that it will be easy to resolve over time. It won't be. It's still the same hard issues that we're going to have to deal with now. Can the United States walk away and have burden sharing take care of itself with the Europeans be in a better position to do that? My answer to that is no, and the reason has a lot to do with nuclear weapons, NATO enlargement and the addition, in particular, Sweden and Finland to the alliance in the last couple of years has greatly complicated Russia security problem in Europe, it has a much longer border to defend, and the additions of Sweden and Finland have brought into the Alliance a great deal of military capacity, great deal of military industrial capacity, a great deal of conventional military strength, and the Russians have to deal with that in some way, and it's almost impossible for them to deal with that exclusively through conventional military. Means, putting a lot of Russian forces on the border with Finland is going to be a very expensive endeavor. The Russians would have to do a massive militarization of their economy, and even

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then, it would be problematic to sustain over time. Almost certainly, the way they're going to deal with this problem is to rely increasingly on their nuclear forces, and it's very likely that they're going to start pointing intermediate range nuclear weapons at Europe in order to contend with this problem. Now, what does the United States do in that situation? Can we say to the Europeans, Hey, your problem, you're going to have to deal with that. I think politically, the answer to that is, no, we can't. Because if we do that, the Europeans are going to say, Okay, fine. Not only is this about a rebalancing of the transatlantic relationship, new burden sharing, but you're not even going to extend your nuclear umbrella to us. And if you're not going to do that, then we have to compensate for that ourselves by developing our own nuclear capabilities.

And that fundamentally changes the security situation in Europe and beyond, quite honestly, and the United States can't escape from that problem with a lot more nuclear powers in Europe and most likely in the world, because the Japanese at that point look at this issue differently, not to mention others. Now we're in a situation where the world has become more volatile, less stable, and oceans don't protect you from that situation. The United States security would be reduced in a situation like that. And I have to say, there is no more fundamental issue in US foreign policy than protecting this country from the threat of nuclear annihilation, physical destruction of this country. That has got to be issue number one, and that is central to this question, the relationship with Russia in that nuclear balance is a central matter of American security. Together, the United States and Russia hold over 90% of the world's nuclear weapons. We have to get this right so it's not simply a matter of two countries. Far Away fighting over territory that is not consequential to the United States. The issues that are involved here are fundamental to American security, and we have to address them.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 30:14

There's a lot to unpack there, and so maybe I'll just go with the last part of that. Jen, do you agree that if we walked away and let Europe pick up its own security and forge its own like security relationship with Russia, that they would be forced to extend their their own nuclear or create their own nuclear deterrence, and therefore putting the United States security at risk because of this proliferation that would result?

Jennifer Kavanagh 30:51

I mean, I guess I see that friendly proliferation as sort of inevitable at this point. I mean, I think the United States should be doing less in Europe. I think the extended deterrence is a little bit of a bluff. It's always been a little bit of a bluff. But if the Trump administration is going to move forward with its plans to draw down conventional force presence in Europe, it becomes even less credible. So I think ultimately there will be a European nuclear capability. I don't know what that looks like. I don't know whether it's an expansion of countries that currently have it, or whether countries like Germany and Poland will make good on their moves to to gain those weapons. And you know, thinking about Asia, I don't necessarily think Asia would would respond directly to changes in Europe, but we know that there's talk of potentially changing the US commitment to South Korea, and South Korea has been talking about wanting its own

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nuke for a long time. So I guess I see the the cat of a nuclear, a friendly nuclear proliferation as a little bit out of the bag, and something that is something that the United States should be thinking carefully about, but not something that it can prevent, or something that is directly linked to the outcome of the Ukraine war, or the Russia us negotiations over the status of Ukraine.

And I do just want to say one other thing, which is I agree 100% with George that at the root of this conflict is this question about NATO expansion and the US role in Europe, and constant breaking through of red lines and promises about what would happen with both the eastward expansion of NATO and the locations of NATO forces along Russia's border. And those are issues that definitely have to be addressed, but I don't think that we should ignore the fact that there are a whole host of other issues that are Russia-Ukraine issues, and they are maybe less important, but they are, they also have to be addressed.

