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QI Panel:

Book Talk – Collisions: The Origins of the War in Ukraine and the New Global Instability

April 23, 2024
12:00-1:00 PM EST

Anatol Lieven 0:38

Hello, everyone, I'm Anatol Lieven, director of the Eurasia program here at the Quincy Institute. Before I introduce our guest for today, I just wanted to flag a webinar that we will be holding at this time tomorrow, when my colleagues George Beebe and Kelley Vlahos, will be joined by Sam Charap of Rand, and Liana Fix, to discuss the question, Does Peace Have a Chance in Ukraine? So I hope that you will also be able to attend that at 12 noon, EST tomorrow. Today, it's my great pleasure to introduce Professor Michael Kimmage of the Catholic University of America where he is a professor of history, and he is also a senior associate at CSIS, from 2014 to 2017. Michael held the Russia and Ukraine portfolio in the Policy Planning Staff at the State Department, and so was very well placed to discuss some of the origins of the war. And today we're going to talk about his latest book just published, *Collisions: the Origins of the War in Ukraine and the New Global Instability*, which I hope you will all go and get and buy. So Michael, welcome. Very nice to see you. So obvious question to begin with. Could you summarize your views and the and the arguments of the book about how the war did originate? I mean, obviously, Putin started it. But whether there were any particular moments in the long path towards war, when different decisions could have arrested the slide and diverted it into into other courses?

Michael Kimmage 2:41

First of all, thank you so much to the Quincy Institute for the invitation to do this book conversation. And, Anatol, it's a great pleasure to be once again, you know, discussing these themes as we have now I think, over the course of several years been talking about how we got to where we are and what our various governments should be doing, in response to the, to the war and into the many policy questions that it that it raises. So very briefly about the title of the book, the reason that it's in the plural and not in the singular, though this is not a direct answer to your question at all, it does attempt to understand the war along three separate axes. One is a Russia Ukraine axis. The second is a Europe Russia axis. And the third is a US Russia axis. And I do believe that these are three separate conflicts, probably with different points of origin, different logics, different dynamics. And I suspect that each of these three axes will have a different conclusion. So if the war seems complicated in its present configurations, I suppose that this framing of it makes it in a sense even more complicated, but I think it's it's true to the event that it has so many intersecting strands and in threads, I alleged there to be four origins for the war, general origins for the war, the first very broadly understood as a Russian will to

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either control Ukraine or to control Ukraine's geopolitical course, or destiny. Secondly, the vulnerabilities of Ukraine after 1991 of being a country that didn't have a massive military, but at the same time was not a part of any larger security alliances in a neighborhood that's often been historically contested. Thirdly, a sense of drift with Western diplomacy. I know that we'll get further into this question in a moment, but inability to set agendas that were realizable for Ukraine and then the inability to realize these unrealizable agendas and then finally a perception of weakness projected onto the United States from from the Kremlin, which may concern Ukraine but may also concern many other things such as the US presence in the Middle East or the US presence in In Central Asia, in other words, the Iraq and Afghanistan wars as background elements of, of Vladimir Putin's decision making. In terms of inflection points, I think there are so many that the challenge is in some ways to select the most important ones. Certainly the one that I emphasize in the book is one that's almost neutral in nature, and this is the flight of Yanukovych in the third week of February 2014. I argue perhaps extravagantly that this is somewhat similar to the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in 1914, in the sense that it sets in motion a lot of things that are almost as factors larger than each of the individual actors, but it certainly changes the Russian calculus. It changes the very nature of Ukraine when you have the annexation of Crimea, and then subsequent Russian incursion in the Donbass. And it also changes, although not that profoundly attitudes in Europe and the United States. So that's without a question. I think the key inflection point, I suspect the election of Volodymyr Zelensky in 2019, is another inflection point where perhaps Putin's wait and see attitude becomes a bit more hardened and a bit different. And I suspect that goings on domestically in Ukraine and 2020 2021 have a bearing on all of this. And perhaps the messy transition from Biden to Trump as part of the story, perhaps the pullout from Afghanistan, and what that signified in the summer of 2021. And then when you get closer to the event, you can think of additional inflection points, but I'll leave it at that I'm happy to speak about hypothetical policies that were not taken or decisions that were not made. But let me offer that as framing. Thank you.

