

Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

QI Panel:

Ukraine Peace Talks and the Pitfalls of Maximalism in a Multipolar World

October 16th, 2025

11:00 AM - 12:00 PM ET

Zachary Paikin 0:22

Well, good morning and welcome to today's Quincy Institute webinar entitled Ukraine Peace Talks and the Pitfalls of Maximalism in a Multipolar World. My name is Zach Paikin, and I'm a research fellow in the grand strategy program here at QI, if you're joining us today for the first time, we are a transpartisan think tank in Washington, DC that is working to build a world where peace is the norm and war is the exception. In our research and writing and through our advocacy efforts, the Quincy Institute aims to promote ideas that move US foreign policy and national security policy away from global domination and military adventurism and toward a new strategy of diplomatic engagement and national defense based on the interests of the American people.

And it is diplomatic engagement with respect to Ukraine, Russia, and indeed the rest of the world that we are gathered here to discuss today, President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin met two months ago in Alaska, and the mood at the time was one of cautious optimism, but little progress appears to have been made since then in bringing the long running war in Ukraine to an end. Accordingly, the focus has once again shifted to the question of how to coax Russia into negotiating on terms more favorable to the west. The question, however, is whether such a strategy may be self defeating, not just in Ukraine and in Europe, but also in a wider world where the United States is no longer the only great power of consequence joining us to unpack this today, ahead of President Zelenskyy's visit to Washington this week, we have our very own George Beebe, director of the grand strategy program here at Qi, our friend and colleague, Sarang Shidore, who directs QI's program on the global south. And last but certainly not least, Emma Ashford, senior fellow with the reimagining US Grand Strategy program at the Stimson Center, and author of the recent book first among equals, US foreign policy in a multi polar world.

George, let me start with you, and I'd like to start with you to help us unpack where things currently stand in the peace process. On the one hand, we're starting to hear stronger words of support for Kiev from the Trump administration, and not only from the president himself. At the same time, the moves being contemplated from Tomahawk missiles for Ukraine to massive tariffs on India and China don't come across as particularly realistic, neither technically nor politically. So what kind of holding pattern are we in right now from your point of view?

George Beebe 3:03

Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

Well, I think you're right to talk about the anchorage Summit and the cautious optimism, as you put it, that came out of that meeting. I think the Russians all along have thought that this war was really about a geopolitical conflict with the United States and NATO with the West over the contours of European security, Russia's role in that security architecture and Ukraine's role in that architecture. And so they have been eager all along to negotiate with Washington, which they believe calls the shots on this issue, and hammer out some sort of geopolitical compromise that would respect what Russia sees as its vital security interests that are at stake in all of this. And they viewed Alaska as having advanced that effort. I think they thought they came away with some significant understandings, not a full fledged deal. Certainly, more work had to be done.

But I think they thought the process was on the right track. And several Russian officials have said so they've said, Look, we thought we had some understandings. We thought we were going to continue this process, and we're hoping that this process will continue. But something happened after that meeting that I think has derailed things. And I think I can try to piece together what I think might have happened, but I'm not sure anybody can say for sure exactly what has gone wrong, but I would focus on a couple of things. One is the question of security guarantees for Ukraine, and of course, the Ukrainians want Article Five style guarantees. They want to know that the United States and or Europe or NATO will come riding into their rescue if the Russians attempted to re invade or violate. The terms of any peace settlement I would in their shoes too. But of course, this clashes directly with one of the key objectives that I think the Russians mounted this invasion to achieve was to make sure that there is not an Article Five style guarantee for Ukraine, where the West would commit itself in some way to go into war, to defend Ukraine and to make sure that NATO or Europe or the United States did not put combat forces or military infrastructure on Ukrainian territory.

So I think what happened at the White House, meeting with the European leaders and Zelensky that occurred after the anchorage meeting the Europeans and Zelensky said, Hey, let's talk about a force, some sort of combat capable deterrent force, that could be put on the ground in Ukraine that would assure the Ukrainians that they're not going to be left on their own If the Russians re invade, and that's where I think, think things started to go wrong. Because my guess is that Putin had indicated to Trump that Russia is fine with a peacekeeping operation in Ukraine. But a lot of people said, oh, okay, well, that means they're okay with some sort of deterrent force on Ukrainian soil. And the Russians don't regard a peacekeeping force and a deterrent force as the same thing at all. They see a peacekeeping force as something that would be conducted under the auspices of the United Nations. It would be focusing on making sure that the terms of a ceasefire deal were implemented, not a force that would be there to counter the Russian military.