And so I guess I see the when I talk about different tracks, I see there are issues that Russia and Ukraine could work on without the US being involved and walking away would, would would not prevent those from being like progress on those issues, and those are things like minority rights, prisoner of war exchange. You know, ultimately, if Ukraine is going to be an arms neutral state and not not in NATO, you the United States will have to commit to that, but Ukraine will have to commit to that too. So what does that look like? What's the what's the nature of Ukraine's future military force. Those are issues that will that the two sides will have to deal with separate together. So I just think that we should not think that the war would be the war isn't going to be solved if the US and Russia reach an agreement, if there's not also an agreement between Russia and Ukraine. So we shouldn't discount, like that piece of this triangle.

George Beebe 33:44

Just respond to that. I agree. Those are, there are aspects of this war that are exclusively bilateral between Russia and Ukraine. Those are going to have to be worked out and those two sides are going to have to work them out together. Now, that said, some of the things that you mentioned, I don't think can be worked out between Russia and Ukraine without us involvement, and the most important of those have to do with Ukraine's own military forces. Russia's position on that issue is that Ukraine ought to have a very, very small military, one that really can't threaten Russia in any substantial way. They in negotiating with the Ukrainians in Istanbul, shortly after the invasion occurred in 2022 insisted that Ukraine's military ought to be well under 100,000 men. Right now it's closer to a million men, at least 800,000 the Ukrainians proposed at that time that they they settle on 250,000 I doubt the Ukrainians would agree to that smaller force.

Is absent some sort of US security guarantee to give them confidence that they would not be left alone should Russia re invade now, can Ukraine and Russia work something out on that issue without U.S. help? My answer to that is No, they can't, because the Ukrainians don't have very much leverage on this matter, and their leverage is disappearing the longer this war goes on, because they have severe manpower problems. And regardless of you know how many

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weapons their factories produce, they need to have enough men to use them, and they are running short of that. So for a compromise between Russia and Ukraine on that issue to be realistic, the United States is going to have to involve itself in that question and to use the leverage that we have with Russia to drive a more reasonable compromise over the question of how large and how capable that Ukrainian military needs to be.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 36:13

Can I ask you a quick question on the leverage? What is our leverage over Russia? What do they need from us, and why should they listen to us? And why should they see us as a good faith mediator in this way, it seems to me that they're holding all the cards?

George Beebe 36:30

Well, no, they're not. They're holding the cards in Ukraine itself. But if you look at Ukraine and this war as a subset of a broader security confrontation between the United States and Russia, between NATO and Russia, we hold a lot of cards, because the Russians can't affect the broader US force posture in Europe, or the broader European force posture in Europe. To deal with that issue. They've got to engage with us diplomatically. They need arms control. They need the kinds of agreements that we had during the Cold War that helped keep the Cold War cold. Now I don't think those kinds of agreements are politically feasible unless the war in Ukraine is on a clear path toward a settlement the Europeans won't engage on that issue, and I think it's highly problematic for the United States to enter into arms control agreements with Russia over these issues in the context of an ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

But if we can put this war in Ukraine on a path toward a settlement, then broader understandings about Confidence Building Measures and conventional and nuclear arms control in Europe become much more feasible. That's what the Russians need. That's what they want. They can't solve that problem simply by defeating the Ukrainians on the battlefield. They still need to come through us to get what they need to enhance Russian security. That gives us leverage on this question, and we ought to use it in order to bring the war in Ukraine to a conclusion and use it in our own interest to stabilize this broader strategic situation with Russia.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 38:35

Jen, do you agree with that? Are we holding some leverage over Russia that will allow us to help settle this war, and George's argument that that's why we need to stay in or do you think Russia can just kind of continue what it wants to obtain through its war With Ukraine, and doesn't see some of those other outcomes, the you know, the security issue between itself and NATO and us as a priority right now.

Jennifer Kavanagh 39:09

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So, I mean, I do think that the US has leverage, and I agree that I would say there are two sources. One is what George mentioned, which is the ability to give Russia some of what it wants in terms of European security architecture and potentially arms control, things like that. Although it's not clear how much, even after the war with Ukraine is over, they'll be able to deliver with the Europeans. The Europeans seem very unwilling to to open up a new relationship with Russia, even after a peace in Ukraine. I think that will be a lot, a lot longer term project, but they do have the ability to deliver that.

