



## **John Mearsheimer: Ukraine war is a long-term danger**

*This transcript may not be 100% accurate due to audio quality or other factors.*

**Aaron Maté (AM):** Welcome to Pushback. I'm Aaron Maté. Joining me is John Mearsheimer. He is R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, now writing on Substack. Professor Mearsheimer, thanks so much for joining me.

**John Mearsheimer (JM):** It's my pleasure to be here, Aaron.

**AM:** I want to get your response to this from *The Wall Street Journal*. This just came out, and it says this about the state of Ukraine's wildly hyped counteroffensive and the Western efforts to encourage it. It says this, quote, "When Ukraine launched its big counteroffensive this spring, Western military officials knew Kiev didn't have all the training or weapons—from shells to warplanes—that it needed to dislodge Russian forces. But they hoped Ukrainian courage and resourcefulness would carry the day. They haven't." Unquote.

So, that's from *The Wall Street Journal*, basically admitting that the West pushed Ukraine into this counteroffensive, knowing that Ukraine did not have what it needed to come anywhere close to success. I'm just wondering, having long predicted that this US effort to drive Ukraine into NATO, turn Ukraine into a NATO proxy, would lead to Ukraine's decimation. Your response to this candid admission in this establishment news outlet.

**JM:** Well, it seems to me that anybody who knows anything about military tactics and strategy had to understand that there was hardly any chance that the Ukrainian counteroffensive would succeed. I mean, there were just so many factors that were arrayed against the Ukrainians that it was almost impossible for them to make any significant progress. Nevertheless, the West encouraged them, pushed them hard to launch this offensive. In fact, we wanted them to launch the offensive in the spring, and you sort of say to yourself, 'What's going on here?' This is like encouraging them to launch a suicidal offensive which is completely counterproductive. Wouldn't it make much more sense for them to remain on the defensive, at least for the time being? But I think what was going on here was that the West is

very fearful that time is running out, that if the Ukrainians don't show some significant success on the battlefield in the year 2023, public support for the war will dry up and the Ukrainians will lose—and the West will lose. So, I think what happened here is that we pushed very hard for this offensive, knowing that there was a slim chance at best that it would succeed.

**AM:** In that same vein, we also integrated Ukraine as a de facto proxy of NATO without formally promising it—or without formally giving it—NATO membership, and that was a major factor in this, in Russia's invasion to begin with.

But then you have this recent NATO Summit in Lithuania, and I'm wondering your take on this. At the end of the summit, the pledge that was given to Ukraine, it seems to me that it actually made future NATO membership for Ukraine even more distant than it was when it was first promised back in 2008. Because this time the final communique—and this was apparently done at the behest of the US—said that we will admit Ukraine when allies agree and when conditions are met, but it didn't specify what those conditions are. And so accordingly, it seems to me that Ukraine is even further away from NATO than it was back when it was first promised back in 2008. I'm wondering if you agree with that assessment, and what you make of this very vague pledge from NATO.

**JM:** I agree with what you said, but I'd take it a step further. The Secretary General of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg, made it very clear that Ukraine would not be admitted into NATO until it had prevailed in the conflict. In other words, Ukraine has to win the war before it can be brought into the alliance. Well, Ukraine is not going to win the war, and therefore, Ukraine is not going to be brought into the alliance.

This war is going to go on for a long time. Even if you get a cold peace, it will linger right below the surface and there will be an ever-present danger that a hot war will break out. And in those circumstances, I find it hard to imagine the United States or any West European country agreeing to bring Ukraine into NATO. And the simple reason is that if you bring Ukraine into NATO in the midst of a conflict, you are in effect committing NATO to defending with military force Ukraine on the battlefield. And that's a situation we don't want. We do not want NATO boots on the ground, or to be more specific, we don't want American boots on the ground. So, it makes perfect sense for Stoltenberg to say that Ukraine has to win. In fact, Ukraine has to win a decisive victory over the Russians within the borders of Ukraine. That is not going to happen, in my opinion, and therefore, as you were saying, Ukraine is not going to become part of NATO.

**AM:** So, given that, I mean, do you think it's fair to speculate that the US policy in Ukraine was even more cynical than it appeared? Because basically this war was largely fought because the US refused to agree to neutrality for Ukraine, saying that, 'Well, we have an open door for NATO; we don't take people's membership off of the table.' But yet, when given the

opportunity, the US won't commit to granting Ukraine a road map to joining NATO, which leads me to conclude that, possibly, what if the aim was never to actually admit Ukraine into NATO but just use the future pledge of NATO membership to de facto turn Ukraine into a NATO proxy, without the obligation, the part of the US and its allies, to actually defend it?

**JM:** It's possible that's true. It's hard to say without a lot more evidence.

I have a slightly different view. I don't think it was so much cynicism. I think it was stupidity. I think you can't underestimate just how foolish the West is when it comes to the whole question of Ukraine—and all sorts of other issues as well. But I think that the West believed—and here we're talking mainly about the United States—that if a war did break out between Ukraine and Russia, that the West plus Ukraine would prevail, that the Russians would be defeated. I believe we thought that was the case.

