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Photo: A night missile attack by Russian troops destroyed a residential building in the center of Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine. Elena Tita / the Collection of war.ukraine.ua

GIVE PEACE A CHANCE?

"We have to negotiate for an all-new security system for Europe, taking into account all sides of this problem. Russia does not feel itself to be secure. And we can laugh about this and say that we never had an aggressive approach towards Russia, but Russians think so. And they are ready to kill for this security question. So we need a huge negotiation, with both sides, all NATO members, all EU neighbors, all natural states which are interested in the security in Europe, to create a new so-called Potsdam/Yalta system, because the alternative will be 10 or 15 years of war."

Oleksiy Arestovych, former spokesman for President Zelensky

The Russian war on Ukraine continues to evolve. The 2022 version of a war that was initially launched in 2014 has shifted from failed Russian blitzkrieg, to valiant Ukrainian defense, to dramatic Ukrainian pushback, to unsuccessful Ukrainian counteroffensive, and now to war of attrition where Russia looks to be winning on the battlefield. **The problem is that wars of attrition between two unfairly matched opponents are almost always won by the big guy**—in this case, Russia with five times the population and an economy ten times larger than Ukraine.

NATO committed itself to make up the difference, at least in terms of arms, munitions and intelligence—but no boots on the ground or planes in the air. However, as the “fighting season” (itself a weird throwback in a hyper-modern world) resumes, that commitment is falling short, Ukraine’s valiant military seems exhausted, and the country is on the back foot as the Russian juggernaut presses forward.

George Beebe, Director of the Quincy Institute’s Grand Strategy Program and former top CIA Russian analyst, proposed a historical comparison during a [recent New Thinking for a New World podcast episode](#). “During the American Civil War, the North had all kinds of advantages in population and industry; the South had better generalship. Their hope was to outmaneuver the North. Eventually, after a period where they performed well beyond expectations, the advantages that the North had were overwhelming.” And we know how that ended.

The implication for the Ukraine war? “Ukraine’s counter-offensive last year was its shot at turning this into a war of maneuver, breaking through Russian defenses, forcing the

Russians to sue for peace. And that didn't work...The Russians are quite steadily exhausting Ukraine's supplies of manpower and they have drained a lot of the West's stockpiles of arms and ammunition."

Logically, that only leaves a miracle—think David's slingshot knocking out Goliath—or a negotiated settlement. The "never surrender" crowd in Kyiv, Washington and various European capitals insist that the next big infusion of artillery shells or jet fighters or whatever will do the trick. Beebe isn't buying the argument; he says that—short of a direct NATO/Russia confrontation—the Russians can easily match and exceed the number and quality of the weapons that the West is likely to make available to Ukrainian fighters.

That leaves the "**n-word**." Beebe argues that **negotiations**—sooner rather than later—are not only possible, but are in the best interests of Ukraine, Russia and the West

What do each of them need to settle the conflict?

- "Ukraine needs to have a secure, independent country in which it is able to be sovereign and to conduct its internal affairs as it sees fit."
- Russia needs to be recognized "as a great power in the world," needs relief from efforts "to exclude Russia as a player in European security and to move the NATO alliance right up to Russia's borders—and in so doing foment regime change or cripple its economy."
- The United States and the West "need a stable European security environment in which Western states can thrive as free democratic liberal polities; in other words, **a European security environment that is safe for democracy.**"

What's obviously missing from Beebe's inventory is territory. When President Zelensky was in Washington in December, he insisted that land is non-negotiable: "We are not going to give up territories to terrorists."

While that is a good sound bite, Beebe insists, "**It's clear to me at this point that the Ukrainians are not going to be able to take back territory on the battlefield, and it's clear to me that the Russians are not going to give it up at the negotiating table.** So, we're probably going to be in a situation where we will have a *fait accompli* that does not have to be addressed in order to stabilize the war." He points out a long history of precedents—the Baltics during the Cold War, Korea, Cyprus and others more recently—where governments have learned "to live with a situation that it doesn't officially recognize but has to deal with in reality."

