

Ukraine War: What Happens Next?

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Lex Fridman interviews John Mearsheimer, an international relations scholar at the University of Chicago, about how the war in Ukraine may end
- › In the best-case scenario, Mearsheimer predicts a ceasefire leading to a frozen conflict
- › In the event of a frozen conflict, Mearsheimer believes it will be unstable, with Ukrainians attempting to weaken Russia's position and Russians "going to great lengths" to damage Ukraine and sow dissension within the alliance
- › Mearsheimer states that if the U.S. continues to interfere in the war, the answer to whether the conflict will be solved "is definitely no ... You have to get the Americans out"
- › Mearsheimer believes there's a "sliver of a chance" to work out the war, but to get there Ukraine has to become neutral and completely sever all security ties with the West

In the video above, Lex Fridman interviews John Mearsheimer, an international relations scholar at the University of Chicago, about how the war in Ukraine may end. Mearsheimer isn't optimistic.

Since the war began in February 2022, about 500,000 Ukrainian and Russian troops have been killed or wounded,¹ along with more than 9,600 civilian deaths in Ukraine.² Meanwhile, according to official aid trackers, the U.S. has sent \$76.8 billion in military, financial and humanitarian aid to Ukraine as of the end of July 2023.^{3,4} The European Union contributed another \$85.1 billion in that same timeframe.⁵

Not only may corruption may be a primary driver of this war, it may be unwinnable. "I don't think there's any real prospect of a meaningful peace agreement," Mearsheimer said. "I think it's almost impossible. I think the best you can hope for at this point is at some point the shooting stops. You have a ceasefire and then you have a frozen conflict."⁶

Did the US Get in the Way of a Resolution?

In the event of a frozen conflict, Mearsheimer believes it will be unstable, with Ukrainians attempting to weaken Russia's position and Russians "going to great lengths" to damage Ukraine and sow dissension within the alliance, "and that includes in terms of Transatlantic relations," he says ... "The potential for escalation there will be great. So, I think this is a disaster."⁷

As an aside, in 2022, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's Center for Countering Disinformation – established in 2021 – issued a blacklist of American "pro-Russian propagandists," which includes Mearsheimer along with Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky, former Rep. Tulsi Gabbard, D-Hawaii, independent journalist Glenn Greenwald and retired Col. Douglas Macgregor.⁸

When Fridman asks Mearsheimer if he believes it's possible for the two leaders to sit down and work it out, he quickly says, "I think the answer is no." Fridman then says, "Even with the United States involved ... three people in the room?" To which Mearsheimer responds, "If the United States is involved, the answer is definitely no ... You have to get the Americans out ... the Americans are a real problem."⁹

Mearsheimer goes back to the start of the war, when the two sides were negotiating in Istanbul. Former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett was acting as the mediator, and progress was being made, according to Mearsheimer, until the U.S. and Britain stepped in:¹⁰

"Bennett is talking in person to both Putin and Zelensky. And what happens to produce failure? The answer is the United States and Britain get involved and

tell Zelensky to walk ... if they had come in and encouraged Zelensky to try to figure out a way with Putin to shut this one down and worked with Bennett ... we might have been able to shut the war down then."

U.S. meddling in the Ukraine conflict reveals that it is not willing to relinquish its imperialistic tendencies. But censorship has silenced any open discussion that goes against the official narrative on the war in Ukraine.

The mainstream media are clear in their message that the Ukraine war is the result of an unprovoked and unjustified invasion, but there's a history to it. Jeffrey Sachs, the former director of The Earth Institute at Columbia,¹¹ who is also an adviser to the United Nations and a professor of economics who's been involved in diplomacy in more than 100 countries for decades,¹² pleaded with the White House to negotiate peace and discourage Ukraine from joining NATO.

They refused, saying anyone has the right to join NATO if they want to. But as Sachs noted, this isn't about the "right" of Ukraine to join NATO, it's about the threat that poses to its neighbors, [Russia in particular](#).

Russia has long been very clear about the fact that it will not allow Ukraine to join NATO, for the simple fact that it would place a NATO military presence right on its border. Russia wants Ukraine to remain an independent "buffer zone" between itself and NATO countries.

Would the U.S. be fine with Mexico forming a military alliance with China, installing Chinese military at our southern border? Sachs wonders. That's highly unlikely, yet that's what they're pursuing in Ukraine.