But you know, given, given my assessment that the US doesn't have that much to lose by walking away, the United States should be careful how much it's willing to give Russia for a cease fire. I mean, what is the what? What is the if? What is the what is the price? What's the appropriate cost that the US is willing to pay? Things like changing NATO force, or pulling us forces back from the NATO border, or closing the NATO open door for good, or other types of changes that Russia might want. The United States could use those as leverage for something else that it cares about more potentially down the line, once you play those cards, you've played them, you can't play them again.

So I do think the administration should be cautious about when it's ready to play those cards. And I think the ultimate leverage that it has is this threat to walk away every time Trump and Rubio and vice president Vance make noise about walking away. Putin actually does respond. He proposes negotiations, and you know, he may be kicking the can down the road, right? He's playing games a little bit here, but he does respond because he doesn't want the US to leave either, for the reasons George has laid out. So ultimately, this threat of walking away, which is reversible, the United States can walk away and come back, that is the ultimate leverage that the US has, and so that's why I really think this is an appealing option for the administration to consider.

George Beebe 41:18

Just a comment I agree that Moscow does not want the United States to walk away. I think Putin understands that if we were to do that, that the situation would would get worse for Russia, and the prospects for the kinds of deal that he's interested in actually diminish. That, said, the leverage that we have in threatening to walk away is far from sufficient to get the Russians to agree to as they're now unconditionally. In other words, it is leverage, but it is not leverage to accomplish the impossible. And I think what we need to do here is to change our tactical goal in this situation, if it's leveraged, to get the Russians to come to the negotiating table and negotiate over the big elements that have to be involved in a peace settlement. My answer is they're willing to do that. We haven't really taken advantage of that willingness yet, because we have not engaged sufficiently in negotiations on those key political elements of a deal. We have attempted to use this leverage in the service of a goal that is not accomplishable. The Russians are not going to give the give before they get the get.

As some people have put it, they're not going to use up their leverage in order to maybe get something down the road after a cease fire is established, and in the meantime, what they

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would risk having happen is the West using the respite that would be granted to the Ukrainians to regroup, to help the Ukrainians be that much more effective on the battlefield, prolong this conflict much longer, and at the same time, put Russia in a less advantageous position to accomplish those key things that it believes is necessary for you know, a long term and stable settlement, not just in Ukraine, but between Russia and the West more broadly. So they're simply not going to agree to a cease fire. So yes, we have leverage. Yes, we ought to use it, but we need to use it in the service of a goal that is achievable.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 44:03

Well, I guess my question is on this issue of collapse, because George, you have argued that if we just walk away, in particular, we cut off aid, intelligence, sharing, all the things that Ukraine needs to continue to fight the war, that they will hasten a collapse that's already sort of in the works, and Russia will be able to take advantage of that. As you read in the news today, Russia has already seemingly launched a summer offensive, and they're already gaining territory, more territory in the dumb boss, Jen, I mean, what about this issue of collapse? So we walk away, and then Ukraine is in an even worse position when it does go to negotiate in. It's forced to negotiate with Russia directly or with the Europeans involved. Are they in a much worse position? If Russia is gaining more territory and they are on the verge of a collapse, if not a full on collapse, are we putting them, I guess, at odds, and even greater odds than they are today.

Jennifer Kavanagh 45:24

I mean, yeah, the battlefield advantages, or the battlefield balance, is shifting against Ukraine. Russia does have the advantage. I guess I am less pessimistic than George is about Ukraine's own military capabilities. It's true that they don't have enough manpower, but they have done a lot to stabilize their lines over the past couple of months. So back in January and February, it was really looking quite dire. Right now, they seem to have sort of stabilized things their own. As I said, defense production is really ramping up, they're able to leverage drones to make up for some of the manpower shortages that they have. You know, Ukraine can now produce, like, three to 4 million drones per year. That is, like an incredible number of drones and Europe isn't totally useless. They're not as good as they can't provide the support the United States can.

