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### QI Panel:

#### Debate: Is a Peace Agreement in Ukraine Possible?

February 19th, 2025

11:00 AM - 12:00 PM ET

#### **Emily Jashinsky 0:08**

Right. Good morning, everyone. I want to thank the Quincy Institute for hosting this timely and important debate from a perspective that, of course, is not corrupted by the many influences that often warp discussion among the foreign policy establishment, we are very eager to begin this debate about whether a peace agreement in Ukraine is possible. Just last night, the New York Times reported quote the latest round of talks to end the war in Ukraine concluded on Wednesday without any sign of meaningful progress. So as expected, the sticking point is territory in Ukraine's east. President Zelensky reiterated on Monday before yesterday's negotiations in Geneva, quote, allowing the aggressor to take something is a big mistake. The 28 point plan that was put out by the Trump administration, I think it was in November, of course, would put Russia in charge of that region without allowing for military forces. This is some of what is on the table. Just last week, President Zelensky pushed security guarantees, saying, quote, I would very much like us to sign security guarantees first and then sign other documents. In my view, Zelensky added that would be a good signal. This is not even a matter of fairness, but a matter of trust, more trust in partners if guarantees come first and then everything else. So can this stalemate be broken?

This morning's debaters are George Beebe, his director of grand strategy at the Quincy Institute, and former Russia director at the CIA. He is going to argue that a peace agreement is possible. John Mearsheimer, who is the R Wendell Harrison, Distinguished Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago will make the case that the war will only be settled on the battlefield. Our debaters will first deliver opening remarks, they will then engage in back and forth question and answer, and finally, they will deliver closing statements, and all of you will have the opportunity to vote at the beginning of the debate, at the beginning of the debate, now and then again at the end, to measure who shifted the most opinion in their direction over the course of the debate.

So before we begin, we would like to get a general sense of where you as an audience stand in a second. Actually, it looks like you can see it right now. In fact, a poll will pop up on your screen. It's going to be asking the question, is a peace agreement in Ukraine possible? That's what's on the table today. So please go ahead and answer it. We will share the results. We will follow up with the same question after the debate ends, to see if your opinions have shifted. So please do go ahead and respond to the poll. Now on that note, George Beebe. George Beebe is going to offer his opening remarks on the foreshore of this resolution. George, the floor is yours.

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### **George Beebe 2:50**

Thank you very much, Emily. Thank you, John for agreeing to debate what I think we both agree is a very important issue. And oddly enough, I'd like to agree. I'd like to begin with something that I think John and I agree to, and that is that this war in Ukraine did not really have its origins in a Russian effort to capture territory in Ukraine, a Russian effort to extend its Empire, to rebuild the Soviet Union, not fundamentally a war of territorial aggrandizement, really. This war began as a geopolitical clash between the United States and NATO on the one hand, and Russia on the other, over what the European security order ought to look like. What Russia's role in that order ought to be, and what Ukraine's place ought to be. And this, of course, is also connected to a debate over the broader global order, and the Russians said fundamentally that they were not willing to live with a NATO centric European security architecture, or a broader NATO centric or US centric international order, and that fundamental clash has been played out in the arena of Ukraine, much to the destruction of Ukraine itself. But the reason why this point is important is because if the United States has fundamentally altered its views of what Europe's security order ought to look like, and if the United States has already decided that that Unipolar Moment a unipolar world order dominated by the United States and its European partners is already off the table and not in America's own interests, then that, in turn, suggests that the possibilities for agreement, some sort of compromise.

To end the war in Ukraine is possible, and here, I think we have a situation where all parties actually have an incentive to try to find a compromise to end the war in Ukraine. The Ukrainian incentive is clear. If this war continues for very much longer, Ukraine is on a path toward destruction, toward becoming a dysfunctional, ineffective rump state, depopulated in a demographic crisis without an ability to reconstruct itself, because Russia will essentially prevent that. And so they need an end to the war so that they have the possibility of resurrection and avoiding a state of dysfunctionality and state failure. The United States has an incentive to seek a deal here because of the geopolitical reality we face in the world. China is increasingly a peer competitor, the biggest geopolitical challenge the United States faces. In that situation, it makes no sense for the United States to continue pursuing policies with Russia that have the effect of driving Russia towards closer and closer security cooperation with China against the United States to deal effectively with China. We need a Russia that has greater autonomy, greater room for maneuver, that is not a dependent, subordinate partner to China, but has an ability to deal with the United States and the West in a more normal fashion, and is not beholden to Beijing going forward. So that's a big incentive for the US to try to find a way to end the war in Ukraine.

And I think the Russians also agree here. Russia does not want to be in the situation it is currently in where it is increasingly dependent on China, where China can set the terms of the relationship, can essentially dictate to Russia how much it's going to pay for oil and gas, for example, where Russia does not have access to Western technology, is increasingly unable to compete in those areas of high technology that are central to being an influential and powerful player in the 21st Century. So the Russians and the United States both, I believe, have

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geopolitical reasons to find a compromise, and Ukraine has reasons of its own. So I think all of these factors are aligning to make all sides incentivized to find a compromise.