If you look at the run-up to the war in early 2022, what's really striking to me is that it was quite clear that war was at least a serious possibility, yet the United States and the West more generally did virtually nothing to prevent the war. If anything, we egged the Russians on. And I find this hard to imagine. What was going on here? And I think that we believed that if a war broke out, we had trained up the Ukrainians and armed the Ukrainians up enough that they would hold their own on the battlefield. Number one. And number two, I think, we felt the magic weapon was sanctions, that we'd finished the Russians off with sanctions, and the Ukrainians would end up defeating the Russians, and they would then be in a position where we could admit them into NATO. That is what I think is going on. I don't think it's really a case of cynicism as you portray it. It may be. Again, this is an empirical question. We just need a heck of a lot more evidence to see whether your interpretation is correct or mine is. But my sense is, this is worse than a crime. This is a blunder, to put it in [*French diplomat*] Talleyrand's famous rhetoric.

**AM:** On the issue of the sanctions, it was recently reported that Russia had a milestone in selling its oil above the price cap that the US and its allies tried to impose on the price of Russian oil. Why do you think the US sanctions policy has not worked, and did that surprise you? Did you expect Russia to take more of a hit than it has?

**JM:** I thought it would take more of a hit than it has. I think the Russians themselves thought that. That's my sense from sort of keeping abreast of this conflict. I think the Russians have done better than they even expected, and certainly better than I expected. But my view, Aaron, is that even if we had been more successful with the sanctions, we would not have brought the Russians to their knees. We would not have ended up inflicting a significant defeat on them. And the reason is very simple.

The Russians believe that they're facing an existential threat in Ukraine, and when you're facing an existential threat, or you think you're facing an existential threat, you're willing to absorb huge amounts of pain to make sure that you're not defeated on the battlefield. So, I

think the sanctions were doomed from the beginning. I think when you look carefully at what has happened since then, it's quite clear that the Russians were in an excellent position to beat the sanctions, by and large. And it shouldn't have been surprising to anyone who spent a lot of time studying how sanctions work, that it was not going to do much against a country like Russia, which was so rich in natural resources and had all sorts of potential trading partners that could replace the ones that it lost in the West. I certainly don't fit in that category as an expert on sanctions, but I would imagine that people who study this issue carefully understood that it was going to be of limited utility against the Russians. And it certainly has been.

This, by the way, was a major miscalculation, I believe, on the West's part. In the literature in the West on the war, if you read the mainstream media carefully, people like to dwell on Putin's miscalculations, and they completely ignore the West's miscalculations. But I think if you look at our behavior in the run-up to the war and what has subsequently been happening in the conflict, it's quite clear that we miscalculated in a big way.

**AM:** On the point, let me ask you to respond to what Secretary of State Anthony Blinken recently said on CNN. He's talking about what he says are Putin's objectives in Ukraine, and he says Putin has already lost.

**Anthony Blinken:** In terms of what Russia sought to achieve, what Putin sought to achieve, they've already failed, they've already lost. The objective was to erase Ukraine from the map, to eliminate its independence, its sovereignty, to subsume it into Russia. That failed a long time ago.

**AM:** That's Anthony Blinken, Professor Mearsheimer. Do you think those were Putin's objectives in Ukraine?

**JM:** No. I mean, it's the conventional wisdom in the West, for sure, that these were Putin's aims. But as I have said on countless occasions, there is no evidence. Let me emphasize here: zero evidence to support the claim that Putin was bent on conquering all of Ukraine and incorporating it into a Greater Russia. You can say that a million times, but it's simply not true. Because there is no evidence that Putin had any interest in conquering all of Ukraine and that he believed when he invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, that that is what he was going to try to do.

But that just takes care of his intentions. You also have to look at his capabilities. The idea that that small force, that small Russian force that went into Ukraine in February 2022 could conquer all of the country is a laughable argument. To conquer all of Ukraine, the Russians would have needed an army that had a couple million men in it. This is a huge piece of real estate. When the Germans went into Poland in 1939—and remember when the Germans went into Poland in 1939, the Soviets went in a few weeks later, so, the two countries, Nazi

Germany and the Soviet Union were a tag team against Poland. Nevertheless, the Poles... I mean the Germans invaded Poland with roughly 1.5 million men.

The Russians had at most 190,000 men when they invaded Ukraine in February 2022. No way they had the capability to conquer the country. And they didn't try to conquer the country. And again, as I said, Putin's intentions were manifestly clear before the war that he had no interest in conquering Ukraine. He fully understood that conquering that whole country would be like swallowing a porcupine.

**AM:** And if you compare the Russian invasion of Ukraine to how the US went into Baghdad 2003, the first thing they do is attack the capital. They try to knock out the head of government, Saddam Hussein.