Anatol Lieven 6:44

Michael, by the way, just for the audience, Mike and I will talk for half an hour or so. And then I'm very happy to pass your questions on which which I hope we will have many could you put them please? Could you write them in the q&a at the bottom of your screen, and I will then pass them on? Forgive me if I can't get around to all of them. I may bring some together. Michael, in your your book you lay, I think rightly, one of your themes is the immense difficulty of well, either integrating and if not integrating finding a much we call it reasonably consensual relationship between Russia and the West, in Europe. And, of course, it could be said that as soon as we in the West began to define Europe as the EU and NATO that almost automatically excluded Russia, since I'm not sure anyone really seriously ever believed that Russia could be a member of those institutions. Was there a possibility of, for example, through Medvedev proposals of a new European security architecture during his interlude as President, when we could have created some kind of new structure or relationship or a new for you, in your view? Was that always a doomed project?

Michael Kimmage 8:19

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Well, I wouldn't want to speak in the language of inevitability. And I try in the book not to do so I think there's a danger now analytically, that we're going to go back and look at everything prior to 2022 as the explanation for what happens in 2022. And that can't be correct. So I think I could offer two answers to your question at all. And the first would take us back to the 1990s, I think, to speak of missed opportunities is, in my view, to speak very much of this decade, you could speculate about what a Marshall Plan or something like that would have looked like, for Russia, as opposed to the kind of economic advice that was offered in that decade, and certainly set back Russia's relations with the West in some foundational and structural way. And then also with the 1990s. You know, it's not really until the middle of the decade that the Clinton White House becomes convinced that expanding NATO is the way to go. And of course, the EU is a longer and more elaborate story. But I think it would have been wise in that decade, if we could have had the foresight to think less along binary lines and more along the lines of institutions, new institutions or old institutions newly imagined, that could have been more open ended, where there could have been graduated types of membership for Ukraine, for Russia for the other ruse for a whole series of countries now where, you know, that are now locked in zero sum conflicts, and that would have been in the interest of these institutions and perhaps it would have left more space for Russian leaders to forge a kind of easier, less conflictual relationship with the West and, and vice versa.

I don't think by the time Putin becomes President everything is set in stone by any means. There are several Putins, there are several chapters to his political story, certainly from 2000 to 2008. Putin is understanding himself or presenting himself as a moderniser. And makes quite considerable efforts to have good relationships with the United States, with Germany, and really, with many European countries. And of course, it's on top of that you mentioned 2009, with innovative proposal that Russia makes a suggestion about how the security architecture of Europe could be, could be altered, but part of the problem in 2009 is that it's motivated who's making the offer? It was hard to know exactly how empowered he was. And you know, there just wasn't really the constellation there on on any side, I think that was going to yield results other than the one other than the ones that we got in 2009, which was Russia and the West, talking past each other, when does some kind of conflict become inevitable? I suspect with the annexation of Crimea, a major road is turned certainly for Ukraine, you know, certainly for Russia, I think it brings a host of strategic problems to Russia that are very difficult to solve, perhaps for Russia without additional war, or without a new iteration of the war. And it also in a different sense, makes it difficult to relate to Russia, as it was before. And, you know, to, to see Russia in the terms in which Russia was looked at, up until the annexation of Crimea. So I don't think 2022 is predestined, even when you get to 2014. But by 2014, all of that Protean experimental phase that's there after the Cold War, I think has begun to diminish has begun to pass, and you start to see the outlines of where we are at the present moment with any number of contingencies between 2014 and the present. But you can kind of sense where we are already in 2014.

Anatol Lieven 11:56

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As a matter of fact, several of the questions obviously, anticipate or the same as some of the questions I was going to ask well, I'll just bring them together. Obviously, one of the questions is the role of NATO expansion, how important do you do think that that was? And if I could add a question of my own. I was astonished, frankly, you know, when NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine came up, actually more well, as it indeed turned out more Georgia, that there seem to be a either no awareness or no willingness to address the question. Certainly no willingness at all to plan within NATO, for contingencies if NATO took in a country with two unsolved territorial conflicts, and Russia, on the other side, because to me, having been worked in that area as a journalist and then an expert, from late Soviet days on, the threat of conflict was, I mean, simply evident, obvious. And yet nobody really seemed to be taking it seriously. I mean, Ukraine, too, though, that, of course, developed more more slowly. But you know, from the 1990s, people, experts, Russians were saying, Look, if if Ukraine is taken is ever taken into NATO, and that implies the expulsion of the Russian fleet from Sevastopol, that means war. You know, I heard that from from people as early as 1995. Why weren't we listening?