### **Emily Jashinsky 7:45**

Professor Mearsheimer, the floor is yours for the against side of the resolution.

### **John Mearsheimer 7:52**

Okay, thank you very much, Emily. And thank you to the organizers for inviting me here, and I'm glad to be debating George, who's an old friend and someone I respect greatly, as Emily said at the start, my basic argument is that there's no way you can negotiate a genuine peace settlement to this conflict. And what you see taking place in these negotiations in places like Geneva, is basically kabuki theater. It's going nowhere. This war is going to be settled on the battlefield, and then you'll get negotiations that lead to some sort of armistice, which means a frozen conflict moving forward.

And the core of my argument as to why this is the case is that both sides have demands that are light years apart. They're just polar opposite sets of demands, and neither side is willing to compromise, and if neither side is willing to compromise, that means you have no bargaining space to get a deal here, to get a peace agreement, you need bargaining space, but there's no bargaining space because both sets of demands, the Ukrainian set of demands, backed up by the Europeans and the Russian demands, are polar opposites, and neither side wants to compromise. To unpack this a bit, let's look at Russian demands, which I think are the most important. There are three basic Russian demands. Number one is that Ukraine has to be neutral. That means it cannot be in NATO, and it cannot have meaningful security guarantees from the West, and here we're talking mainly about the United States. It has to be a genuinely neutral country.

Secondly, Ukraine has to disarm to the point where it's not an offensive threat to Russia. That means significant disarmament for Ukraine. And then the third demand is that the Russians insist that the West and Ukraine and the international community more broadly, were. Recognize Russia's annexation of Crimea and the four oblasts in eastern Ukraine that the Russians have already annexed. The Russians make it unequivocally clear that these demands are non negotiable, and they have never moved away from any of these demands, despite all the nonsense in the Western media about how they're willing to compromise on this and that they are unwilling to compromise on these three demands, and it's for a very simple reason, what the Russians think about what is going on in Ukraine is that it is an existential threat. They think that Ukraine becoming part of NATO is an existential threat to Russia. It is a threat to their survival.

And these three demands, and I cannot emphasize this point clearly enough, these three demands, are there for the purpose of removing that existential threat, and the reason they will not compromise is because they are determined for all the obvious reasons to remove that

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existential threat. Now the problem here is that the vast majority of people in the West do not believe the Russians are facing an existential threat. Most people believe the Russians are just good old fashioned imperialists, and they're just interested in conquering territory. And if you believe that, then there is bargaining space. But the fact is, that's not how the Russians think and how people in the West think is simply irrelevant.

The only thing that matters here is what the Russians think. And the Russians think they're facing an existential threat. They're determined to eliminate that threat, and there is therefore no room for them to compromise on their demands. There's no bargaining space from their point of view. Okay, let's go to the Ukrainians. The Ukrainians are not interested in bargaining either. They're not interested in giving up what they consider to be sacred territory. We live in the age of nationalism, the idea that the Ukrainians are going to be willing to give up four oblasts, plus Crimea to the Russians and accept that with a smile on their face that is simply not going to happen. Furthermore, from a Ukrainian point of view, at this juncture, Russia is an existential threat. Russia is an existential threat from Ukraine's point of view. And what are we asking the Ukrainians to do? Or what are the Russians asking the Ukrainians to do, they're asking him to disarm and to eschew any alliance with the west, to have no security guarantee. This is unacceptable to the Ukrainians for all the obvious reasons. So what do you have here? You have a situation where both the Ukrainians and the Russians have a set of demands that are irreconcilable, and neither one is willing to move for what I think are good reasons from each side's point of view, the end result of all this is it will be settled on the battlefield, and at some point it will be clear that the Russians have won and the Ukrainians are in a hopeless situation, And what you'll get is an armistice, and from there forward, you will have a frozen conflict, not a negotiated peace settlement.

### **Emily Jashinsky 13:29**

Thank you so much, professor Mearsheimer, we are now going to go into a Q A portion here, where I'm going to start with George. I will ask you a question. You'll have five minutes to answer, and then professor Mearsheimer will get a three minute rebuttal, and we will rinse and repeat that cycle, as they say. So. George, a question that I'm picking up on from Professor Mearsheimer, here is this question of bargaining space. If both sides see the other as an existential threat, then there is necessarily no room for compromise. So you coming to this perspective, I actually think you probably agree that both sides see the other as an existential threat. I assume you both agree on that question. Then what room is there for bargaining space? Why is there in your opinion, room for bargaining space? You'll have five minutes.