But with Europe continuing to support Ukraine, I think Ukraine could continue to limp along, and I'm not really that confident that Russia's summer offensive is going to yield any major breakthroughs. I think that they may gain territory more rapidly, but ultimately they're going to end up burning out pretty quickly, because they too, face struggles with manpower shortages. Putin will have to decide if it goes on too much longer, if he wants to do a second mobilization, which will be politically unpopular and they have military capacity to, like, maintain the war at the current level, but not really to increase it all that much? I don't think so you so is, is, Will Ukraine be in a worse position if the US walks away? Yes, but should that be what's guiding the US decision? In my view, no. In my view, what should guide the US decision is what's in US interests? And is it in US interests to continue to provide military support when we already know

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that we have scarce military resources ourselves, in terms of us stockpiles, obviously, the United States does not have scarce military capacity.

We know that the United States spends an obscene amount of money on its military every year, but we have critical gaps in certain types of munitions. Should we continue to spend air defense missiles that were that we could potentially need if there were a crisis in Asia that we need to protect our own forces? Is this really the best use of US military capacity? I would say no. And this like at some point, you have to decide that more the policymakers have to decide that US interests come first, and stepping back is the right choice. Now, there's a whole host of other issues that George and I have been debating for this whole time that, you know, complicate this picture of US interests. But if we're looking specifically at, you know, the military balance and whether or not Ukraine's military position should be the deciding factor, I would say that should be, that that should not be the deciding factor in the US, in US policymakers decision at this point.

George Beebe 48:28

I agree with that entirely. This war is not one where the United States should make decisions about its own interests on the basis of what's best for Ukraine, we have to decide what's best for American interests. And I certainly agree that the amount of military support that we're providing to Ukraine is not well spent relative to our other priorities in the world. But I do come to a different policy conclusion, and that is that is an argument in favor of settling this war through a compromised settlement now, rather than walking away from the situation. Now, we haven't gotten into some of the other secondary geopolitical effects of walking away, but let's assume for a moment that Europe is left in a state of insecurity without any of the safeguards that helped keep the Cold War cold arms control agreements, various other arrangements that minimize the prospect of a real confrontation between NATO and the Warsaw pact between the United States and Soviet Union, and let's assume that one of the decisions that Russia would make is a result of that chronic insecurity. I would be to make sure that its security relationship with China isn't that much closer, which I believe they would do under these circumstances.

In other words, geopolitically, it is not in America's interest to take steps that drive Russia toward China, make it more dependent on Beijing economically and militarily, because that complicates our ability to deal with China geopolitically. One of the reasons why the United States should pursue detente with Russia is precisely because it would encourage a more normal, quote, unquote relationship between Russia and China, make it easier for the United States to pivot from Europe and Russia toward China, and also make it easier to deal with China without the very close relationship between Moscow and Beijing that it might otherwise have to contend with. So to me, this is not an argument for walking away from the situation in Ukraine. It's an argument for settling that conflict and putting the US Russian relationship on a much healthier track, because geopolitically, that helps us deal with China that much more easily.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 51:32

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Well, do you want to address the China issue? Should we be worried about pushing Russia into the arms of China?

Jennifer Kavanagh 51:38

We should absolutely avoid policies that pushed Russia into the arms of China. However, I guess I don't see So, I mean, I think we this comes back to sort of a fundamental disagreement between me and George is, you know, can the US step back from peace negotiations over the Ukraine war and continue to work on its bilateral relationship with Russia? I think yes, because I think that there are issues. I recognize that it would be difficult to move forward with some of the strategic stability questions and other types of questions if the war is ongoing, but there's a whole host of other areas where I think the United States and Russia could make progress, and that would help to stabilize the bilateral relationship, especially if the US made clear that it was cutting its involvement in Ukraine and no longer supporting Ukraine, which is something that Russia has wanted, and I think that would help to prevent the effect that George is talking about. But I also think that Russia is already balancing against with other powers to limit its dependence on China, with North Korea, with Iran.