So we have some significant differences of perception and probably communications that were simply too vague on this issue. And I think that has been a key friction point, and that is in part why we're in this stall I think the other part is direct negotiations between Russia and Ukraine. I think Putin probably said, Look, we're fine negotiating with Ukraine on issues that are essentially bilateral, not the big geopolitical issues it wants to talk to the United States about, but things like

Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

prisoner of war exchanges, where territory might be delineated, reparations, those sorts of things that are really between Russia and Ukraine. But in saying that Russia was fine with those negotiations, I think he ran into a difference of view in Washington, where Trump approaches these things by saying, Great, the two presidents need to sit down immediately and work out this deal between the two of them now. And that's not the way Russia typically approaches these issues. It's not the way most countries typically approach these issues. Most of the time. The summits follow working level negotiations on these issues, where your working level experts work out most of the issues that they can at that level, and then the President's coming at the end to stamp their approval on what's been worked out and to bridge the gap on those remaining differences that haven't been hammered out. But that enables the presidents to go into those meetings with a pretty good sense that they're going to come out of it with some kind of success.

That's what the Russians envision with Ukraine right now not let's start with a summit meeting that could very likely fail and embarrass people. Let's start by hammering out these deals, then the President's meet. And that, I think, has been a real friction point. So right now, I think these issues have enabled people, particularly in Europe, that oppose a fundamental compromise settlement with Russia. Rather, they want, essentially to twist Russia's arm into some kind of capitulation. They've used these issues and said, See, Russia actually doesn't want to negotiate. And Putin promised you one thing and didn't follow through. So you know, he's not approaching these things in good faith. The only way forward here we've got to ratchet up the pressure on Russia, economically, militarily, send things like Tomahawk missiles, impose secondary sanctions on Russia and force Putin to say, uncle, and I think that the problem that we're going to run into here is we've largely tried that approach. That's what Biden did for several years, and it failed. And I don't see any prospect that it will have greater success today than it would then.

Zach Paikin 9:58

And we have seen recent reporting from the FT that the US has also been providing Ukraine with intelligence support and conducting long range strikes on Russian energy facilities. In your view, George, how much time remains before any goodwill achieved and at the anchorage summit has been exhausted. And in other words, I mean, how urgent is it for the Trump administration to get this right?

George Beebe 10:19

Well, I don't think we're at the point where the Russians are imminently going to say, Okay, this has failed. We have no choice but to pursue a military solution to this. They are going to continue to pursue a military option. Of course, they were going to do that one way or the other, up until the point where a deal was secured because their leverage of negotiations really flows from the advantages they have in the battlefield, so they're not going to give those up prematurely. But that said, if you look at how Putin and other Russian officials have reacted to Trump's expressions of disappointment and frustration and the veiled threats that he has made

Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

to send tomahawks and impose sanctions and other things like that, I think they've been at pains to not blame Trump, not to say anything bad about what he's doing. Putin at his vlahosy conference essentially said, you know, I think Trump was being ironic in some of the things that he was saying, and he reiterated Russia's interest in wanting a peace process to move forward, and I think they're not going to be quick to close the door on the potential for a peace settlement.

And the reason for that, I think, is very simple. They worry that they're not going to get a better deal from any other US president in the future. And that's number one. And number two, they can't solve their bigger security problems with Europe, with NATO, with the United States, just by defeating Ukraine on the battlefield, they'll still be left with a greatly expanded NATO that is remilitarizing. They'll be left with a situation where the United States is planning to put intermediate range missiles in Germany for the first time since the mid 1980s when the INF Treaty banned them. And Russia has an enormous challenge with its own military in trying to counter the threats that it faces from NATO. The Russians really need a negotiation with the West in order to mitigate those threats.

And furthermore, they don't want to be left as a dependent, subordinate, junior partner to China. You know, they don't want bad relations with China. Certainly, they want friendly, cooperative relations with China. But they want alternatives. They don't want to be left in a situation where China calls the shots. Russia has no bargaining leverage in any of the deals. It has simply because it has no relationship to speak of with the United States in the West. So they have, I think, serious geopolitical reasons to want this deal to continue now. Will they reach a point where they say, Okay, this is over. We tried it failed. Yeah, I think that that could be, but I don't think that's this week or next week. I think we've got a little bit of time on this, assuming that the United States doesn't overplay its hand and attempt to coerce the Russians in ways that simply force Moscow to say, Okay, this is simply not tolerable.

Zach Paikin 13:47

George just spoke a little bit about Russia's grand strategic priorities. Let's bring in Emma now to talk a little bit about the grand strategic priorities of the United States. Can you help us, Emma to understand what sorts of pressures the United States will face in a multipolar world, and how should those pressures influence the way that Americans approach conflicts like the one in Ukraine?

Emma Ashford 14:07

Oh, thank you so much for having me today. Look, I mean, I think we've seen pretty significant shifts in US foreign policy in the last nine months, as the administration has changed, I think they have broken, in many ways, with existing foreign policy consensus. What I think is lacking is, at this point, a new vision, right, where they actually want to take the United States. And there's a couple of reasons for this right. One is it's very hard. Path dependence is a very real force, and I think this is something we see quite strongly in the Ukraine case, where we see

Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

Trump having tried, and I, you know, I agree with George on this point that, you know, the Alaska summit was a very, sort of shallow attempt to get peace, not really accompanied by significant, you know, middle. Level negotiations that you might have expected. So we've tried to do that, but, you know, we're not really succeeding there. So we're just kind of backing off and we're trying something else, and maybe we're focusing on the hemisphere, maybe we're focusing on the Indo Pacific.