### **George Beebe 14:13**

Well, I think I'd like to start with something John and I agree with, and that is that the Russians see the Ukraine issue broadly defined as an existential threat to Russia. The Russians do not see Ukraine separate from the West, separate from the United States, and NATO involved inside Ukraine as by itself, an existential threat. And that's a very important distinction, because if the United States is willing to say to the Russians, we are comfortable assuring Moscow that

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the United States will not bring Ukraine into the NATO alliance, that we are not going to continue our post cold war policy of continue to expand. In NATO eastward, and the security assurances that we're willing to provide to Ukraine will be fashioned in such a way to respect Russia's own security concerns, then you do have bargaining space, and I think that's exactly the situation that we're in the United States has clearly and repeatedly signaled to Russia that we are willing to close the door on NATO's further enlargement, that we're also willing to close the door on NATO. Military involvement inside Ukraine, no combat presence inside Ukraine, no military infrastructure inside Ukraine. And when you provide those kinds of assurances, which the United States has clearly indicated repeatedly that it is willing to do, now, you've got bargaining space. Now the Russians can look at Ukrainian disarmament through a little bit different lens and show more flexibility on this question of what kind of Ukrainian capabilities, what size Ukrainian military the Russians are willing to live with.

And I would further add that Ukraine's internal situation is such as a result of this war, the damages that have been done the demographic crisis that I think everyone acknowledges Ukraine is in Ukraine itself is not going to be able to field an 800,000 man military, for example, that's a paper exercise at this point that is really important for Political buy in, but will not affect what kind of standing army the Ukrainians can actually put into the field, and the Russians know that very well, so that gives them more flexibility on this issue. I would finally add, the Russians have, in fact, already shown some flexibility on these issues. This assertion that the Russians have unbending and permanent demands on this that they have not shown any flexibility on is wrong. When Putin gave a speech in June of 2025 2024 laying out Russian demands on ending the Ukraine war. He insisted on full control and recognition of Crimea and the four oblasts in Ukraine that Russia has officially annexed but doesn't fully control on the ground the Russians fell away from that they have indicated again, quite often in the past year that they're willing to settle for the Line of Control in Zaporizhzhia and Kherson Oblast, in return for Ukrainian withdrawal from portions of the Donbas that they now occupy, which Russia has annexed and claimed that by itself, is an indication of flexibility on the Russian part.

And the Russians have also affirmed again, repeatedly and again by Putin that they are willing to live with future Ukrainian accession to the EU. Now, whether that that happens or not is also a complicated question, but the fact that the Russians have indicated a willingness to accept political and economic integration of Ukraine into the West, if in turn, The West closes the door on NATO membership for Ukraine. That also is an indication of flexibility on Russia's side, and that is the basis for a geopolitical compromise going forward. So those things, I think, are already well down the road. The negotiators have already accepted that those are going to be part of a compromise settlement. What's left right now are some very difficult issues over territorial control, and there are some creative solutions that are right now under discussion, such as taking the disputed portions of Donbas, turning them into a demilitarized zone and or free economic zone that would allow each side to claim sovereignty, but in practice, create a situation that is acceptable to both sides and saves face politically for both sides. If, in fact, that's where we are in the negotiations. And I think that is where we are. That's an indication that this is not kabuki theater. There's actual bargaining going on and serious approaches to try to find a settlement to this war.

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### **Emily Jashinsky 19:53**

Very eager to hear your rebuttal to that. Professor Mearsheimer, you have three minutes. Very eager to hear your rebuttal to that. Professor Mearsheimer, you have three minutes.

### **John Mearsheimer 19:57**

I will try not to disappoint you. Emily. Uh, George, just on the whole business of these concessions that you see the Russians making, I simply don't believe that. And I think there's zero evidence that the Russians themselves have said that they're willing to concede on the four oblasts. You tell this story that the Russians say if the Ukrainians withdraw from the Donbas, and that, of course, involves two of the four oblasts, they'll accept the Line of Control on the other two oblasts as a possible final settlement. The Russians have made it unequivocally clear that they have annexed all four of those oblasts and they are not giving up any territory. What we have here in the West is an ongoing propaganda war where it becomes virtually impossible to figure out what the Russians are really saying, because we have become so expert in putting at putting words in their mouth and saying that they're willing to concede this, or willing to concede that it's simply not true, they are not giving up those four oblasts, and in my opinion, they would be nuts to give up those four oblasts.

Now you say furthermore that we have room to cut a deal here, because we can, in effect, isolate, we the Americans, can isolate the Ukrainians, and the Ukrainians can't do much to threaten the Russians. First of all, even if the United States is able to cut off aid to Ukraine, there's still the Europeans. The Europeans back the Ukrainians to the hilt, and the Europeans believe that Russia is an imperial power. They don't agree with you and me that this is all about NATO expansion. The Europeans, like most people in the United States, believe that this is really all about Imperial Russia on the march, and we've temporarily stopped them, but they're eventually going to move on Eastern Europe, and they're eventually going to move on Western Europe, given that European leaders think like that, they have a deep seated interest in remaining joined at the hip with Ukraine forever.