Russia obviously didn't do that. There were no missile strikes on the presidential office in Kiev, no missile strikes on basic infrastructure, and the railroads even left intact, even though those railroads supply military equipment. But what Putin did get, though, in those early stages was negotiations, which apparently went somewhere to the point of a tentative deal reached between Ukraine and Russia, in which Russia would have withdrawn to its pre-invasion lines and Ukraine would have basically pledged neutrality.

We know from various reports that the West stood in the way. Boris Johnson reportedly came over, told Zelensky that, 'If you sign a deal with Russia, we're not going to back you up with security guarantees.' Putin recently produced a document when he was speaking before some African leaders that he said was signed by Ukraine, and he also accused the West of sabotaging this deal. Based on the evidence you've seen, do you think that's a fair rendering of events, that there was a serious deal reached but the West stood in the way?

**JM:** Couple of points. I think there was a potential deal. Whether it could have been worked out had the West not interfered remains to be seen. There're some very complicated issues that had to be resolved here, and they weren't fully resolved in the negotiations at Istanbul. So, I would say it was a potential deal; it had real promise, for sure.

I do think that the West moved in, the British and the Americans, to sabotage the negotiations, because as I said earlier, Aaron, I think that we felt we could defeat the Russians. When those negotiations were taking place in March, at that juncture it looked like the Ukrainians were holding their own on the battlefield, and that simple fact coupled with our belief in sanctions made us think we had the Russians right where we wanted them, and the last thing we wanted was a deal. This was time to inflict a significant defeat on Russia, so I think that's what was going on.

Now, just to go back to what you said about Putin's goals going into Ukraine, I think you're exactly right, that he was not interested in conquering Ukraine, as I said. What he wanted to do was coerce the Ukrainians into coming to the negotiating table and working out a deal.

That's what he wanted. He did not even want to incorporate the Donbass into a Greater Russia. He understood that would be a giant headache. He preferred to leave the Donbass inside of Ukraine. But what happened here is that the West moved in when it looked like a possible deal was there to be had, and the West made sure that the Ukrainians walked away from the negotiations and that the war went on. And here we are today.

**AM:** A major goal of Russia is, it seems to me, on top of getting Ukraine to commit to neutrality, to not joining NATO, was to get Ukraine to implement the Minsk Accords—the deal that it had signed back in 2015 to end the war in the Donbass. And I'm wondering what you make of the admissions that have come out since Russia invaded, from NATO leaders like Angela Merkel of Germany and *François* Hollande of France, who helped broker the Minsk Accords, where they said—and this mirrors what Ukrainian leaders like [*Petro*] Poroshenko said, too—that Minsk wasn't intended to actually make peace; it was intended to buy time for Ukraine to build up its military to fight the Russian-backed rebels in the east of Ukraine and Russia itself. Do you buy that from Merkel and Hollande, or do you think they're maybe just trying to save face and reject criticism from hawks who believe that their efforts to try to broker peace and end the war on the Donbass somehow enabled Russia and Putin?

**JM:** It's really hard to know what to think, for sure. I mean, the fact is that Hollande, Poroshenko, and Angela Merkel have all said very clearly that they were not serious at the time about negotiating some sort of settlement in accordance with the Minsk II guidelines. If they say that, it would seem to me to be true. Is it really the case that they're all lying now to cover up their past behavior so that they don't damage their reputations in the West? I guess that's possible. I don't know how you would prove one way or the other where the truth lies. But my tendency in these situations is to believe what people say, and if Angela Merkel tells me that she was just pretending in the Minsk negotiations because she wanted to help arm up the Ukrainians, I tend to believe her. But maybe she's not telling the truth. Who knows for sure?

**AM:** And going back to what you said earlier, about how the US did nothing to prevent this war and in some ways may have even egged it on before February 2022, given that the Biden Administration refused to address Russia's core concerns of NATO expansion and the NATO military infrastructure surrounding Russia, which Russia and its draft treaties that it had submitted in December 2021 proposed, that NATO basically roll back its NATO military infrastructure around Russia to pre-1997 lines. Given that, the Biden Administration pretty much refused to discuss any of that with maybe some minor exceptions, from a realist perspective, is there any room now for the Biden Administration to go back on that and to actually discuss the issues that it wouldn't discuss prior to the invasion? And if they won't discuss those issues, then what kind of future are we looking at?

**JM:** Well, let me make a quick point. I think your description of the American position in December 2021 and in the run-up to the war in February 2022 is correct. But it's also important to emphasize—and people in the West don't want to hear it, but it is true—that the Russians were desperate to avoid a conflict. The idea that Putin was chomping at the bit to invade Ukraine so he could make it part of Greater Russia, it's just not a serious argument. The Russians did not want a war, and they did, I believe, everything possible to avoid a war. They just couldn't get the Americans to play ball with them. The Americans were unwilling to negotiate in a serious way. Period. End of story.