A lot of folks are watching the forthcoming national security strategy, national defense strategy, to see what it says and what we can discern about the administration, but, but I think that the main point, and you asked me about, you know, a multipolar world and the constraints on the United States, the reason why we're seeing these changes in foreign policy is not just a new administration with a different viewpoint. It's also because US foreign policy policymakers are trying to adapt to this changing world. You know, we were in a situation for several decades where the United States really was the most powerful state in the world, where we were able to intervene in many places, not necessarily unopposed, but mostly unopposed.

And I think Ukraine, again, is a great example of where we start to see the constraints coming back into the picture here, constraints of the kind that we saw during the Cold War, where it's not possible, you know, you end up in potentially, a proxy war with another great power, if you're if you're not careful. And you know, so we see this in Ukraine. We see this growing with China over Taiwan. And so for policymakers trying to figure out, you know, how do you advance US interests in a space where you can, again, no longer just do exactly what you want? I think that's a very difficult transition. And again, the Ukraine case is really important here. Because not only is this the case that shows us why. You know, there are limitations on what can be achieved, but it's also one of those places where policymakers are quite literally, psychologically, trying to adapt to the idea of a less than ideal outcome, and different sides want different things. There are others who may not yet accept that there's not an ideal outcome, and it has made policymaking quite difficult as a result.

Zach Paikin 17:03

You mentioned the National Security Strategy and defense posture review from the Trump administration that we're expecting relatively shortly. And the expectation there is that the Western Hemisphere is going to rank as the top priority, China second, and then conflicts like Russia, Ukraine will occupy third tier importance. But after more than a decade of failed American attempts at pivoting to Asia, for example, how much do you anticipate that this administration will genuinely preside over a veritable sea change in Grand strategic priorities in practice, not just in word?

Emma Ashford 17:32

Look, I'll make two points here. I mean. One is that I think it is probably not the national defense strategy, national security strategy, that's the most important thing. It's probably actually the fourth coming forthcoming force posture review, where the Pentagon will talk about where US

Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

troops are deployed around the world and whether changes need to be made. Now the Biden administration did one of these, and it was widely anticipated that maybe they would talk about dialing down some force commitments, and then the review actually said, basically, no. Everything's absolutely fine as it is. And so for me, you know, it's one thing. If the documents say, Oh well, the you know, the US is going to start prioritizing the hemisphere going to start prioritizing China. But if there are no corresponding force posture changes, then, to me, that signals more continuity than change.

The second point that I'll throw into the mix here, though, is it is, unfortunately, as we're learning, not the case that a focus on the hemisphere necessarily means that the US is going to give up on regime change operations or some of the more problematic parts of US foreign policy in the last few decades, as we're seeing now, The administration is taking a pretty hard line on Venezuela and the Maduro government. It's entirely possible we end up in some kind of contingency there. So again, I'm mostly watching the force posture review, but I'm also keeping an eye on how we think about this relationship with the hemisphere, if we're going to start prioritizing it, what does that actually look like in practice.

Zach Paikin 19:04

Thanks so much, Sarang. Let's bring you into the conversation. Part of the struggle between great powers to shape international order in a multipolar world is going to play out in the global south. So has the US approach to the war in Ukraine, since 2022 in your view, damaged Washington standing in the Global South. And if it has how consequential is this for US interests, right?

Sarang Shidore 19:27

I think the prominence of the global south was just alluded to in fact, because if we are going to have a military set of military strikes on Venezuela proper, or indeed going further than that, then we are really bringing Latin America into our cross hairs in a way that hasn't been the case for a long time. And in that sense, the near abroad, the American near abroad, then emerges as a very central zone of conflict. And. But to answer your question, Zach, I think there's no question that the Ukraine war has created a moment. In Washington created a moment, not that something dramatically new happened in the world, apart from the war obviously, was a big moment, but the rest of the world was more a realization that even as Washington saw the war in starkly moral terms, and by the way, there was an illegal invasion of Ukraine, but there was a lot more than that that had happened prior to the invasion of Ukraine, but Washington only saw the illegal invasion.

And then, to add to that, saw that as a contact contest between sort of light and darkness, between democracy and autocracy, and expected that the world would simply fall in line and see that. Well, what really happened? I think a lot of global south countries, not all with significant exceptions, but a lot of them did vote at the UN to condemn the invasion, but when it came to joining the West in imposing sanctions, any sort of sanctions, even mild ones, almost none of

Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

them joined. And that told you right away that the global south was looking at the question through a very different lens, through the lens of its own interests, but also did not see the conflict in such stark terms, saw it much more as a gray while it condemned the illegality of the Russian invasion and saw the violation of sovereignty and territorial integrity as a serious problem, it also saw other issues where the West had not taken Russia's core security interests into account in the period leading to the war, And I think that realization came slowly in Washington. It's still coming. And in the meantime, the global south has concluded that really, we are dealing with a world of great powers where perhaps all of them are in violation of one norm or the other.