So the Russians face not simply the Ukrainians, but the Europeans. Then you get to the Americans. Your assumption is that Trump is flexibly, is willing to cut a deal. Who knows what Trump thinks from day to day? You know he he changes his views on subjects all the time. Furthermore, Trump is not forever, and you could have Joe Biden the second come back in 2028 and the Russians are back to square one. Furthermore, the United States is basically out to wreck Ukraine. Excuse me, is out to wreck Russia. The Russians fully understand this, the idea that we're a benevolent actor, we want to cut a deal with the Russians. We want to live happily ever after with the Russians. This is just not the way we work, right? We are looking to cause enormous trouble for the Russians, and Trump continues to do lots of things that point in that direction. The Russians don't trust us, as far as they can throw us, and that means that compromise, compromise is not something that they're really interested in. They are interested

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in creating a security situation involving Ukraine that will allow them to maximize their security in the frozen conflict that lies ahead.

### **Emily Jashinsky 23:43**

Well, I'm glad you just made that point, because I was going to actually ask for the next question portion of this about Russia's incentives. Now, George mentioned that from the United States perspective, it doesn't make sense for the United States to drive Russia to China. Russia has looked at I mean, we're talking so many young Russian men, so many young Ukrainian men who have been lost to this war, who have been killed or who have been wounded or otherwise traumatized in this war.

So is there any incentive on the Russian perspective for compromise at a certain point, like, if we're talking, you know, they get to, we're talking. We go to more than the estimate. Latest estimate is 2 million casualties in this war. So is there a point where there's a convergence of US interest and Russia interest that squeezes a compromise, or does that just become the armistice that you referenced, which is not the same thing as a peace agreement?

### **John Mearsheimer 24:41**

Look, I think that it was from the get go in our interest to have good relations with the Russians. If you live in a multi polar world, and you're the United States and you're the most powerful state on the planet and the peer competitor between the other two great powers. Is China. You want the Russians on your side of the ledger. You want to be you want the Russians to be allies against China. And the last thing that you want to Drew do is drive the Russians into the arms of the Chinese. And of course, this is exactly what the Ukraine war has done. And furthermore, it's pinned us down in Eastern Europe, and it's hindered our ability to pivot to East Asia. So from a strategic point of view, I think the Ukraine war has been remarkably foolish, and I think we have powerful incentives to put an end to this. But my point to you is that we can't do that. And we can't do that because we're so deeply involved in the war.

At this point in time, there are so many people in the United States who are committed to continuing this war, putting the Trump administration aside. The national security establishment in the United States is deeply committed to staying in the fight. The Europeans are committed to staying in the fight for the reasons I just explained, and the Ukrainians, of course, will stay in the fight because they want to regain their lost territory, and they want to join the NATO alliance. So we're in a position where we just can't seem to shut this one down. And even if we move down the road that George was describing, and we are able to cut off support, our support for Ukraine. The fact is that the Europeans and the Ukrainians themselves will stay in the fight, and this will cause all sorts of problems for us, because it will be hard to divorce ourselves from this situation. So I think there's no question that from a strategic point of view, it'd be best if this war had never happened, or if we could end it and leave it behind. But I just don't see that happening.

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### **George Beebe 26:51**

A couple of points, I think John and I agree on some fundamentals here, that the United States has a strategic incentive to try to end this war where we disagree is in our ability to do so and the viability of continuing the war. What we lack here is the ability to do this for as long as it takes, and that was the old Biden administration slogan. We will continue to support Ukraine for as long as it takes. And that has an assumption behind it, that we have the capacity to support Ukraine for as long as it takes, but we don't. There's some structural limitations on our ability to continue this level of support. One is Ukrainian manpower. Ukraine's population is a fraction of Russia is probably a fifth of the size of the Russian population. They've got probably under 33 million people at best, probably closer to 20 million remaining on the territory right now, and a vast portion of that are pensioners, retirees, people that can't contribute to the war effort, and in fact, are dependent on state outlays. That is a real problem, it poses real restrictions on how long Ukraine can continue to field an effective military force on the battlefield. The US and Europe can't change that demographic reality unless we're willing to put our own boots on the ground in Ukraine, which we are not willing to do.

Second is production, particularly in air defense missiles, we're already running out of what we can provide to Ukraine to defend itself against missile, glide bomb and drone attacks from Russia. We simply don't have enough volume and enough production capacity to keep up with the demands the Russians are out producing us in terms of what they can build and send at Ukraine relative to what we can put in place in Ukraine to defense against those attacks. And again, we can't change that reality. Neither can Europe. So that, in turn, imposes a real incentive for us to try to find a way out of this. We can't just continue a frozen conflict ad infinitum.