Since Russia's entry into Ukraine, the U.S. has pushed for the escalation of conflict, to the point that nuclear war entered the picture. Why would the U.S. take such risks? To take a stand for Ukraine's "right" to join NATO? It's beyond irrational, but that's where we are.

Is There a Sliver of a Chance to End the War?

Mearsheimer believes there's a "sliver of a chance" to work out the war, but to get there, he says, two things have to be done:¹³

"One is Ukraine has to become neutral and it has to completely sever all security ties with the West. It's not like you can say, 'We're not going to expand NATO to include Ukraine but we're going to continue to have some loose security arrangement with Ukraine.' None of that. It has to be completely severed — Ukraine has to be on its own.

And No. 2, Ukraine has to accept the fact that the Russians are going to keep the four oblasts that they've now annexed and Crimea. The Russians are not going to give them back. And what you really want to do if you're Zelensky, or whoever's running Ukraine in this scenario that we're positing, is you want to make sure the Russians don't take another four oblasts to include Kharkiv and Odessa, right?

If I'm playing Putin's hand, and this war goes on, I'm thinking about taking four more oblasts. I want to take about 43% of Ukraine and an exit to Russia, right? And I certainly want Odessa and I certainly want Kharkiv, and I want the two oblasts in between."

But Mearsheimer stresses that if they can talk about cutting a deal now, "you may be able to head that kind of aggression off at the pass, and limit Putin and Russia to annexing the four oblasts that they've already annexed, plus Crimea. "That's the best I think you can hope for," he says, but that also requires concessions from Ukraine:¹⁴

"The point is you have to get the Ukrainians to accept becoming a truly neutral State and conceding that the Russians keep a big chunk of territory. It's about 23% of Ukrainian territory that they've annexed, and I find it hard to imagine any Ukrainian leader agreeing to that."

EU expansion is another wild card in the scenario, as it's not only an economic expansion — there's also a military dimension:¹⁵

"In the runup to the war – actually in the runup to the 2014 crisis when it first broke out – the Russians made it clear they saw EU expansion as a stalking horse for NATO expansion. So, EU expansion is tricky but I think ... healthy economic relations ... between Ukraine and the West is possible."

Broken Trust May Keep Leaders From Resolving Conflict

Fridman believes in the power of individual leaders to come together to end war, but this requires trust – something that, Mearsheimer says, was broken for the Russian. This was in large part due to the Minsk Agreements, which were meant to shut down civil war taking place in the Donbas region in southeastern Ukraine.

Four main players were involved – Russia, Ukraine, Germany and France. "I believe the Russians took the Minsk accords seriously," Mearsheimer explains. "I believe Putin took them very seriously. He wanted to shut down that conflict."¹⁶

The other leaders involved, however – Angela Merkel from Germany, Francois Hollande from France and Petro Poroshenko from Ukraine – were not wholly on board. According to Mearsheimer:¹⁷

"All explicitly said they were not seriously interested in reaching an agreement. In all of the discussions with Putin they were bamboozling him. They were trying to trick him so that they would buy time to build up Ukraine's military. Putin is profoundly upset about these admissions by these three leaders. He believes he was fooled into thinking that Minsk could work.

He believes that he negotiated in good faith and they did not, and he believes that the level of trust now between Russia and the West is virtually zero as a result of this experience over Minsk ... if you're Putin at this point in time, trusting the West is not an idea that's going to be very attractive at all. In fact, you're going to distrust anything they say."

The No. 1 Job of Any Leader Is to Ensure Survival of Their State

Fridman again suggests that individual leaders could overpower even deep distrust in the West, as human nature makes it possible for humans to trust other humans, even if they distrust the entity or structure behind them. "The other beautiful thing about human nature," he says, "there's forgiveness and there's trying again."¹⁸ But Mearsheimer isn't so sure:¹⁹

"When you're the leader of a country in an anarchic system, you have to be very careful not to let your trust in a foreign leader take you too far, because if that foreign leader betrays you or betrays your trust and stabs you in the back, you could die. And again, you want to remember that the principal responsibility of any leader – I don't care what country it is – is to ensure the survival of their state.

And ... when you've already betrayed the trust of a leader, you really are not going to be able to rely on trust very much to help you moving forward ... my prediction that this war is going to go on for a long time and end in an ugly way is a prediction that I don't like at all, so I hope I'm wrong."

Sources and References

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