Now, what can we do today? In effect you're asking whether we can go back to where we were before the war broke out, or maybe even where we were in March 2022, shortly after the war broke out, when the negotiations in Istanbul were ongoing. I think we are well past the point where we can work out any kind of meaningful deal. I think that first of all, both sides are so deeply committed to winning at this point in time that it's hard to imagine them negotiating any kind of meaningful peace agreement. Both sides can win and both sides are committed to winning, so negotiating the deal now at the general level is, I think, not possible.

But when you get into the details, the Russians are bent on keeping the territory that they have now conquered, and I believe the Russians are intent on conquering more country, more of Ukraine. The Russians want to make sure that Ukraine ends up as a dysfunctional rump state and cannot become a viable member of NATO at any time in the future. So, I think that what the Russians will end up doing is cleaving off a huge chunk of Ukrainian territory, and then going to great lengths to keep Ukraine in a terrible—both economic and political—situation. They'll do everything they can to continue strangling the Ukrainian economy, because they do not want Ukraine to be in a position where it becomes a viable member of the Western alliance. So, the idea that the Russians would now agree to give up the territory that they've conquered and pull back to the borders that existed in February of 2022, I think is almost unthinkable.

Now, you may say they would do this if Ukraine became a neutral state, it gave up its aspirations to become a part of NATO. First of all, I don't think that Ukraine is anytime soon going to agree to become a neutral state. It's going to want some sort of security guarantee, and the only group of countries that can provide that security guarantee are NATO countries. So, it's hard to see that bond between Ukraine and NATO being completely severed.

Furthermore, the Russians are going to worry about the fact that Ukraine will one day say, 'We're neutral,' and then the next day they'll change their mind and form some sort of alliance with the West, and the end result is the Russians will have given up all that territory and Ukraine will no longer be neutral. So, I think from a Russian point of view what makes sense is just to conquer a lot of territory in Ukraine and make sure you turn Ukraine into a dysfunctional rump state. I hate to say this because it portrays such a dark future for Ukraine

and also for international relations more generally, but I think the mess that we have created here, the disaster we have created here, cannot be underestimated in terms of its scope.

**AM:** There was a recent acknowledgment in *The New York Times* from NATO officials that pretty much said the same thing, that their policy, they acknowledge, incentivizes Russia to continue the war and take more territory. I'll read you the passage.

They're talking about the US policy of rejecting any territorial deal with Russia inside Ukraine, and also this policy of leaving an open door for Ukraine to join NATO. This is what *The New York Times* says, quote, "...as several American and European officials acknowledged during the Vilnius summit,"—the NATO Summit in Lithuania—"such commitments make it all the more difficult to begin any real cease-fire or armistice negotiations. And promises of Ukraine's eventual accession to NATO—after the war is over—create a strong incentive for Moscow to hang onto any Ukrainian territory it can and to keep the conflict alive."

**JM:** That's exactly right. But that raises the question, why don't Western leaders change the policy regarding bringing Ukraine into the alliance?

I mean, they're exactly right, and if you go back to what caused this war, the principal cause of this war, as the evidence makes perfectly clear, is the idea that we were going to bring Ukraine into NATO. And if we had abandoned that policy before February 2022, we probably wouldn't have a war today. Then once the war starts, we keep doubling down on bringing Ukraine into NATO. We've refused to give up on that. But the end result is, that just incentivizes the Russians more and more to make sure that that never happens, or if it happens, Ukraine is a dysfunctional rump state.

So, we are playing—we, meaning the West—are playing a key role here in incentivizing the Russians to destroy Ukraine. It makes absolutely no sense to me from a strategic point of view or from a moral point of view. You think of the death and destruction that's being wrought in Ukraine, and you think that this could have easily been avoided. It makes you sick to your stomach just to contemplate it all.

**AM:** What do you make of US policy so far when it comes to weaponry? There's been so many times where the Biden Administration says publicly that certain weapons are not going to Ukraine, but then later on they relent and send those weapons, and now it looks like F-16s will be the latest on that list. And by contrast, recently John Kirchhofer, who is with the US Defense Intelligence Agency, said that unlike what Biden and Blinken are saying, he said the war is at a stalemate. And he also said that none of these heavy weapons are going to make a difference to allow Ukraine to break through.

**John Kirchhofer:** Certainly, we are at a bit of a stalemate. We do see incremental gains by Ukraine as they commit to this counteroffensive over the summer, but we haven't seen



anything to really help them break through, for example, to drive to the Crimea. It's interesting to me, we tend to focus on some of the munitions that we, the West, provides to Ukraine as they fight this out, and we look at some of them as holy grails as they play out. So, if you think of HIMARS, certainly that led to some sensational tactical events. And then you see the Storm Shadow missile doing the same thing, and now we're talking about dual purpose improved conventional munitions or cluster bombs. None of these, unfortunately, are the holy grail that Ukraine is looking forward to, that I think will allow them in the near term to break through.

**AM:** So, you have that being acknowledged by somebody with the Defense Intelligence Agency. But that doesn't seem to have entered the thinking of the White House, which keeps sort of slowly drip-feeding these heavy weapons systems that had previously been taken off of the table.