Here, then the last thing I would say here on the Russian side, the Russians can't fix their big geopolitical problem and their big security problem simply by conquering territory in Ukraine, let's admit, for the sake of argument, that Russia might be able to conquer all of the Donbas, all of the territory that it claims. It still is faced with a big security challenge in the form of the United States and NATO. Now European states are launching a rearmament effort. There's deep hostility in you, in Europe, relative to Russia, Germany is starting to crank out an ability to re arm that is very concerning to the Russians. They can't do anything about it, just through military solutions in order to cope with the enlarged NATO Alliance, which has doubled in size since the Cold War ended, from 16 to 32 members, taking on a lot more territory, has a technological and economic advantage over Russia. Russia has to engage with Europe, with NATO, with the United States at the negotiating table, working out arms control arrangements, confidence and security building measures, risk reduction measures. It can't do that if the Ukraine war is continuing, that is a real security incentive for the Russians to try to find a compromise end to the war in Ukraine, because it can't fix those bigger security problems just by prevailing on the battlefield.

### **Emily Jashinsky 31:05**

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George, I want to ask what many people may think is an obvious question, and that all of those incentives just laid out have roughly been the same over the course of the war. Now, of course, more and more people have died as the war has raged on. But if everything you just said were true, why is it not an argument in John's favor that even just yesterday, the negotiators left Geneva basically empty handed, as in, why has this not happened yet? If all of those things are true?

### **George Beebe 31:35**

Well, here again, I would cite John that there is a propaganda war that's going on here an effort to shape the narrative of what is going on. And I think it's important that we keep in mind that nearly the entirety of the mainstream media in the United States and Europe doesn't want to see a compromise solution. They don't want to see some sort of concession made to Russia in the interest of finding a compromise settlement here. So they want to portray all this as futile. They want to downplay the possibility of bargaining space going on here. So every time a negotiation round ends without a breakthrough, without, you know, a clear resolution to some of these thorny issues, they're ready to proclaim this a failure. In fact, the sides are zeroing in on key compromises. The things that are in dispute began here. They're gradually zeroing in on a few remaining issues now. They're hard issues. They're difficult issues. You can't resolve them in one or two meetings. This requires a lot of creativity. It requires trust building. It requires a step by step approach.

So we didn't have a final solution yesterday. Here in Geneva, we don't have a breakthrough, quote, unquote, but the sides are gradually zeroing in on acceptable compromises, and they did agree that they're going to continue to meet. I think it's very clear that there's going to be another round of negotiations very soon at this trilateral level. And it's also clear that both President Putin and President Zelensky are preparing their publics for a compromise. It's clear that President Zelensky is doing some things to get Ukraine ready for this kind of thing, by talking about new presidential elections, by talking about a referendum that would legitimize and ratify a compromise deal. And I think President Putin is doing things in Russia, such as, for example, the move against the telegram channel, which is a an online channel in which much nationalist, patriotic opinion is being expressed the very parts of the Russian political spectrum that would be most opposed to compromises and concessions to end the war in Ukraine.

So I don't think it's true that there's not progress being made. I think there is progress being made. It's unreasonable to expect that it's going to happen quickly or in one or two meetings, but these negotiations are getting very serious, and the fact that a lot of these discussions are zeroing in on tough issues like territory is a sign that they're serious and they're making some progress.

### **John Mearsheimer 34:43**

Emily, can I just respond to George?

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### **Emily Jashinsky 34:45**

Absolutely, you have three minutes.

### **John Mearsheimer 34:48**

George, the big issue between us is whether there's bargaining space, and that revolves around the question of whether the two sides are willing. Willing to move off their positions and make compromises. And you said in your comments a few minutes ago that hardly anybody in the West, and this, of course, includes Ukraine as well, is willing to compromise. And I think that's true, but then you talk about all this evidence of compromise between the two sides, but you said quite correctly that there's hardly any evidence of willingness to compromise in the West. Furthermore, if you look at the Russians again, there is zero evidence that the Russians are willing to compromise on those three demands that I described before which they, of course, laid out on June 14, 2024 as you pointed out, those are hard demands, and those demands are designed to remove the existential threat that they see, and therefore you should not expect them to want to compromise on those three demands, because they're inextricably bound up with what they see is an existential threat.

So the idea that we're getting closer and closer, I don't think that's true. And as Emily was saying, you know, these negotiations in Geneva just ended, and if anything, all of the commentary from both sides was that they were worse off after this third set of negotiations than they were after the first set and the second set. So it appears that they're not making any progress. So I just don't see you know what the happy ending here is. And then just my final point is, if you believe this is going to be a frozen conflict, right, which I do, then if you're the Russians, you have to position yourself for that frozen conflict. And that means you have to be ruthless in what you do in the months ahead, before you have an armistice. So the Russians have an incentive, not only not to compromise, but to be more aggressive in their goals, especially their territorial goals. In the months ahead, we have about 10 minutes until closing statements, and this is such a good back and forth, I say we just keep that going.