Zach Paikin 21:57

I mean, norms, you know, figure relatively centrally in the world, views in general of the global south countries, you know, obviously they practice multi alignment as well as a realist dimension of their foreign policy. But this is not a an a normative foreign policy. And there are many folks in the West who really thought that post colonial states, by definition, are going to prize the norms of sovereignty and territorial integrity for obvious reasons, and that therefore they would rally to the west side after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. They haven't done so. Nor have they done so in response to the food insecurity and the economic disruptions caused by the war, which you know, arguably have been caused more by the war than by the Western sanctions in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and yet, many folks in the global south parrot the line that it's actually the Western sanctions that are more to blame. What explains this? Help Western audiences to understand this? How should we empathize with this global south perspective?

Sarang Shidore 22:52

So I think that, I think the lens the global south takes, like any other set of states, it looks at the world international system through its own interests. So there's a set of immediate material interests that are at play, relations with Russia, defense energy, ties also with the West and so forth, also with Ukraine, in some cases. The other aspect is the global south does not want a world where there are no laws and no norms that just anything goes. Why is that? Because they tend to be weaker states. They are not the great powers by definition, and when they are not the great powers, they do rely on at least a scaffolding of law and norms for the system to function.

Now, the global south looked at the Ukraine war and saw violation, but it also saw a context, as I said, in terms of how the West had treated Russia, but it also did not see the West as really a credible, you know, messenger on on upholding those same laws and norms given the what had happened earlier, in terms of endless wars in The Middle East, Iraq, Afghanistan, long occupations, many violations and instabilities that are caused by that, including economic instabilities, migrations, all sorts of things, food as you mentioned, food security, all of that did not build confidence in the unipolar era in terms of the United States as a guarantor of those norms, as one that actually leads in terms of its own actions and in honestly creating a better world for Global South states, where they can thrive and prosper better.

Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

So it's it, the question of norms and laws is very much tied to interest. Without interest those norms, nobody is going to defend those norms and laws, just for the sake of them, but for the Global South, really, the the two are entangled, and it saw the West as not a credible customer on that Russia obviously had, had, had committed a violation. So the global south took the middle path, as it still does, and it tries. It has been, trying to do what it can to end the war.

Zach Paikin 24:58

Got it. Thank you to the audience members for posing questions in the Q and A function. I will try to get to some of those a little bit later in the webinar. But in the meantime, let me pivot back to George for a second and pivot back to Europe in the process, because from sanctions relief to what happens to Russia's frozen assets to reconstruction and EU accession for Ukraine, Europe's role in the EU's role specifically, in any compromise settlement is going to be pivotal, Pivotal, excuse me, yet it has proven exceedingly difficult to square European positions with Russia's red lines in these talks. Now, a negotiated settlement in Ukraine may be in America's interest, but if getting one requires using coercive leverage against allies on something that they view as vital to their security, at what points, from a grand strategic perspective, do the benefits risk outweighing the costs for the United States?

George Beebe 25:47

Well, I would challenge the assumption that we're going to have to cross Europe's own security red lines in order to end this war in a compromise in Ukraine. I do think there is a sweet spot where Ukraine's security interests, Russia's, Europe's and those of the United States are all addressed at least to the minimum degree necessary to get a deal. Nobody's going to come out of this feeling like they got everything they wanted. That's the nature of a compromise. But I think we can still come away where everyone feels like they at least got the minimum that they required. Now I would also add that I don't regard European opposition to a compromise settlement with Russia as driven actually by concrete European security concerns. I think the Europeans, at least, most of them, I'll say the Baltics and perhaps Poland may be an exception here, but I think most of them recognize that the Russian military is not going to wind up in Paris in a few weeks, unless we defeat them in Ukraine.

But I do think there are serious political objections inside Europe, at least on the part of most European leaders, to a compromise with Russia, and I think the nature of their political concerns has to do with their own precarious relations domestically, with their own voters. I think France is in a situation where absent some sort of conflict with Russia that Macron and others can point to and say, here's the problem you need to worry about. French voters think about their own domestic situation in a way that does not play well politically for the French leadership, I think that's true in a lot of these countries, Germany as well. So they have a political interest, I think, in distracting their publics from focus on issues that they can't easily resolve, that are very difficult to address, and they've got a little bit more room for maneuver. So the Russians are a convenient foil, I think, politically. Now, how do you overcome that? That's a trickier problem for the United States, because, you know, rational policy arguments showing how the United States

Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

and the terms of a deal can actually ensure that Europe will be secure don't work against those sorts of political concerns. So this is a difficult problem.

Zach Paikin 28:36

Let's come back to that in a moment. But let me bring back Emma into the conversation for a second prior to Russia's full scale invasion, it was assumed that a US strategy of restraint would lead to a more stable equilibrium between Europe and Russia, because us Russia relations suffered from the Cold War hangover. They were more naturally adversarial, whereas Europe and Russia had far deeper economic and people to people ties. But now European countries, with a few small exceptions, are more hostile toward Russia, and the EU as a whole is more hostile toward Russia than the United States. Is so normally encouraging greater European strategic autonomy is something that should facilitate American prioritization of other theaters. Is that still the case if relations between Europe and Russia become prone to escalation without constant American tending to its allies perceived insecurity?