So I don't think, I think that there's a lot of hype around this Russia China relationship, and a lot of it is overblown. Russia doesn't want to be China's vassal state, and is working hard to try to diversify its relationships anyway. I don't necessarily think that you know, a better relationship with China, with Russia, makes it any easier to deal with China. China is going to be difficult to deal with anyway. And I would actually like to avoid this like dichotomy that if we can, you know, settle things with Russia, then we can go hard on China. Because I would like a different relationship with China too, that is not so hostile and that that is, you know, that tries to reset the relationship with China too. So, you know, I think what my colleague Lyle Goldstein has called like the double Kissinger, can we, like, normalize and reset relations with both Russia and China, instead of putting that kind of trying to split that in that way? So I guess I agree with George that that's an undesirable outcome, but I see that as something that can that I don't see walking away as something that necessarily drives us to the eventuality that that George has laid out.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 53:51

Okay, I'm going to try to get to some questions, because we got a bunch in the Q&A, apologies ahead of time, not going to get to all of them, but I'm trying to choose some that will sort of like dovetail nicely with with our conversation and bring some more elements into this. Joseph Gerson has a question, if the US walks away from Ukraine, peacemaking diplomacy, will any country take the US and its of sensible commitment. Seriously, I would like to pair that for Jennifer with a question about the politics and the optics. One of the things that kind of sticks in my craw and the question and why I can't really go 100% on walking away, is because I think if we walk away and disaster in Ukraine ensues at some level. And the Washington establishment behind me. I'm pointing to the Capitol, the Washington establishment, which is already poised, very anti Russia, ready to like, you know, slam. More. Our sanctions on at any moment, they are

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not going to be behind any effort to reach some sort of detente or new relationship with Russia. I think they would go 180 degrees in the other direction. So like on one hand, what does it signal to the rest of the world, if we just walk away from this situation after saying that, A, we stand by Ukraine. And B, we want to end the war. And three, would there be any political energy for creating new relationship with Russia in the wake of all of that.

Jennifer Kavanagh 55:42

So those are great questions. I think on the credibility question, I think there's a few points to make. So first of all, Trump has never said that he would stick by Ukraine, like 100% right? That was the Biden, the Biden administration. So I think you could draw the line. I think we know from literature and political science that credibility doesn't transfer the way some people assume. So walking away from Ukraine is not going to signal to China that the United States would walk away from Taiwan. They're two entirely different situations. The United States has an entirely different relationship with Taiwan and with Japan and with its NATO allies than it does with Ukraine. It has no alliance with Ukraine. In fact, many presidents now have declined to send U.S. forces to defend Ukraine, making it clear that Ukraine is not a vital US interest. So I do think that this would be seen in that context. I also think that there's general questioning globally about the US, how much the US currently stands behind a lot of its commitments, apart from Ukraine. So I'm not sure Ukraine would change the way that the current that countries in Europe are now thinking about how much they can depend on the United States, or how much countries in allies in Asia are thinking about the same the same question how much they can depend on the United States, and I'm not sure that's a bad thing. If countries we the United States always emphasizes reassuring allies, we have to reassure them. Reassure them. Maybe we've reassured them too much, because none of them are spending enough on defense and they depend on the US security umbrella. So if they're less reassured and they spend more on defense in my book, that's a win.

So I'm not sure I'm all that concerned about the credibility implications globally, either because both because I don't think they'll manifest, and because if they do, I'm okay with the outcome, which is countries spend more on their own defense and rely less on the US in terms of political will. You know, in any normal administration, I would be much more concerned about the political, politics and the optics, but the current administration has shown a willingness to do things that are unpopular and a willingness to really buck the pressure from Congress, both their own party and the opposition party, and I haven't seen any evidence from Congress that they're willing to stand up to what the administration is doing on foreign policy or domestic policy, really. And so I think that the administration would have some leeway. It would depend a little bit on the timing, as I said before, I think the walk away option becomes less politically viable over time, and I think it would depend on how the on the narrative and the context in which it happened. But I do think that there would be, there would be pushback from some of the, you know, the more hawkish senators and representatives, like Lindsey Graham comes to mind Tom Cotton comes to mind as people who would push back. But I think ultimately Trump would be able to win the political sport he needed to move forward, at least on some things, which is all really that's necessary to get the ball rolling.