### **Emily Jashinsky 37:18**

George, three to five minute response to Professor Mearsheimer

### **George Beebe 37:21**

Well, I do think there is evidence that the Russians have shown flexibility. The notion that they've shown there's zero evidence of any flexibility or compromise on the Russian side is just wrong. One of the things you hear constantly from Russian officials, including from Foreign Minister Lavrov, in an interview that was broadcast just a few weeks ago, was the spirit of Anchorage. The Russians talk about, here's what we thought we agreed to at Anchorage, and we expect that to be reflected in these negotiations going forward. Well, what was the spirit of Anchorage? What are we talking about? What are the Russians talking about? Well, the spirit of

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Anchorage, as I understand it, is exactly that compromise, this notion that in three of the oblasts, and in particular in in ksain and Zaporizhzhia, the Russians would settle for a Line of Control compromise that they would de facto accept that they were not going to continue the effort to control portions of those regions that they don't currently occupy in return, the Ukrainians would withdraw from parts of Donetsk that the Russians have claimed that Ukraine currently holds, that was sort of the fundamental framework of compromise that was discussed at Anchorage, and that by itself, is a compromise that is less than what Putin demanded in that speech in June of 2024 that both John and I have referred to.

So that is evidence, and the Russians have repeatedly cited that second thing in the closing press conference that both President Trump and President Putin had at Anchorage, President Putin said some very significant things, including he said we in Russia understand that Ukraine has security concerns that need to be addressed, and we are willing to talk about how to do that now that is not a specific concession, and I wouldn't expect President Putin to say we are willing to accept certain levels of armament, certain sizes of the Ukrainian military, certain caps on. On military weapons that Ukraine might have training. But in general, the notion that Russia is willing to address Ukraine's security concerns and a public acknowledgment that it does have legitimate security concerns at stake here, I think, is evidence that the Russians are willing to talk about these issues, that they're not simply going to come in and say, Ukraine has to have an 80,000 man military. It can't have any offensive missiles. It can't do the following things.

What I think, where we are right now is that the Russians are willing to live with a military relationship between Ukraine and Europe, so long as it closes the door on Western military forces on the ground in Ukraine, Western military infrastructure on Ukrainian territory and the future prospect of membership in NATO and further NATO enlargement to the east. All of those things are things that the United States, I think, is willing to accept, and that, to me, opens the door for bargaining, and that I think is in fact, what is going on right now in these negotiations.

### **Emily Jashinsky 41:20**

And John, three to five minutes. Response to that, I'll just tack on, why does what George just laid out not count as compromises in the right direction and showing that there's a willingness to find a kind of find that "space to bargain", as you referenced in your opening statement.

### **John Mearsheimer 41:36**

Because George talks about the spirit of Anchorage, we have no record of what was agreed to at Anchorage. In the West tells all these stories about what was agreed to at Anchorage, and the Ukrainians tell stories about what was agreed to. The Europeans tell stories this huge propaganda war takes place. I want to see where the Russians said, right, the things that George has them saying, I see no evidence of that. And the Russians, and this is especially true of Lavrov, their foreign minister, who George has referenced, Lavrov has been driving home the point that the Russian demands of June 14, 2024 haven't changed at all. The idea that the Russians are making compromises, I simply see no evidence of that. I see lots of evidence of

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the West saying that's true, but I just don't believe it. The only concrete thing that I thought came out of Anchorage was that Trump said that possibility of a ceasefire was off the table. He said that right after the anchorage discussions, of course, he then began to flip on that issue, and he continued to talk about a possible ceasefire.

The Russians have made it clear there's going to be no ceasefire. This is either going to be settled on the battlefield or you're going to get a peace agreement, and we are nowhere near a peace agreement, and this, these negotiations have been going on for quite a while now. Now, George also makes a big deal of the fact that the Russians accept the fact that Ukraine has legitimate security concerns. And implicit in George's commentary is the belief that you can satisfy Russian security concerns at the same time you can satisfy Ukrainian security concerns. The problem is George, you cannot do that. The Russians do not want Ukraine to be in NATO. The Russians do not want Ukraine to have a meaningful military capability. If that's the case, how can Ukraine security concerns be satisfied? Ukraine wants a big army, and it wants to be joined at the hip with NATO or have a security guarantee, an Article Five type security guarantee from the west. That's how you satisfy Ukrainian security concerns. The Russians say that that's unequivocally unacceptable.

This is the standard security dilemma in international politics. What one country does to enhance its security detracts from the other side's security. This is an iron law of international politics. So the Russians are determined that they are going to make sure their security is taken care of, and in the process, Ukraine is going to be screwed. And of course, the Ukrainians don't want to be screwed. We can understand that from their point of view, and the Europeans and the Americans don't want to see the Ukrainians screwed. But how do you avoid this? And the only way you avoid it is to win on the battlefield. But the problem there is, as you pointed out, George, the Russians are going to win on the battlefield. They're going to get their way, although you're going to get a frozen conflict. Very clear here, you're going to get a frozen conflict, and it is going to be very ugly moving forward. We are in deep trouble.