Emma Ashford 29:28

I think so. Look, I mean, let me start just by saying I think I disagree with George a little bit on this point. I don't think that European leaders are necessarily using Russia as a foil to cover optimistic discontent, if anything, because I think they are facing so much domestic discontent that the war is now a distraction and a real problem for them politically. So I'm not sure I quite buy that. What I would say is I do believe European leaders are effectively trapped by their own prior public statements. And commitments that they when us support was very strong, they massively oversold their commitment to Ukraine, and now are struggling how to realize that in the absence of overwhelming us support, I would pinpoint you ask about you know, would a Europe, Russia relationship be more adversarial now, in the absence of the United States, I don't necessarily think that's true.

For one thing, again, many of the states in Europe are currently extremely distracted with internal problems, despite commitments on spending, we've not seen actual step ups in military capabilities in a lot of states. And I also think we've seen in some of these negotiations over the coalition of the willing. You know, there are very real limits to what Western European states in particular are willing to do for Ukraine. Where I see the concern in the future is is the between Russia and Ukraine itself, once this current conflict has ended, you will have two countries, both of which are presumably going to be revanchist to some extent, wanting to reverse whatever perceived ills of the past, both of which will be armed to some extent and capable of trying to take back territory. So the risk of future conflict there, I think, is actually fairly high.

And that's why I think it's so important that any peace deal be a constructive one that includes restrictions on armaments on both sides, preferably some sort of larger security architecture discussion for Europe and so again, this is why, even though I'm very supportive of trying to find an end to the war in Ukraine, I am extremely unhappy with the way it has proceeded under the

Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

Trump administration, in terms of just how shallow and lacking in substance the process has been. If we want to prevent future conflict, we need to do better, George.

Zach Paikin 31:58

Let me just give you the chance to reply to Emma's intervention there, in which you said that the problem for Europe is not primarily political, as you said, but almost discursive. They raised the stakes to the point where saying that it's the rules based international order itself that's at stake. I might add that it's Europe's sense of ontological security, as we would say, or its sense of status and security that's very much at stake here as well, if that makes Europe much more immovable in talks, at what point does the United States, from a grand strategic perspective, have to, sort of say, you know, time to wipe our hands of this problem here. It's not worth, you know, the diminishing returns that we're placing in this conflict, you know, from from a diplomatic perspective. And indeed, can the United States even do that after having been involved so deeply in this war and in the years leading up to this war and in this conflict, can the United States just wash its hands of this issue altogether?

George Beebe 32:51

Well, to answer your last question, first, I think the United States can try, but it's going to be very difficult. Anytime you're talking about foreign policy, there are plans and intentions, goals that you have, that you want to achieve, and then there's life that happens. And a lot of foreign policy doesn't flow from plans and intentions. It flows from reactions to situations that arise that you simply have to deal with as best you can. And I think the problem in Europe is not that the United States doesn't have some sort of strategic logic to what it's trying to do. I think it does. I think in a multipolar world, I think the United States says, Look, we can't afford to maintain Europe as some sort of dependency in which the United States serves to underrate European security, and they essentially outsource their security concerns to us. Europe is going to have to stand up provide a lot more for its own security. Play a role as a pole in this multi polar order so that it can counterbalance Russia, for example, among others.

Now the difficulty I think we face with Europe is they're not so eager to play that role. Number one, they have been very comfortable outsourcing their security to the United States. That's worked out well for them. Number two, I don't think they're very capable at this point of actually playing that role. The European Union is, as you know, quite unwieldy. When it comes to acting as a single entity in foreign and security policy, there's simply too many divergent issues within the EU having to do with different histories, cultures, geographies and different national interests, and they don't have, I think, a capacity. Right now to do much proactively when it comes to playing that kind of role. So if the United States sort of walks away and says, over to you, Europe, hope you rise to the occasion, I think the chances are that Europe actually doesn't rise to the occasion, and you're left with a European security environment that is fundamentally unstable, one in which we don't have a settlement in Ukraine.

Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

We have essentially a situation where Russia has taken whatever land it cares to take, which is going to leave a large portion of Ukraine independent and unoccupied, but then Russia is not going to allow that rump Ukraine to be reconstructed or coherent or capable of doing anything that would threaten Russia, and they have the ability to prevent that rump Ukraine's reconstruction. They've they've got a formidable arsenal of missiles and glide bombs and drones, and the Ukrainians just don't have the air defenses, and we don't have the air defense systems available to prevent Russia from exercising a veto on reconstruction projects. If Ukraine isn't reconstructed, the refugees are not going to return in any substantial numbers, and if they don't, Ukraine is in a demographic crisis for a long time to come.