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Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 58:48

George, let me I want to direct. I want to get through a few of these questions. Let me direct. This next one to you. It's from Mike Vlahos. Like earlier wars, Russo, Japanese Russo, polish the road to settlement requires a battlefield fait accompli or a deus ex machina. Ironically, such a battlefield dispensation is in all parties interests. Hence, a partial U.S. withdraw, walking away would likely precipitate the outcome, at which point the US could re enter and re represent itself, however awkwardly, as mediator, with the support of all parties given a then impending Ukrainian collapse, do we need some sort of settlement on the battlefield? And I think John Mearsheimer said this as well, that this is, this will be settled on the battlefield. I think that's what Mike is getting at. How do you respond to that?

George Beebe 59:44

I respond to that by saying that if this war were simply between Russia and Ukraine, that would be absolutely correct. But it is not a war simply between Russia and Ukraine. It is a broader geopolitical conflict between the United States and Russia the. Between NATO and Russia, and that is not a conflict that will be settled on the battlefield. If it is settled on the battlefield, we will not be having these kinds of debates anymore that would not end well for anybody involved. This is a situation where, if we're going to settle this broader conflict extends well beyond what's going on between Ukrainian and Russian forces in Ukraine. We're going to have to do that at the negotiating table. So just to get back to the sooner we get on with that, the better.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 1:00:38

Well, just to get back to something that Jennifer had said, and I think Mike was hinting at our can we be a good faith mediator if, as you say, we are actually part of the war, how do we represent ourselves as mediating, and how do we get both sides to the table if we're on already involved on one side or the other?

George Beebe 1:00:59

We we're not going to be a mediator between Ukraine and Russia on this, and we shouldn't be okay. What we need to do is to conduct direct negotiations with the Russians over these bigger issues. And these bigger issues are issues that the Europeans don't want to bargain with the Russians over, and there are issues that Ukraine cannot bargain with the Russians over. We are the only ones that can negotiate with the Russians on these bigger issues, and that is what has to be done. Now, if we make progress on those bigger issues, the specific situation in Ukraine becomes easier to deal with, and that is a situation on the battlefield that won't result in an unconditional military victory for the Russians. They're not going to conquer all of Ukrainian territory. They're not even going to conquer the Ukrainian capital. They're going to conquer a large portion of Ukraine's eastern and southern regions. Then they're going to dig in, and this is ours. There's going to be a no man's land between our forces and the rest of Ukraine that we will render uninhabitable. We're going to seed with land mines and other things to prevent any

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kind of offensive action by the Ukrainian military against the area that Russia holds. And then good luck to you. The rest of Ukraine becomes your problem Europe or and or the United States, and we're left with what is likely to be a very dysfunctional rump Ukraine thereafter. So this doesn't settle this situation. It leaves it in, I think, a state of dysfunction with many of the key issues that underlie the conflict unresolved, and they can only be resolved at the negotiating table, and primarily those negotiations have but have to be between Moscow and Washington.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 1:03:10

Jen, do you have any response to that?

Jennifer Kavanagh 1:03:15

I mean, I agree that the battlefield isn't going to resolve all the issues. I think the battlefield can resolve some of the Russia Ukraine issues. It will be in Russia's favor. They will get to set the terms. I think there will be Ukraine will have much less leverage to push back on Russia's concerns about the size of Ukraine's military and things like that. I do think this goes back to something George said earlier. I think there's a lot more gray space there in terms of what the Russians would ask for than than some people might think so. I think, like right now, there might be room for negotiation. I think over time that shifts, and Ukraine is left with much less leverage and ability to protect its own defensive capabilities. And I think you would that would still leave the larger security questions unsolved, which will be undesirable. That said, I don't see like, I don't see the, you know, I think.

And again, this goes to something that George and I disagree on. I think those tracks can be separated. I think if that result, if you resolve the battlefield conflict, and you had a cessation of hostilities, even if they were unfavorable to Ukraine, that would open the door for broader discussions between the United States and Russia about these broader strategic issues that should be dealt with. I think the administration wants to deal with them, and is uniquely willing to deal with them because they already want to draw down posture in Ukraine. So I guess I don't, I don't see the battlefield as solving the problem or solving all of the issues, but it certainly resolves the active war which I think would open, would which, which could then facilitate some of the other conversations happening.