### **Emily Jashinsky 45:01**

George, we have about three minutes for a rebuttal to that. Is your argument based on propaganda? Is that? Why is why is your predicate here, not propaganda?

### **George Beebe 45:13**

Well, I think what I understand John to be arguing is, show me the documents, the mem cons of what happened in Alaska, so that I see evidence that the Russians have actually committed themselves to certain positions on that. And the reality here is you're not going to get that. That's not public. We're not going to be privy to that. So we given that we're not going to get access to what each side had to say in these confidential diplomatic engagements, you're forced to make some inferences, to look at indirect indicators, indirect evidence, of what may have been agreed to. And my argument here is what both the Russians and the Americans are saying about what they thought was agreed to in anchorage points you in the direction of inferring that some

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understandings were reached that needed to be fleshed out, that they were understandings in principle. The Devil was in the details on how you translate these agreements in principle into working documents that can actually be implemented. But I think that is, in fact, a fair reading of where we are. When you look at what the Russians are saying, what the Ukrainians are saying, what the Americans are saying, We're in fact, zeroing in on some compromises that are attempting to address exactly that security dilemma that John raised, and that is the problem that we're dealing with here.

This is not first and foremost, a deterrence problem, where the United States and the West and Ukraine somehow have to build a significant enough military capability to Stop Russian aggression and deter any future aggression. We're, in fact, dealing with an escalatory spiral problem, a security dilemma, problem in which each side sees its own security as compromised by steps that the other side is taking. That's a world war one kind of problem. The way you address a problem like that is not through more deterrence, not through more military conflict. You can only address a security dilemma, problem by discussion and compromise, a way to address each side's legitimate security concerns, both of which are seen as existential on the part of the parties.

That's what's going on right now. We're finding a way to address Ukraine security concerns so that it feels supported, that it feels it won't be left alone to face the Russian army without the backing of the West in some way, while at the same time respecting Russia's concern that that combination of NATO and American involvement in Ukraine with the Ukrainian capability is an existential threat to Russia, and we're developing a security assurance model for Ukraine that actually addresses both sides of this, that respects Russia's concerns about NATO, about NATO involvement inside Ukraine, while at the same time assuring the Ukrainians that should Russia actually attempt to re invade after a peace deal, that they will not be left alone, that they will get European support, and that the United States will itself be a backstop to the Europeans as they provide that aid to Ukraine and Ukraine's own self defense. To me, that's a reasonable compromise. It's a way of addressing both sides concerns here.

### **Ermily Jashinsky 49:02**

Well, we've reached the end of our question and answer portion. Are moving now into closing statements. As a reminder to the audience, please do prepare at the end of closing statements to respond once again to the polls so we can measure the shift in opinion. I have to say this has been, I think, the most helpful by far, back and forth on the question at hand today that I have seen in a long time. So we're very grateful to both of our debaters here this morning. On that note, George, you now have three minutes for your closing statement, and that will be followed by John, the floor is yours.

### **George Beebe 49:34**

Well, ultimately, we're not going to know the answer to this question, unless and until there is some sort of breakthrough among the players. So I think we have to acknowledge that we can't

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have a very high degree of certainty about whether peace is possible until we actually have presidents sitting down at some kind of Summit saying. A we're prepared to put our names on an agreement here. Moving forward, how close are we to that? I think we're a lot closer than most people believe we are, and I think all of the sides have serious incentives to try to get to that point, and it's fundamental here to understand that the United States objectives, not just vis a vis this war in Ukraine, but more broadly in the world, more geopolitically, have changed, and that change is not going to be ephemeral, and it's not dependent on Trump himself.

The China challenge is going to be an enduring one, and that incentive that the United States has to normalize its relationship with Russia and thereby make it easier for us to cope with the challenge that's posed by China is not going to go away, no matter who is in the White House. And the structural impediments that we face to keeping the war in Ukraine going, to keeping this conflict simmering, are substantial. They're not going to go away either, regardless of who is in office. And the Ukrainians, I think, clearly recognize that time is not on their side. Their situation gets worse week by week and month by month. So their incentives for a deal are not going to go away. They're going to increase over time.

And the last thing the Russians can't fix their fundamental geopolitical problem or their fundamental security problem by winning the war against Ukraine, they capture all the territory that they want to capture. They still have a NATO security challenge that they can't address without engaging with the West. They're still left, more or less in a geopolitical cul de sac, dependent and subordinate to China, not able to tack between East and West and to play the role of a great power, and really left unequipped technologically to advance in those areas that are central to 21st Century power and influence in the world. So they're going to have incentives to try to find a way out of that situation. None of that's going to go away. And that means that I think the possibilities for creative solutions, compromises on some of these thorny problems in Ukraine are going to be there. Doesn't mean that we're going to be successful necessarily in finding elegant solutions to some of these problems, but it does mean that the sides have real incentives to try hard to find them, and I think we're probably going to find that in the near future we're going to see some substantial breakthroughs.