**JM:** Well, I think there's no question that we're desperate here. You used the word 'stalemate.' In a way it's a stalemate. If you focus on how much territory each side has conquered, it looks like a stalemate. But I don't look at territory conquered as the key indicator of what's going on in this war.

In a war of attrition like this, the key indicator is the casualty exchange rate. That's what you want to pay attention to. You want to focus on how many people each side has available to draft, to put in the military, and then you want to focus on the casualty exchange rate. And, in my opinion, the casualty exchange rate decisively favors the Russians who also happen to have many more people than the Ukrainians do. This is a disastrous situation for Ukraine. It makes it almost impossible for Ukraine to win this war, and it makes it likely that the Russians will prevail.

So, the question is, if you're the West, how do you rectify this situation? What do you do to keep the Ukrainians in the fight? And you want to remember here that the Russians have a formidable industrial base, and they have lots of military equipment—lots of heavy equipment, lots of artillery, lots of tanks. They have assembly lines that are churning out lots of equipment. The Ukrainians have hardly any assembly lines at all; they're completely dependent on the West for weaponry.

So, the question then becomes, what can we give them? And there're real limits to what we have, right? We don't have that much more artillery to give them. So, it's no surprise that therefore we're giving them cluster munitions. It's no surprise that in recent months we've emphasized giving them tanks when what they really needed was artillery. So, you see, we're in a pickle here, in that we've picked a fight with a country that has a huge industrial base that can produce lots of weaponry, and our ally—the country that's doing the fighting for us, the dirty work on the battlefield—does not have weaponry of its own, so we have to supply it. And again, we have real limits to what we can give them.

So, what's going on is that we give them HIMAR missiles, and everybody says this is the magic weapon, it's going to rectify the casualty exchange ratio, it's going to help the Ukrainians prevail on the battlefield. That proves not to be the case, right? And then we start talking about giving them sophisticated tanks. We give them sophisticated tanks, be they Leopard 2s, Challengers, or what have you, and they're supposed to be the magic weapons. And that doesn't work out. Then we talk about training nine brigades and creating a Panzer Forest that can punch through the Russian defenses, to do to the Russians what the Germans did to the French in 1940. And, of course, on June 4th of this year the Ukrainians launched their counteroffensive, and they used a lot of those NATO-trained and -armed troops—and it didn't work. They didn't even get to the first defensive lines of the Russian forces. They ended up fighting in the gray zone and suffering huge casualties.

So, what's the solution? Well, we've got to give them F-16s and we've got to give them ATACMS [*Army Tactical Missile Systems, long-range guided missiles*], and if we give them that, that will reverse the balance of power between these combatants, reverse the casualty exchange ratio, and the Ukrainians will end up prevailing on the battlefield.

This is a pipe dream. It's hard to believe that people in the Pentagon who study war for a living believe that F-16s or ATACMS are going to change the balance of power on the battlefield. They are doing this in large part because we have to do something, and this is really all we can do. So, we can't quit, we got to stay in the fight, we got to continue to arm the Ukrainians. This is the only game in town. So, what we're doing here, giving them weapons that we can publicly say and then the media can repeat it, that these are war-winning weapons, and once the Ukrainians get these weapons and learn how to use them, once they learn how to fly F-16s, the balance of power will be rectified, and we'll live happily ever after.

Again, this is not going to happen. The Ukrainians are in deep trouble. We have led them down the primrose path, and there is nothing we can do at this point in time to rectify that situation.

**AM:** Well, speaking of which, that was your famous warning back in 2015, that the West is leading Ukraine down the primrose path and, according to you, the end result is that Ukraine is going to get wrecked.

**JM:** What's going on here is that the West is leading Ukraine down the primrose path, and the end result is that Ukraine is going to get wrecked. And I believe that the policy that I'm advocating, which is neutralizing Ukraine and then building it up economically and getting it out of the competition between Russia on one side and NATO on the other side, is the best thing that could happen to the Ukrainians.

**AM:** This was your warning back in 2015. Why were you so confident of this? What made you so sure that this was the inevitable path?

**JM:** Well, I thought it was very clear when the crisis first broke out in February 2014. Remember the crisis breaks out on February 22, 2014, and at that point in time it's clear that the Russians view Ukraine in NATO as an existential threat. They make no bones about that. And furthermore, it's clear that if we persist to try to bring Ukraine into NATO, if we persist to try to make Ukraine a Western bulwark on Russia's borders, that the Russians will destroy Ukraine, they'll wreck Ukraine. They make that clear at the time.

So, that's in 2014, and then if you look at what happens from 2014 up till 2022, when the war breaks out, when it goes from being a crisis to a war, if you look at what happens then, the Russians make it clear, at point after point, that Ukraine in NATO is an existential threat, but what do we do? We double down at every turn. We continue to commit ourselves more forcefully each year to bringing Ukraine into NATO. And my view in the very beginning was that this was going to lead to disaster.