Michael Kimmage 14:00

I think it goes back to the rather arcane way in which or esoteric way in which all of this came about as if it had been designed by some deity for maximal confusion. So, Ukraine has never offered a Membership Action Plan, which is the tangible step to membership. And arguably, in 2021, when Joe Biden becomes president, NATO membership for Ukraine is as distant as it was at the end of the Cold War. It's not an additional initiative of the Biden presidency. It's not something that he pushes for. And you can see how there will be reservations about Ukraine's NATO membership in 2021. In places like Hungary, Germany, France, and many other, you know, sort of, among many other NATO states, probably including Turkey, as well. So one element of the confusion is that this was never a policy idea that was on the horizon, on the verge on the cusp of being implemented. So I'd say Think Anatole, some of the casualness that you're describing stems from that circumstance. If it's not about to happen, you don't need a contingency contingency plan, because it has the status of a trial balloon. But of course, as your question and you know, sort of implicitly understands, there was the promise in 2008, at the Bucharest NATO Summit, which, interestingly enough, Putin himself attended that the claim was made there that one day Ukraine and Georgia would be NATO members.

Anatol Lieven 15:30

Well, and the United States and Britain did press for a Membership Action Plan.

Michael Kimmage 15:39

That is correct, and that was in the last year of the W Bush presidency, and then that sort of lapsed under the Obama the to Obama terms, and certainly was nothing that President Trump was going to activate. And, you know, it sort of diminishes it recedes as a possibility. But no doubt, the impression was left in Moscow that this was something that was on the minds of Western policymakers a sort of hypothetical possibility. And then, when Yanukovych flees that

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very pivotal turning point, you do see a change in atmosphere in Ukraine, where it becomes much more an explicit goal of Ukrainian foreign policy for Ukraine to join, to join NATO. So, you know, the sad part of the story, you know, it's not unusual in the annals of diplomacy to have confusion and to have words in reality, not quite in sync. But the sad part of the story is that practically speaking, Ukraine was given nothing. And yet the way in which it was given nothing did serve as Bill Burns, and others have noticed, to antagonize the Russian Foreign policymaking elite. So it's it's a deeply confusing story. I personally, I can go into this, if you're interested. I personally do not foreground NATO all that much in the book, as you know, and I'm happy to explain why that's the case. But it is there, of course. And it's an essential part of the larger story of of Russia's relations with the West and the West relations with Russia.

Anatol Lieven 17:02

Could you say a bit more about that?

Michael Kimmage 17:04

I just don't think now, there's a real problem here of evidence when it comes to Putin's decision making with the 2022 War, and it means that all of us wherever we stand on these debates, the policy debates, the historical debates have to have humility, because we really don't know. We don't know what the genuine calculus of Putin was. We don't know when he made the decision, which itself is very important to understanding Russia's path to war. Was it? Two weeks before the war itself? Was it 10 years ago? Was it 15 years ago? It's it's simply unknown. And I fear that it may never be known, we might never have the paper trail or the interviews or the evidence that allows us to adjudicate these questions. But I do think in 2021 2022, which are clearly important months for decision making, on the subject in the in the Kremlin, I just don't see NATO as anywhere near on the top of the list. It's very far from happening in Ukraine. You know, I think that the Biden administration makes a very pragmatic pitch in 2021, pulling back on Nord Stream two, and sort of offering some room for, for negotiation, not on European security architecture, but perhaps in some of these questions. And yet Putin drives forward to war. So I think the causes are to be found, obviously, in certain dynamics within the Kremlin itself, in Putin's read of the Lansky, his read of Ukraine, his read of things that are going on in Europe at this time, and his read of things that are going on in the United States, but none of these interpretive questions to me really rests on the issue of, of NATO membership. So in the book, I tried to find other sources of explanation. But again, I would underscore the need for humility on this point, because I have no way to back up the claims I make about Putin's decision making. They're all in a sense, fictionalized in the book, but hopefully they're fictionalized in a way that the reader knows that they are not really rooted in evidence.