So you don't end up with a strong state in Ukraine, you end up with something that looks more like Libya in the middle of Europe, and that is a source of instability for Europe, something that prevents Europe from being peaceful, prevents Europe from playing the kind of role that I think the United States hopes it can play in this new multipolar order, and that, in turn, imposes some real constraints on us, geopolitical room for maneuver, and it also, I think, forces Russia into a much closer security and political relationship with China than it might choose otherwise. I think Russia wants to be able to tack between east and west to maximize its own leverage and flexibility and influence in the world. But if the European Theater is fundamentally unsettled, and there is a long term confrontation between Russia and Europe without the rules of the game to stabilize and contain it like we had in the Cold War.

That's a different situation, and I think we wind up in a world in which Russia and China are much closer than the United States should want to see. So all of that bottom line for me is the United States is going to have to be engaged, be very proactive and nimble in its statecraft to try to pull off the kind of compromise deal in Ukraine that will, in turn, facilitate the kinds of changes in Europe and in the US Russian relationship that I think we want.

Zach Paikin 38:10

Let's move from norms and hard security to energy and economics and Emma, let me bring you back in here, restoring some degree of energy and economic ties between Russia and the West seems like it would be a natural part of any negotiated settlement, and it could also help to craft a global balance of power that is, as George says, nimbler and features fewer rigid blocs. The problem is that, politically, it's a very difficult sell at this point for Europeans to restore economic and energy ties with Russia, who have become convinced of the perils of so called weaponized interdependence, as it were, and at the same time, the longer this war goes on, and George has been speaking to this, the deeper Russia's economic and energy dependence on China is likely to grow.

So it seems like U.S. grand strategy on this issue is stuck between a rock and a hard place. How would you advise American strategists to navigate this terrain, the desire to restore some aspect of relations between Russia and Europe at the economic and energy level, for purposes related not just to increasing Russia's maximization of its strategic options, but America's as well, by implication, and this issue that the Europeans are simply not prepared for this. But of

Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

course, this could lead to deeper and more rigid blocks emerging with Russia becoming more dependent on China.

Emma Ashford 39:27

Well, look, I think we also have to be clear here that that actually Russia and the United States are competitors in the energy space when it comes to who's particularly gas Europe is buying and so particularly in this administration, where they're very keen to see American companies win out over competition. I can't see strategic interests topping that business interest. A second point would be, though, that Europe does continue to import at least some Russian oil and gas. Now there's the official stuff, which mostly comes in. Hungary and a few of the other states in that region, then there's a lot of unofficial stuff. So either LNG, which is supposed to be phased out, I believe, by the end of the year, or gas and oil that has been refined outside of the European Union, but is Russian and then is transported into the EU so if there were to be peace, I would expect at least some of that to start coming in the front door again.

I do think, from the point of view of European energy security writ large, they are never going to go back to a position of absolute dependency on Russia. But I think the smart energy security strategist would look at the situation and say, they probably don't want to be entirely, 100% dependent on the US anyway, or either. So I expect that they will get back to some level of Russian gas and oil after this conflict is over, but it's going to take a very long time, and I don't think that's something we're going to see in the near future. I should also add here, I think we've seen significant development in the energy space, in the conflict itself, over the last month or two, and that is something that is worth bearing in mind. Ukrainians have primarily used some of the Long Range strikes that they've been able to get to strike deep into Russia at energy assets, at refineries, and this is creating some economic turmoil in Russia. Right? Long lines to get gas, things like that. Russia has responded by attacking Ukraine's not just energy generation and energy transport infrastructure, but also the production infrastructure that it has.

So Ukraine is actually a producer of oil and gas, and the Russians are have destroyed, I think maybe as much as 50 or 60% of that in the last that in the last few weeks. So this, this war, has moved even further into the energy space. So that's all by a long way of saying that I just don't see the prospect in the near future for European Russian energy ties to get back to anything even approaching what they were before the war. In fact, I'm not sure that's ever going to happen again.

Zach Paikin 42:06

Sarang, China and India have become big consumers of Russian energy since the start of the war in Ukraine, and we've also seen attempts at De americanizing the global economic system gather pace in the wake of Western sanctions. Are these developments, in your view, durable or ephemeral, and is it actually possible to employ economic coercion to compel Russia to change course in Ukraine without this being entirely self defeating to America's broader global interests and standing?

Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

Sarang Shidore 42:34

Yeah, I think a lot of the energy shifts and flows, and I think Emma captured that really well, are a result of business advantage. I mean, the fact is that, for example, India is importing Russian oil. There's, of course, a relationship with Russia there that has stood the test of decades. It's also because India is a highly energy vulnerable, energy dependent country. So is China, to an extent, although the renewable transformations are making that changing that situation a bit. But both of them, and particularly India, will try to reduce the import bills of energy, which are significant, significant aspects of their budgets, especially for India.

So when Russia offers a discount India, India took it as much for commercial reasons. It was not a signal of any sort of moral endorsement of the invasion. It was simply a aspect of looking after its energy security interests. Now is that durable? I think the answer lies there. I think if the war ends and we see a different energy scenario in the world, which, by the way, is becoming moving towards a more renewable oriented matrix, then I think the flows will shift based on what the market offers. But fundamentally, I think the interests are driving a lot of this. And, you know, the strategic aspects are there, but they are sort of more not hampering it than than energizing it. If you know what I mean.