Now, a lot of people like to portray my views as anomalous. I'm one of a handful of people, folks like me, Jeffrey Sachs, Steve Cohen [*Stephen F. Cohen*], who make these kinds of arguments. But if you think about it, back in the 1990s, when the subject of NATO expansion was being debated, there were a large number of very prominent members of the foreign policy establishment who said that NATO expansion would end up in disaster. This included people like George Kennan, William Perry—who at the time was the Secretary of Defense.

**AM:** He almost resigned, he says.

**JM:** Pardon?

**AM:** He almost resigned, he says, over the issue of NATO expansion. When Clinton expanded NATO, he said he considered resigning, I believe.

**JM:** Yes, that's exactly right. And, by the way, there was widespread opposition to NATO expansion inside the Pentagon at that point in time. And all this is to say that those people were right.

And one of my favorite examples is Angela Merkel. When the decision was made in April 2008 at the Bucharest Summit—the Bucharest NATO Summit—to bring Ukraine into NATO, Angela Merkel and Nicholas Sarkozy, who was then the French leader, both of them were adamantly opposed to bringing Ukraine into NATO. This is when the trouble started, April 2008. Angela Merkel was bitterly opposed, and she subsequently said that the reason that she was opposed was that she understood that Putin would interpret it as a declaration of war. Just think about that. Angela Merkel said that in 2008, when she opposed the idea of bringing Ukraine—and Georgia, by the way—into NATO, she opposed it. She opposed it because she

understood that Putin would interpret it as a declaration of war. So, there are a lot of people besides Jeff Sachs, Steve Cohen, and John Mearsheimer who understood that this whole crusade to expand NATO eastward was going to end up in disaster.

**AM:** Let me ask you a personal question. You were friends with Steve Cohen, who I knew very well. He was a hero of mine and a friend. I'm wondering, it seems to me that since his passing [*in 2020*] and since the Ukraine War escalated with Russia's invasion, you should have taken his place as Enemy Number One in the US academy in terms of someone willing to speak out and counter the establishment point of view. I'm just wondering whether you agree with that, and whether it's given you any more empathy for Stephen, and what that's been like for you, and what you make of the space for debate and how it compares to previous controversial issues that you've spoken out on. You're very critical of the Israel Lobby. You spoke out against the Iraq War, how all that compares to the climate we're in today.

**JM:** Well, just to talk about Steve Cohen for a minute, I think Steve was out front on this issue before I was. He was out front on the issue before 2014, when the crisis broke out. That's when I first got involved. I wrote a well-known piece in *Foreign Affairs* in 2014 that said the crisis which broke out in February that year was the West's fault, but Steve had been making the argument before I came into the game. And then he and I were involved in a number of different events where we were on the same side, making the same argument. And then, of course, Steve passed, and his presence in this debate is greatly missed, for sure. I think you could say that people like me and people like Jeff Sachs are in effect replacing Steve, where we're making the arguments that he made for a long time. So, I think there is a lot of truth in that.

Now, with regard to your question about how receptive people are today to hearing the argument that I have to make or that Jeff Sachs has to make, where the argument that Steve was making when he was alive, I think there's no question that it is more difficult to be heard today than it was when the Iraq War, for example, took place in 2003. I was deeply opposed to the Iraq War in a very public way, in late 2002 and up until March 2003, when the war started. And it was tough to make a case against the war in public in those days. It was tough to be heard, but it is much tougher to be heard today. The climate is much more Orwellian.

And I would note, by the way, Aaron, that Steve, who I talked to obviously about these issues a lot when he was still alive, told me on more than one occasion that during the Cold War, when he would sometimes make arguments that one might categorize as pro-Soviet or sympathetic to the Soviet position, it was much easier then to be heard in the mainstream media, in places like *The New York Times*, for example, than it was in 2014 or 2016 in *The New York Times*. The cone of silence here is really quite remarkable. The extent to which people like Steve, people like Jeff Sachs, and people like me have sort of [been] kept out of the mainstream media is really quite remarkable. We have a conventional wisdom here, and

the mainstream media is committed to policing the marketplace to make sure that people who disagree with that conventional wisdom are not heard, or if they are heard their arguments are perverted or countered immediately. It's a terrible situation. It's not the way life is supposed to work in a liberal democracy. You have to have some semblance of a marketplace of ideas if you want to have smart policies, because the fact is that governments often times do stupid things, or they pursue policies that look like they're correct at the time but prove to be disastrous, and you want to have lots of people who disagree with those policies having an opportunity to voice their opinions before the policy is launched and after the policy is launched. But in this day and age, that's very difficult to do, and that's very depressing and distressing.

**AM:** Turning back to the battlefield today, are you at all concerned about a new front opening up? There's recently been some heated rhetoric between Russia and Poland, Putin warning Poland not to attack Belarus, Belarus now hosting Wagner fighters and some of them talking about going back into Ukraine, or maybe opening up a new front with Poland. What do you make of all that talk, and does it possibly threaten a new front opening up, or is that overblown?