Anatol Lieven 18:57

I absolutely sympathize. I always have to laugh when when people ask me, what is Putin thinking? Ask him yourself, if you can. We're also speculating from a more or less informed or educated gets perspective. One question. The United States endorsed the Minsk two

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agreement. But thereafter, there seems to have been no real will in the Obama administration level in the Trump administration, actually to try to push that forward. And because of course, it would have required very serious concessions from the Ukrainian side as well as the Russian side. By the time the Biden administration took office in in 2020, One, US officials were telling me that oh, the Minsk process is dead. There's no going back to the Minsk process. However, they had nothing actually to replace the Minsk process with in terms of proposal for a compromise. It was simply going to be supporting Ukraine could could more have been done Do you think to to actually get Minsk implemented?

Michael Kimmage 20:29

I don't I spent two years in government working on issues related to Minsk, which in part were sanctions. And then there was a lot of diplomacy connected to Minsk. And I think it's one of the pivotal questions and I find it terrifically convoluted. It's a very difficult question to disentangle. I'll do my best with you, Anatole. And, you know, for our viewers who are dissatisfied I would recommend turning to the book because there's a lot of effort expended in the book to try to understand what happened with with Minsk. I think the difficulty with Minsk is that that Minsk was not what it said it was not what it seemed to be on the surface, or the the words of the Minsk agreements didn't have that much bearing. On reality Minsk is generated, the need for immense diplomacy has generated first in September of 2014. And then in February of 2015 Min squantum ins to is generated by Ukrainian battlefield setbacks, which occur over the summer, and 2014. And then around the balsa in February 2015. That's something that Ukraine had a hard time accepting. It didn't want to acknowledge really, that in Minsk, it was suing for peace, which was, to an extent, the case and what Ukraine got out of it was something close to a ceasefire. But there was no desire in Ukraine to go beyond that. And, you know, to cede any kind of tacit control over Ukrainian territory to Russia on the Russian side. And here too, I struggle with good evidence to understand Russian decision making.

I think Minsk was not much more than a holding pattern. Russia didn't like what happened in Ukraine in 2014. There was perhaps a hope in Moscow that there would be new leadership. You know, it was costly for Russia to keep going with the war that was causing sanctions. So we'll halt and we'll create this thing called Minsk. But I don't think that there was any sincere desire to go forward on the basis of Minsk in Moscow. What makes it even more convoluted is that Minsk was negotiated not by the United States, but by Germany, France, Russia, and Ukraine. So on the western side, the key agents in Minsk diplomacy are Germany and France, who in the end, kind of wash their hands of of all that was entailed in Minsk and didn't push either for concessions or for exerting more coercive power on Russia, and the EU in the US just, you know, gradually forgot about Minsk, as you're suggesting or lost all faith in Minsk as a diplomatic process, but but nothing else in its place. And so Minsk says, How can I explain it best as the chasm as a through a metaphor, it's a sort of shoddy structure with very poor building materials. And the blueprint is one that doesn't make a great deal of sense. And it says, if the weather around it just eroded Minsk at a certain point, and then it kind of washed away. And then what came in its place was the very frantic year 2021 frantic diplomacy, and then gradually the, the

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Russian march to war, but it's as a historian, I struggled to gain clarity on this question, because the, the issues to me again, seem so so horribly convoluted.

Anatol Lieven 23:36

You know, I wonder in the end, if though, I have to say if they were so, really so complicated, because it seems to me that in the end, the Russian and Ukrainian perception of Minsk was actually the same. Russia thought that it would get an autonomous area of Ukraine, with international guarantees for its autonomy and some form of local security guarantees in terms of local armed forces by another name within Ukraine, which would then be in a position heavily to influence Ukrainian policies, including on Russian language and including on path to NATO. That was exactly what Kiev feared that that you would have such an autonomous Donbass within Ukraine, which would play such a role in influencing Ukraine and blocking or trying to block Ukraine's path towards the west. But the thing is that if you weren't going to have an autonomous Donbass guaranteed with the autonomy permanently guaranteed from Keith, what on earth were you going to have? And at that point, I mean, this, of course, became impossible after 2014. But politically speaking, but previously, so many Ukrainian nationalists, I know had been saying that we should let the Donbass go, we should even kick it out, because then we will have a more homogeneous and much more homogeneous Ukraine in which we can, you know, really create a Ukrainian nation without so much Russian influence. I mean, did would it have been, I mean, I can't help thinking that Dean Acheson would have said, right here, you know, this is a potential conflict, which risks in broiling the United States, here is the solution. Take it or leave it, is that something that U.S. diplomacy is capable even of thinking about anymore?