As goes Korea or Cyprus might go Ukraine?

Of course, lots of people would not be happy with that outcome, including many Ukrainians. This might be a classic case where the good is the enemy of the better—or, given the circumstances, the bad is better than the worse. If the Russians cannot get what Beebe thinks is one of their minimal demands—Ukraine excluded from NATO or from a significant (i.e., American) American bilateral security guarantee—then “I think [the Russian] **Plan B is we'll simply wreck Ukraine**. They will so devastate Ukraine physically and economically that Ukraine won't be able to rebuild. Those millions of refugees that have fled will not return. Ukraine will go into a terminal swoon that will leave it looking a lot more like Libya than like Poland or Germany.”

He insists that does not seem to be Russia's preference; indeed, during negotiations after the invasion had started in 2022 the Russians had accepted in principle that Ukraine could join the European Union, but not NATO. Beebe argues that “a less corrupt, less ethno-nationalist,” more economically vibrant Ukraine—even one that “feels economically and culturally part of Europe”—would not be seen as a threat by the Russians. In contrast, they refuse to accept a “Ukraine linked to a military presence of the United States.”

Ergo, EU, ok; NATO, never.

Perhaps the biggest block to even framing a negotiation in practice has been American and European insistence that only the Ukrainians deserve to be at the negotiating table. Beebe thinks that's a dead end and not remotely in American (or, for that matter, Ukrainian) national interests. “The Russians believe that this is not just between them and Ukraine. They believe that this is fundamentally a conflict between Russia and the United States, and between incompatible conceptions of what the European security order ought to look like.” His clear estimate is that, if Russia's perceptions are not addressed, then the war will go on until either Ukraine is defeated or the conflict escalates into something much larger in scope.

The final, obvious question: if President Putin is winning, why would he negotiate? Beebe's answer: The Russians “could turn Ukraine into an Iraq if they felt that they had to in order to prevent its military alliance with the United States. **But they cannot fight their way into a recognized, legitimate role in Europe's security situation...nor a normal relationship with the West...nor reduced dependence on China.**”

The punch line? “Those broader geostrategic set of interests are the biggest incentive that Russians have for talking. And that gives the United States some leverage that we should take advantage of in trying to bring this war to an end.”

One huge caveat: if Ukraine collapses—which Beebe believes is possible—then “The

Russians dictate the terms of a settlement, and those terms are not likely to be ones that we like." **Thus, continued U.S. support is critical, but with the goal of negotiating a stable settlement.**

"The real question is [do we have] the confidence, politically, to pursue that? We talk about negotiating from a position of strength. That strength is not just military strength; it also is strength of character...**And I think that's what we're lacking right now, the confidence to believe that we can compromise with the Russians and still survive and even thrive, which I think objectively is true. We can do this.**"

Amen.

George Beebe recently spoke with Alan Stoga as part of the Tällberg Foundation's "[New Thinking for a New World](#)" podcast series. Listen to their conversation [here](#) or find us on a podcast platform of your choice ([Apple podcast](#), [Spotify](#), [Google podcast](#), [Youtube](#), etc).



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George Beebe is the director of the Grand Strategy Program at the Quincy Institute in Washington. He spent more than two decades in government as an intelligence analyst, diplomat, and advisor, including as director of the CIA's analysis, director of the CIA's Open Source Center, and as a staff advisor on Russia matters to President Cheney. His book, *The Russia Trap: How a Shadow War with Russia Could Spiral into Catastrophe* (St. Martin's Press, 2019), details how the United States and Russia could end up in a dangerous military confrontation.

Prior to joining QI, George was Vice President and

Director of Studies at the Center for the National Interest and before that he served as president of a technology company that measured the impact of events, issues, and advertising campaigns on audience views. He speaks Russian and German.