**JM:** Well, that's just one possible front. Another front is the Black Sea. It's quite clear that the Russians are now moving towards blockading Ukrainian ports on the Black Sea, and the potential for conflict there is real. Then there's the whole question of Moldova, and there's all sorts of talk about a possible conflict there. Then there is the Baltic Sea. The Russians care greatly about the Baltic Sea because it's the only way they can get to Kaliningrad. And if you look at all of the countries besides Russia that surround the Baltic Sea, they are now all NATO members now that Sweden and Finland have been brought into the alliance. If you look at the Arctic, looking down the road, the Arctic makes me very nervous. There are eight countries that are physically located in the Arctic. One is Russia, of course. The other seven are all NATO members now that Finland and Sweden are in the alliance. And with the ice melting and all sorts of questions about control of water and territory coming into play up there, the potential for conflict is very real. And the Russians and NATO are bumping into each other.

So, you have the Arctic, the Baltic Sea, Moldova, the Black Sea, and then the issue that you raised, which, at this point in time appears to be the one of most concern, and that is Poland coming into the war mainly in Belarusia. There's also the question of what happens if Polish troops enter into western Ukraine. [*Alexander*] Lukashenko, who, of course, is the leader of Belarus, has made the argument that this is basically unacceptable to the Belarusians, so one can imagine a situation where Poland comes into western Ukraine and the Belarusians end up in a fight, and the Russians end up in a fight with the Poles in western Ukraine. I'm not saying that's likely, but it's possible.

And then if you look at the Polish-Belarusian border, as you pointed out, there are Wagner forces very close to that border, and not surprisingly the Poles have moved up their own forces to make sure that the Wagner forces don't do anything against Poland. So, you have Wagner forces and Polish forces eyeball-to-eyeball on the Belarusian-Polish border. This is not a good situation. Who knows what the chain of command looks like with [Yevgeny]Prigozhin, who's in charge of those Wagner forces, as best we can tell. So, there's just all sorts of potential for trouble here.

And the general point I like to make is that we're not going to get a meaningful peace agreement between Ukraine and the West on one side and the Russians on the other side. The best we can hope for is a cold peace, and a cold peace where the Russians are constantly looking for opportunities to improve their position, and the Ukrainians and the West are constantly looking for opportunities to improve their position. In both cases this means taking advantage of the other side. When you get into a cold peace, where both sides are operating that way, the potential for escalation and returning to a hot war is great. And you want to think about that in the context of the different possible fronts where war could break out that we were just discussing. There's just a lot of potential for escalation in this area of the world. So, I think the situation between Russia on one side and the West on the other side, and of course Ukraine, is going to be very dangerous for a long time to come.

**AM:** Finally, Russia has already annexed four Ukrainian oblasts during its invasion, on top of Crimea in 2014. You mentioned earlier that you think Russia wants to take more territory. Where do you think Russia would be satisfied stopping its incursions? Where do you think its territorial ambitions end?

**JM:** Well, on a very general level, Aaron, I think it's important to understand that the Russians will want to take territory if they can do it militarily, and that remains to be seen. If they can do it militarily, they'll want to take territory that has lots of Russian speakers and ethnic Russians in them. This is why I think they'll take Odessa if they can, and Kharkiv if they can, and two other oblasts as well. But I think they will stay away from the oblasts or the areas of Ukraine that have lots of ethnic Ukrainians, because the resistance to a Russian occupation will be enormous. So, I think the demography of Ukraine limits how much territory the Russians can take.

Furthermore, I think military capability limits how much of Ukraine that they can take—that they don't have the military capability to take all of it. And I think they'll have to actually increase the size of the existing Russian army if they're going to take the four oblasts. This includes Kharkiv and Odessa that are to the west of the four oblasts that they now control. But I think that they will try to take those eight oblasts, plus Crimea. Those eight oblasts, they already control four and they've taken Crimea; that represents about 23 percent of Ukrainian territory, before 2014. If they take the additional four oblasts to the west of the four they now have annexed, that will represent about 43 percent of Ukrainian territory that will have fallen

into the hands of the Russians. And that I think will leave the Russians in a position where they are dealing with a Ukraine that is a truly dysfunctional state.

I hate to say that this is the likely outcome because it's a such a terrible outcome from Ukraine's point of view, but I think in all honesty that that is where this war is headed. I think the Russians are now playing hardball, where, as I said to you before, well past the situation that existed in March of 2022, or certainly in the period before the war broke out in February of 2022, where it's possible to imagine a situation where the Russians pulled out of Ukraine in return for Ukrainian neutrality. Those days are gone, and a Russia that's playing hardball is a Russia that's going to conquer more territory if it can and do everything it can to wreck Ukraine.

**AM:** One more question, because we haven't discussed this issue yet and it's existential, and that's the nuclear threat. There was a recent article by a Russian named *Sergei Karaganov*, who was an academic with the Russian Council on Foreign and Defense Policy. He's said to be close to Putin. And I don't know if you caught this essay, but he basically said that Russia needs to adopt a more bellicose nuclear posture, needs to embrace the use of First Use, and even threaten to use it in Ukraine in order to sufficiently scare the West. I don't know if you caught that essay, but if you did, what did you make of it? And overall, is the nuclear threat, the threat of nuclear war something that you think is still a possibility when it comes to this war itself?