Michael Kimmage 25:53

Maybe I mean, I think thinking back to that time, from my time in the State Department, there was just a basic optimism that Minsk was going to work because of the sanctions, which proved not to be correct. But that was the dominant, thinking there. It wasn't Achesonian in the way that you describe, I think I take a somewhat different view of the Russian position on Minsk. And to me, this view feels feels validated by the events of the last two and a half years, but I'll offer it only as speculative. I don't think that Moscow or Putin looked at the new Ukrainian government. So Poroshenko becomes the president in May of 2014. I don't think that the most that Moscow looked at this new government as legitimate. And certainly if you look at Russian media messaging, it's often referred to as a junta or regime, a CIA construct, um, you get different versions of this in different corners of the Russian media world. And I think that Minsk on the Russian side, was a way of driving home this point about legitimacy. And I think that it was supposed to be humiliating, the concessions were supposed to be humiliating. And that aspirationally on the Russian side was to cause problems in Kyiv, and perhaps to generate the fall of the petition co government. And then when we move on to a new stage of the Russian Ukrainian relationship, or of the conflict between these two countries, but I don't think it was that much more than a lever, a lever of chaos, that's, you know, 2014 2015 in terms of the military presence as such, but a diplomatic lever to humiliate give and to show that Russia was still in the driver's seat, and that any way forward would be achieved through concessions that were

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probably unacceptable to the Ukrainian polity, I would offer that argument. So in that sense, if it's extra Sonian as a kind of pragmatic solution that could have gotten things back to, to normal. I don't see that being a sort of viable option at the time, but I guess we're contending both of us with with with hypothetical alternatives.

Anatol Lieven 27:59

I mean, autonomy is not in itself humiliating. It's been the solution that we proposed to several conflicts around the world.

Michael Kimmag 28:02

If autonomy was really in the offing, I mean, I think what got Minsk sort of bogged down, was that you had two different notions of sequencing one on the Ukrainian side, and one on the Russian side, and the Russian side was more, we'll have elections and we'll sort of figure out the politics and then we'll take our soldiers out on the Ukrainian side it was the Russians have to take their soldiers out, and then we'll do the elections and, and, and all of that. So if it had been, you know, sort of autonomy plus Russian soldiers on Ukrainian territory, I think that would have been very humiliating. Indeed, and of course, it's It's anybody's guess if that's what the arrangement would have been. But my my supposition is that's the arrangement Ukraine would have gotten, even if it looked different on the in the paperwork of Minsk.

Anatol Lieven 28:44

Nut the Ukrainian parliament, as you know, refused to, to amend even with of course, it would have had to have a delay to an amendment to the Constitution guaranteeing Donbass autonomy. And the notion that one side disarms completely before the other side guarantees anything is I'm sorry, that's not a starter for any peace process, it would be regarded as hopeless, in any other context. I do feel there that, you know, we did apply a very different diplomatic standard to this war than we would, you know, in any other territorial dispute elsewhere

Michael Kimmage 29:25

No, that's possible. But I think that the Ukrainian would position was underscored by a deep black lack of trust of, of the Russian side, in a sense, that lack of trust was borne out by what happens in in 2022.

Anatol Lieven 29:41

Well that's working backwards from, you know, from what happens later to earlier which I didn't tell you is when you say to yourself is can be a grave mistake for a historian.

Michael Kimmage 29:53

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Yes, but, you know, the, the, at the same time that now everything points toward 2022, 2022 is a revelation of, in a sense, of the truest Russian policy toward Ukraine from which Russia has not served swerved since 2022. And I think it does shed a kind of light on what Russia was aiming for in 2014. So without drawing too tight a causal line between those two moments, 2015 and 2022. I do think that there is an illumination that comes in 2020 to about, in effect, what Russian policy was all along.