### **Emily Jashinsky 53:13**

Professor Mearsheimer, your closing statement.

### **John Mearsheimer 53:16**

Thank you, Emily. I think with regard to where George and I are at we both agree that the moment, the demands that the two sides have are far apart, and the question on the table is whether you can have any compromise on the part of both actors. I think George is saying that you're going to need compromise from both players in this situation, which I think is correct. And as I said before, this really does come down to a question, whether or not you believe there's bargaining space. And I want to start with the Russian demands, and then say a few words about the Ukrainian demands, and just strengthen, try to strengthen my argument as to why

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there's not going to be a compromise, why there's really no bargaining space. It's just very important to understand, and this is remarkably difficult for most Westerners to understand, that Russia sees this situation in Ukraine as an existential threat, they see it as a threat to their survival. And I understand lots of Americans and lots of Europeans don't buy this argument, but that doesn't matter, because the only thing that matters is what the Russians think. And as Bill Burns pointed out in a very famous memo in early 2008 the Russian elite, almost to a person, understands that Ukraine and NATO is an existential threat from their point of view, and their point of view is what matters. So these three demands that they've come up with to deal with this existential threat are demands that they're not going to move off of, and they would be remarkably foolish not. Given how they think about Ukraine and NATO to move off those demands.

Now, George says that there's evidence that they're moving away from those demands. I think he's simply wrong with all due respect, and I think that people who have doubts about this should go Google what Lavrov has been saying over the past two months, because he's given a whole handful of press conferences where he's talked about this issue, the Russians are driving a hard bargain today, just as they were in June of 2024 there's been no movement on the Russian side, so I don't think that you see potential for compromise from the Russian side. Now, on the Ukrainian side, Georgia's basic argument is the Ukrainians are going to have to make certain concessions, but we could deal with the security dilemma. George's argument is you can satisfy Ukraine's security concerns at the same time you can satisfy Russia's security concerns. And what I'm saying is that's simply not true. If you look at the Russian demands, you look at what the Russians want, they basically to put it in crude terms. They want to screw the Ukrainians. They want to make sure Ukraine has no significant military capability and it has no meaningful Alliance, and that in a very important way, Ukraine is left naked and is not a threat to Russia. That's the Russian position. And there's no way you can fix security for Ukraine in a way that doesn't scare the Russians.

You know you were talking about at the end of your comments, George, about the possibility of the United States or the Europeans coming to the rescue of the Ukrainians if they get into trouble. That was part of the compromise deal that you were talking about. That's categorically unacceptable to the Russians. That's what this war is all about. Is you and I both agree there can be no security guarantee. So you have this tragic situation, as I often say, someday, when we look back at the April 2008 decision to bring Ukraine into NATO, it is going to be seen is one of the most disastrous foreign policy decisions the United States has ever made, because this one has led to a giant disaster that we're now in the midst of, which shows no sign of going away over time, nothing but trouble regarding Ukraine for as far as the eye can see. And I'm sad to say, I don't see any way out of it. I hope I'm wrong, and I hope I do, truly hope that George is right, but I'm sad to say, I think he's wrong.

### **Emily Jashinsky 57:47**

This marks the end of our debate portion, which means it's time for you to vote once again. The poll is up on the screen as a reminder. Initially, 47% of you said yes, you agreed with George. A

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peace agreement was possible. 53% agreed with Professor Mearsheimer, no, a peace agreement is not possible. So please do go ahead and answer the poll right now so we can track exactly who moved the most opinion or who moved the most minds during our debate this morning. As a reminder, please do go to the Quincy Institute's website. Quincy Institute. It's actually [Quincyinst.org](http://Quincyinst.org), to learn more about upcoming events, just like this one, if you enjoyed today's programming. There is more where that came from.

We are tabulating our poll results here. Let me take a look at the screen, I can't see the percentages. So if the Quincy folks could get those for me, that would be fantastic. 35% here we go. The results are in. 35% now say yes, a peace agreement is possible. 65% say no, a peace agreement is not possible. So I'm the worst person to be in this position, because I'm terrible at math. But here we go from 47% saying yes to 35% saying yes, in this case, and we go from 53% saying no to 65% saying no, which looks to me like, if I'm reading these numbers correctly, 12 points in each direction, which looks like a tie. Am I correct on this? If I'm doing the math correctly, it looks like the result of today's debate is that you both moved an equal number of minds, which I think is a wonderful, oh, it looks like,

Okay, wait. We have, we have a concluding argument here. Looks like Professor Mearsheimer is the winner of today's debate, according to the Quincy Institute's tabulators. So Professor Mearsheimer, congratulations on this performance, but congratulations to both of you for. I think having the single best conversation I have heard on the question at hand, even as Geneva ended, unfortunately yesterday, with not much significant direction. So George, John, thank you so much for joining us for today's debate.

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