Now I would agree that it would be much more desirable for these things to be happening in parallel, like all these conversations, like the US rush conversations to stabilize the US rush relationship are going to take a long time. They're not going to happen in one meeting. And that's one problem with this. The current administration seems a little bit impatient. You know, they had a couple of meetings with the Russians, and they're like, Oh, we're done. Like, of course, this is going to take a long time. I mean, look, it took several years for the to negotiate a end to the Korean War. Think about how many years it took to end the Vietnam War. I mean, they started negotiations in the 60s, and they didn't actually end until the 70s. So these things take a long time, which is why it would make sense to kind of open some of these, like, you don't have to do everything in necessarily, in sequence, and why?

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You know, I think walking away from one piece doesn't have to mean walking away from all the broader issues, although George and I disagree, but I think we agree fundamentally that there's a whole set of like, interwoven issues here, and that the US is ignoring, or the current administration is ignoring a little bit what's at the core, and whether they're ignoring it because they hope to deal with it later, or they're ignoring it because they haven't yet understood that it's really at the core. You know, I can't answer that question, but, but I think it's very clear to me that like that, that's sort of the sticking point that needs to be addressed. It could also be a bandwidth issue. We know that the current administration still isn't fully stopped up. Maybe they don't have, like, the bandwidth to deal with all these issues at once, but certainly something that needs to be like worked out going forward.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 1:06:32

We have reached the end of our time, but I want to give George the last word. The burning question in my mind is, how do you get the both sides to come with their specific demands to start hammering out this settlement that that you say needs to happen before a cease fire can even occur? I know that they're supposed to be meetings on Monday in Istanbul. There seems to be a flap over while Ukraine has its peace memorandum, its set of demands. Does Keith, I mean, does Moscow have theirs? Moscow is playing coy. How? I mean, if you could talk to the President right now, you say, Well, how do you get to that point where both sides come with their set of demands, and then you start hammering out a framework for peace? What could they be doing better at this point to really focus and get that piece of it in your mind rolling?

George Beebe 1:07:28

Well, I'm very pessimistic that Ukraine and Russia are going to make very substantial progress negotiating between each other. What I do think is possible is for the United States and Russia first to agree on a fundamental geopolitical compromise, and the nature of that would be, the United States assures Russia that we are not going to bring Ukraine into the NATO alliance, and in return, The Russians formally support the accession of Ukraine into the European Union. The Trump administration has indicated that is willing to do that, NATO part of it, and I think the Russians have indicated on a number of occasions that they are willing to support Ukraine's accession to the EU.

So what we need to do is codify that, put it down on paper so that each side is committed to it. Then you take that to the Ukrainians, you take that to the Europeans, and you say, this is the fundamental geopolitical deal that we are going to codify here, that we all should get behind. This gives Russia something that's critical to its interests. It gives Ukraine a viable path toward anchoring itself politically and economically in the west and reconstructing Ukraine so that it is a viable, sovereign, independent and prosperous state. That would be a critical accomplishment now, paired with that, I think the Trump administration and Moscow could agree on a roadmap, a list of all the other issues that have to be addressed as part of a settlement, and, you know, putting down on paper where each of the sides is on those issues, and then committing to a

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process And a schedule for narrowing those positions and coming to agreement over time, but that, I think, would satisfy a political need that the Trump administration has to point to a success, but it also then takes a process that will take a long time, but it gives it a structure, and I think the sides are in a position where they can agree on that kind of roadmap, so that's where I think we ought to be going.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 1:09:47

Thank you. I wanted to end on a positive note, so I appreciate it. And before we leave, I just want to plug our next event at Quincy, June 4, the US as peacemaker in Central Africa. We're going. Talk about diplomacy and an entirely different part of the world. Very excited. I'm moderating that one too. So please check that one out at 11am on June 4, and all of the other Quincy events coming up in June on Quincy ins.org and thank you all for joining and thank you to George and Jennifer for a wonderful discussion. Thank you.