Anatol Lieven 30:29

Yes, I mean, certainly, in Russia, policy was to continue to exert heavy influence over Ukraine. But as I say, I think that was the, you know, the goals through Donbass autonomy within Ukraine. Many Russians say that Putin's great mistake in 2014 was annexing Crimea, instead of keeping it within Ukraine as a, you know, as a lever on on Ukrainian policy. Questions, more questions from the audience? Do you see any possibility now? And this is going to be the subject, obviously, but webinar tomorrow? Do you see any realistic possibility of of a peace settlement in Ukraine?

Michael Kimmage 31:06

I don't. I don't think that the position of the Ukrainian government and the position of the Russian government can be reconciled in a way that would resemble a genuine peace settlement. In in the sense that I don't think what Russia would accept as acceptable to Ukraine, I think that Putin began the war. This seems to me close to an objective fact. He began the war with maximalist ambitions of conquering the country partitioning the country, certainly taking the capital city, probably in some way or certainly eviscerating the Ukrainian government. And, you know, sort of building something that would have been an entirely new structure on the territory of Ukraine. I personally, and I know that there's a wider range of opinions on this in the expert community. I personally don't see evidence that Putin has moved back from that position moderated in some ways since the course of the war has been. The momentum has been on the Russian side for the last couple of months. In some ways, I think. Those may be the ceiling or rather the floor of Putin's ambitions at the present moment. And perhaps he's thinking in even broader terms about what what Russia can do in and around Ukraine. And if that's the case, there's I think, no way that Ukraine could accede to that vision, or in a different sense, accede to a ceasefire or a kind of interim arrangement that would allow Russia to regroup, and then re begin. Its its invasion. And, you know, we could speak about political configurations within Ukraine, I don't think that there is much political will, to engage in concessions. And, you know, the course of the war has not been such, I think that Russia would require anything less than surrender of one kind or another from Ukraine, to end to end the hostilities. I do, however, believe this is not to answer the question in the terms of your question, but to propose somewhat different terms that over time, and I have in mind several years here, Ukraine and Russia can determine rules of engagement that's happening already, in some ways there is contact between the two governments about the kinds of assets that they strike. You know, it's an archaic, but there's some degree of communication between Kyiv and Moscow, in that regard, and that may be a

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template for the future. If these two governments realize that neither can achieve their full agendas. Ukraine can't fully liberate itself and Russia can't conquer Ukraine, then the conflict may continue in some way as a kind of low boil, medium boil conflict, but with some rules of engagement that's as optimistic as I'm able to be about it moving from an all out war to something other than an all out war, but I don't see a negotiated diplomatic settlement as the as the path of exit.

Anatol Lieven 34:18

I mean, what Russia says of course, well, naturally, we cannot assume this is in fact sincere, is is rather different. It's about neutrality, arms limitations, do not suffocation which is very ambiguous unit and territorial recognition now, neutrality, it seems to me is actually has the Lenski himself said, you know, in the first month of the war, said, You know, I went to all the NATO capitals and asked can you get guarantee that we will be in NATO within five years. And they all said no. So why not, you know, neutrality with guarantees, obviously, of whatever kind denotes vacation? Well, it's been suggested to me that by Russians that this could simply the Ukrainians adopting a version of the Austrian law, even under the state Treaty, which banned neo-Nazi parties, very complicated in Ukraine, on territory. It's absolutely obvious. I think that the Ukrainians can never recognize Russian annexation. But I mean, the fact of the matter is that unless the Ukrainians can reconquer these territories, they aren't practically speaking, going to get them back. So, I mean, is there a possibility, which, by the way, I mean, Zelensky, also proposed as far as Crimea was concerned, that as in as with Cyprus or Kashmir, you just and one or two smaller cases around the world, you just kick this, the territorial issue down the road for future negotiation, which, of course, will never actually, as in the cases I've mentioned, they will never actually be resolved, it will just gradually go away.