Zach Paikin 44:16

Let's head back to the high table of politics for a second, because countries from the global south Sauron, such as Brazil, Indonesia, African countries, they've made interventions and occasionally signaled a more active desire for an end to the war over the past three plus years. But perhaps other than interventions from China and India to warn the Russians against using nuclear weapons, for example, we've not seen any considerable effort from global south countries or non western countries to mediate an end to the war, even if ending the war would indeed be in their economic interests.

So with that in mind, how much attention should the United States therefore be paying to the global south when it comes to its attempts to reshape European security, when it comes to American attempts to reshape European security, or put, let me put it different. Kelley, how much do we need to think of the global south and global south countries as actors in their own right, rather than as mere battlefields on which external powers will be competing for influence?

Sarang Shidore 45:11

Yeah, it's a fair question, because when it comes to the Ukraine war, very few actors have real leverage. I mean, China clearly has leverage with Russia, Turkey has some leverage. India has some very limited leverage. But outside of those three or four actors, it's hard to imagine, for example, the Indonesians who proposed a peace plan, the Shangri La in 2023 or the African Union that led a delegation. These can be channels when they're the parties are interested in working out some side deals on limited issues like food security, for example.

Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

But I think there's a broader question there. The broader question is, apart from the Ukraine war, can the United States sort of do what it wants without taking into account the global south? I think that probably was more the case during the Cold War. In the Cold War era, many of these countries had just been liberated from colonial rule. They were much poorer. Their state capacities were much weaker. Today, their state capacities are higher. There are significant middle powers that have risen that are taking advantage of their geographic positions. They may not be first world countries, but they are taking advantage of where they sit. Turkey is an excellent example of that, and also countries like the UAE or Saudi Arabia who provide channels for Russia's circumvention of Western sanctions, if the West had imposed sanctions in 90s, the early 90s, unilaterally, they would have been more effective.

Today, they are less effective, partly because of China, of course, first, but also because of these Collectively, these other middle powers that provide markets for Russian goods, that provide certain amount of legitimacy to Russian presence in the world, and BRICS and other coalitions. So if the goal of the United States is to isolate Russia or to exercise leverage against Russia, then global south countries play a role in that they facilitate Russia's presence on the high table. If they had collectively sort of pull back from Russia much more then Russia would indeed be not isolated, but indeed be looking less credible.

But today, Russia strides the global stage outside of Western countries. Like a normal country, in most cases, Putin can't visit some countries because of the warrant at the ICC. But in for all practical matters, Russia is engaged in all of the things that major powers and major states do with other countries, commerce, trade, security, conversations, nuclear, energy, you name it. It's there. There are business meetings and summits and so forth that leaders are attending in St Petersburg or Vladivostok and so forth. So it's a normal country for most of the world outside the West, and I think the United States, in a non unipolar or post unipolar world, cannot but take this into account. If it had been a unipolar world, it would have mattered less, but I think going forward is going to matter much more.

Zach Paikin 48:18

Thanks so much, Sarang. We have a question from the audience, from Joseph Gerson, about Belarus and how to understand the role of Belarus in this process. So George, let me ask that to you. Is Belarus an important linchpin in America's efforts to reorient its grand strategy bring the war in Ukraine to an end? Is it a viable capital through which messages can be exchanged and messages passed along to the Russians. The Belarusians have at times, of course, demonstrated their desire to maintain a commitment to arms control regimes when the Russians have been less willing to do so. At the same time, there are obvious questions since 2020, in the political crisis there about the extent to which Belarus can genuinely be considered an independent actor. So how important do you see Belarus in this equation?

George Beebe 49:04

Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

Well, I think Belarus is an important symptom of the changing geopolitical order in the world that we're dealing with. I think the United States, in the past, has attempted to integrate countries of the former Soviet Union and others into the Western world. That was the thrust of our foreign policy approach for much of the post Cold War period. Transform these countries from within, integrate them into the West, into the EU, into NATO, into into western organizations and structures that didn't work, and we're now in a situation where we're trying to figure out, okay, how do we approach this new multi polar order?

And we seem to be either by design or by the logic of circumstances, moving toward an approach. Where we're saying we're going to respect some of the great powers security concerns. For example, we understand that Russia doesn't want NATO military infrastructure and forces in key parts on its border that they regard as threatening. We do need to respect that, or we can wind up in a military confrontation with Russia. Have to proceed with caution there, but we're also not going to cede these countries to some kind of Russian exclusive sphere of influence.

Belarus is a case in point. We certainly understand that the military relationship between Belarus and Russia and that of the United States, and Belarus is an area that is fraught with danger, but I think we're exploring an improved economic relationship, more diplomatic exchange, that would allow us to have a relationship with Belarus and other countries along Russia's periphery that does not condemn them to being subordinate to Russia enables them to have some geopolitical room for maneuver within certain parameters that respect Russia's security concerns and doesn't divide the world into exclusive spheres of influence. Is more fluid than that, and allows these countries to have some degree of geopolitical room for maneuver. I think that's in our interest.