**JM:** Well, I think that nuclear war is most likely if the Russians are losing. If the Russians are losing, if the Ukrainian military is rolling up Russian forces in eastern and southern Ukraine, and the sanctions are working and the Russians are on the verge of being knocked out of the ranks of the great powers, in that situation I think it's likely that the Russians would turn to nuclear weapons, and they would use those nuclear weapons in Ukraine. They would not dare use them against NATO, but they would turn to nuclear weapons. I think, given the fact that the Russians are not losing and, if anything, are winning, therefore the likelihood of nuclear war is greatly reduced. I don't want to say it's been taken off the table for one second, but I think as long as the Russians are on the upside of the battle, not on the downside, the likelihood of nuclear use is very low.

Now, with regard to the *Karaganov* article, I read that to say that the Russians are likely to prevail, but to use rhetoric I've used, it's going to be an ugly victory. I think he understands that the Russians are not going to win a decisive victory. They're not going to end up with a neutral Ukraine, and they're not going to end up in a situation where the West backs off. I think that Karaganov understands that even if the Russians capture more territory, and even if they turn Ukraine into a dysfunctional rump state, that you're going to get at best a cold peace that's going to be very dangerous. I referred to this in my Substack article as an ugly victory. And I think what he is basically saying is that it's not clear that's acceptable to the Russians over the long term. It's not clear that Russia can afford to live in such circumstances over the

long term. And if Russia were to use nuclear weapons, it might be a way of sending a wake-up message to the West. It might be a way of telling the West that they have to back off.

In other words, what's going on here is Karaganov is talking about using nuclear weapons for coercive purposes. He's interested in limited nuclear use for the purpose of getting the West to back off, getting the West to change its behavior and put an end to this ugly victory, and allow the Russians to have some sort of meaningful victory and to help create some sort of meaningful peace agreement. I think that he is right. The Russians at best can win an ugly victory. I think it's just important to understand that. He senses, I think, quite correctly, the Russians are not going to win a decisive defeat. There's no real happy ending to this story, that's what he's saying. And he's saying that's probably not acceptable, and we've got to figure out a way to move beyond a cold peace, and nuclear coercion may be a way to do that.

Now, is that an argument that's likely to sell? I think it's impossible to say, because we don't know exactly what an ugly victory will look like, number one. Number two, we don't know who will be in control in Russia in the future, who will have his or her finger on the trigger in Moscow when this ugly victory is becoming almost intolerable, and we certainly don't know whether that person would be bold enough to countenance using nuclear weapons.

Is that possible, that someone might countenance using nuclear weapons, because Russia is in an intolerable situation? Yes, it's one, but it's an ugly victory, and that's not acceptable. It is possible. I think there's a non-trivial chance that there'll be someone like Sergei Karaganov in power and who will think about using nuclear weapons. I bet that that will not happen, but who knows for sure? As you well know, it's incredibly difficult to predict the future, especially when you're talking about scenarios like that. But I think that's what's going on here—and again this just highlights how much trouble we're in, no matter how this war turns out. As I said before, if the Russians are losing, I mean, they're seriously losing the war, that's where nuclear use is likely. And what Karaganov is saying is, even if we win it's going to be an ugly victory and we may have to use nuclear weapons anyway. You want to think about where that leaves us.

And then there's the whole question of, if Ukraine is really losing, let's assume that the Ukrainian military cracks, let's assume that the beating that it's taking leads to a situation like the one that faced the French army in the spring of 1917—this is when the French army cracked, it's when the French army mutinied—let's assume that that happens, and the Ukrainians are on the run. Again, I'm not saying that's going to happen, but it is a possibility. What is NATO going to do? Are we going to accept the situation where Ukraine is being defeated on the battlefield in a serious way by the Russians? I'm not so sure. And it may be possible in those circumstances that NATO will come into the fight. It may be possible that the Poles decide that they alone have to come into the fight, and once the Poles come into the fight in a very important way, that may bring us into the fight, and then you have a great power war involving the United States on one side and the Russians on the other. Again, I'm



not saying this is likely, but it is a possibility. What we are doing here is, we're spinning out plausible scenarios as to how this war can play out over time. And almost all the scenarios that one comes up with have an unhappy ending. Again, this just shows what a huge mistake we made not trying to settle this conflict before February 24, 2022.

**AM:** Well, based on this answer alone, I can see why you called one of your most recent pieces "The Darkness Ahead: Where the Ukraine War is Headed." Very apt. John Mearsheimer, thank you so much for joining me.

John Mearsheimer is the R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, now writing on Substack, which I will link to.

Professor Mearsheimer, thanks so much.

**JM:** It was my pleasure. Thank you for having me, Aaron.

**END**