Michael Kimmage 36:25

Well, I think, to me the issues here, as you say, it's hard to know what the logic is behind the logic when it comes to the Kremlin in the war, and it could well be a darker logic than the one that you outlined, namely immiseration of Ukrainian statehood. And, and, and peoplehood as the kind of driving Russian aspiration with the rest of this stuff, sort of a smokescreen, that's one possibility. But even taking these proposals on face value, it doesn't seem to me that any Ukrainian government could accept them state with truncated sovereignty with a military much reduced and a state that, by definition, is unable to form alliances and partnerships with other states, presumably apart from Russia, where I'm sure Russia would be delighted to form an alliance with with this kind of Ukraine, but that sort of state would be unbelievably vulnerable, and weak. And so I think the core Ukrainian concern would have to be if they would make all of these concessions to get an end to this stage of the war. That a year later, when Ukraine has been demilitarized, rendered a neutral state and has less territory than it had in on February 23 2022, that Ukraine would be much, much easier to invade. And the concern would be that Russia would just at a certain point in quotation marks Finish, finish the jobs because all of these things would make Ukraine quite a bit weaker. I mean, Ukraine has already signed a

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security guarantee arrangement of some kind with the United Kingdom. I'm not quite sure what that entails.

Anatol Lieven 37:57

As a Brit, I'm not quite sure what is worth.

Michael Kimmage 38:02

It's a question to ask, but there are other such guarantees that are sort of coming into existence for for Ukraine. And I can't imagine I just can't imagine as a practical matter, that Ukraine would be willing to unwind those relationships and whatever may come in the future, even if it falls short of NATO NATO membership, that gift would be willing to unwind those relationships for the sake of ineffective Russian promises that if all of these concessions would be made, then Russia would put to the side the territorial ambitions that it put on such stark display on the 24th of February 2022. It just seems a very difficult, practically speaking to me, difficult is an understatement sort of unacceptable set of conditions for free for Ukraine.

Anatol Lieven 38:46

But in a well, you're in your book, you very much model yourself on Thucydides, one of my great heroes, of course, as a as a realist, and as you said, it is famously said, *the strong do what they can and the weak do what they must*. What if Ukraine loses militarily? You know, the odds in the long run, do seem pretty heavily against it. Of course, much will depend on the US elections and what happens in the wider world. But I mean, it's Well, first, I mean, this goes beyond your book, of course, but what happens if in fact, Ukraine does just start to lose the war? Very badly? And secondly, if it does, what? What do you think the West does?

Michael Kimmage 39:42

Well, I think a Ukrainian defeat would be catastrophic for for the West in the sense that the war wouldn't finish the war would just move westward. And perhaps begin to involve a Not through Russian invasion, but through a cute geopolitical tension handful of NATO member states. And we would be, in effect closer to a Russia NATO war, in addition to massive refugee flows and the humanitarian catastrophe that Ukraine's defeat would embody. So that's certainly a nightmarish scenario. And I agree with the logic of your question to the extent that we have to do everything possible to prevent that. But I would say in this regard, although there are plausible scenarios this summer and later have different versions of Ukrainian defeat, that it's important to remember how steep the strategic climb is for Russia at the present moment. There's been a legitimate degree of attention paid to Ukraine's difficulties, manpower difficulties, material and since you mention Thucydides is the kind of strengths that Russia is able to bring to bear on the war with Ukraine on its own, can't equal or match, although Ukrainian alliances with other countries could, could begin to do so. But I think and I know that we've had this discussion before, in other settings, Anatol that Russia can't make "progress" in the war, unless

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it can start to take major Ukrainian cities. Yeah, and I guess Kharkiv is now the one that sort of in question due to the sort of decimation of the city that's been proceeding paced television tower, you know, electricity and these kinds of these kinds of resources. And if that happens over the course of the summer, then, you know, my argument might start to look weaker. But if Russia is unable to take any of these cities, you know, Mariupol, of course, is now on the Russian side of the ledger. But that's the only major Ukrainian city that is that has fallen on the Russian side of the ledger since 2022. I don't see how Russia can change the political dynamic of the war. And in that sense, I don't see how Russia can, when they can exert enormous amount of difficulty and in cause all kinds of suffering and civilian life and family life and all those things will be considerably darkened by the by the war, but that doesn't amount to victory in the in the conflict. And in that sense, Russia, two and a half years into this war is very, very, very far from any kind of objective that would allow Russia to terminate to terminate hostilities. So you're entirely right, that we need to think through these scenarios, we need to think through the implications they matter for diplomacy in a different sense matter for the kind of military assistance given to Ukraine, but not I think, on the presumption that Russia is that much on the up and up with the war. It's not my that's not my assessment at the present moment.