Now the question is, can we pull this off to what degree is that the vision that's really driving the US policy, arguably, I think we've seen this play out between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the role that the United States played there in helping to settle that conflict and build new transportation quarters there that not only address the interests of the players of the region, but also serve American interests as well. And I think we're trying to explore something similar in Vlahos, where we have a more robust diplomatic relationship, more economic exchange, but do so in a way that still respects Russia's vital security concerns.

Zach Paikin 52:25

We have another question from the audience, Emma. Let me pose it to you, and it's an interesting one. It's, how should we think of Russia in the international order? Should we think of Russia as more of a Germany, more of a China, or more of an India? Presumably, this is meant in terms of the level of power. It has the role it plays in the international system. What implications based on how we think about Russia, what implications should that have for American grand strategy and the way that we approach our relationship with Russia?

Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

Emma Ashford 52:49

This really is such a great question. And I think, honestly, a lot of these big, high profile debates about polarity, is it bipolarity? Multi polarity? A lot of that, I think comes down to just how you think about Russia, right? Do you think Russia belongs with the US and China at the top of the pile, or do you think they are something less for myself, I actually think that with the exception of nuclear weapons, now, that is a significant exception, right? But I do not think that Russia has the same economic military power as either the US or China does, does not have the same level of influence in the world.

I think of Russia as, again, definitely a major power, definitely a regional power, a great power, a second tier one, if you want to say that, but more comparable to, let's say, you know, a Germany that had fully re armed, or South Korea or India, right states that, again, are extremely powerful, that may be capable of significant military actions, as we've Seen in Ukraine, but they're not able to completely say no to these bigger states. And so we see that Russia has really, in many ways, only been able to keep the war in Ukraine going as long as it has because of its growing need to cozy up to China, right? And China is providing enough in terms of economic support that Russia can do this, if they were truly that first tier great power, in my mind, they would not need to do that.

Zach Paikin 54:28

Got it? We're running short on time. Let me ask George what's probably going to be the last question of the webinar, which is, in your view, is there any chance for considerable, meaningful reset between the United States and Russia, with all the grand strategic benefits that that might bring for both countries in a multi polar order, absent a settlement in Ukraine. And if the answer to that is no, there's no chance for such a reset, then what's your main message to the Trump administration about how they should tangibly move forward over the coming weeks and months?

George Beebe 54:57

Well, my short answer is, in fact, no. I think that's very unlikely, absent a compromise deal in Ukraine. And part of the reason for that answer is I don't think there's the political room in the West, in Washington or in Europe to explore substantial improvements in the relationship with Russia unless we've got a settlement in Ukraine that more or less satisfies the key interests of all the players involved. We tried a lot during the post Cold War years to pursue a cooperative relationship with Russia by starting small. Let's focus on the things where we have shared interests, or where our interests overlap to a great degree. Let's, let's look at low hanging fruit, so to speak, build some momentum in the relationship, and hope that that momentum enables us to tackle the bigger, more Prickly, more difficult to resolve, issues where US and Russian relations really do bump up against each other more directly, and that approach failed.

Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

What happened, I think consistently, was that the big issues in the relationship, the real friction points that we had, overwhelmed our ability to cooperate, on those things, where we should cooperate, where those those interests do align with one another. I have no reason to believe that that isn't the case today. Yes, we could cooperate in the Arctic. There are areas where we have shared interests in counterterrorism and other things, shared economic interests, for example. But unless we get the big things in the relationship right, find a way to manage our differences over those bigger issues. I think the political room for cooperation on those other things is just not going to be there.

Zach Paikin 56:52

What about strategic stability?

George Beebe 56:56

Well, I think that's one of them. You know, the notion that we can pursue real arms control in an increasingly complex strategic environment, where you have new technologies that are difficult to manage, where you've got China that is approaching some sort of peer status in its strategic nuclear arsenal, and you've got essentially no conventional arms control left in Europe with the demise of the CFE treaty, no theater nuclear arms control with the end of the INF Treaty, I think it's going to be very difficult politically to make the argument that we can and must pursue cooperation in that area, if this big question of Ukraine and everything that is attached to it remains unresolved.

Zach Paikin 57:58

Well, on that very happy note, thank you, George Beebe, Sarang Shidore, and Emma Ashford for being with us today. This was a very enlightening discussion. There are many more angles we could have probed, and I wish we could discuss this for yet another hour. But in the meantime, let me thank all three of you for a very enlightening discussion, and to thank all of you who are participating today, before I let you all go, let me mention that you can register for other forthcoming webinars at Qi by going to our events page, quincyinst.org/events, and you can also subscribe to the Quincy Institute mailing list from our home page, Quincy inst.org, to receive invitations to all of our events and to follow Our work more generally, thank you again for participating today and for joining in our efforts to promote ideas that move US foreign policy away from endless war and toward military restraint and diplomacy In the pursuit of international Peace. Thanks so much.