Anatol Lieven 42:40

No, I think I mean, on, on the point about the cities, you're absolutely right. And urban warfare, as indeed the US, as found on occasions is, you know, a very, very different matter from conquering swathes of the countryside. So yes. Putin prior to '22 came under considerable criticism, from hard nationalist, hardliners within Russia, over two things: first, his his actual refusal to recognize the independence of the Donbass republics, but also, he was massively criticized within the establishment, though, of course, behind the scenes for not invading Ukraine, or at least eastern Ukraine, the whole of eastern Ukraine in 2014 or 2015. When, of course, the Ukrainian army was so weak that Russia could have done that much more easily. Why do you think he didn't?

Michael Kimmage 43:41

Yes, I think it's a sequence of opportunities and challenges that came Putin's way, once again, with this unexpected flight of Yanukovych. On the you know, sort of late late night hours in February 21 2014 of the early morning, hours of February 2022. You know, Crimea, in a sense, falls into Putin's lap. There are Russian military assets and Crimea. Well, before 2014, there are a lot of retirees in Crimea from the Russian military. As you were suggesting, before with one of your questions politically, there was, you know, a large constituency in Crimea that wasn't necessarily in favor of separatism, but that look maybe more to Moscow than to Kiev, a large number of Russian speakers, etc, etc, with and also that it's a peninsula, which makes it, you know, sort of perfect for, for annexation. So that worked for Putin, of course, and of course, he was part of Russia until 1954. And all of the history that's there, behind behind 2014. And it was very popular in Russia, even among people who weren't great fans of Putin. The annexation of Crimea gave him a political boost within Russia itself, that I don't think was was was replicable

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in the Donbass Donbass was much more chaotic obviously there's no beginning and end to the Donbass. It's a, it's a landmass from what I understand the cities were more Russian speaking the countryside is more Ukrainian speaking. And that just created a lot of political messiness. And it is the case that the Ukrainian military once Pachenko became president, he becomes president in May of 2014. By June, Ukrainian military is beginning to advance and probably would have just, you know, sort of brought Donbass back into the fold. By the summer if regular Russian military units hadn't been introduced to this to the fight in July and August of, of 2014. But that already is, you know, kind of a mess, I would say, for Russia, and then these two gangsta republics are a very awkward solution to the problem, if they're a solution to any problem in 2014 2015, but Odessa, and other things that were referred to, by those two pollutants, right, in 2014, Novorossiia, as it was called, that sort of administrative unit from the time of Catherine the Great, I think that was even more difficult still, in terms of just the on the ground support that Russia would have had, and the ability to, you know, sort of cleanly turn this into places of Russian influence or of Russian domination. So that kind of appetite was there. I think a lot of it is created by Crimea, and how successful it looked in Russian eyes. You know, sort of the Donbass diminishes that appetite. And then I think looking elsewhere in Ukraine, it just wasn't a practical possibility. And so I think the decision follows from those circumstances more than anything, purely political or strategic.

Anatol Lieven 46:31

Yes. I mean, you see my point, if indeed, Putin always had this ambition, this basically unchanging ambition to dominate the whole of Ukraine. Why did he not go for that, when it was much easier to do so rather than in 2022? When it's been, although, obviously, he vastly underestimated the Ukrainians that should clearly become much more difficult? Because there's a question, you know, as revealed now by the CIA, and that, between 2014 and 2022, there was, you know, intensifying US military connections, aid intelligence aid to Ukraine. Did how big of a role did that play? Do you think in Putin's feeling that it time was simply, you know, against them? And also, the question of Russian language and culture within Ukraine, the feeling that you moved by the Ukrainian state in the long run were basically going to tremendously diminish the Russian that the role of the Russian language and culture within Ukraine over time?

Michael Kimmage 47:46

Well, let me go back to 2014. It's a very interesting question about why Putin didn't go further. In 2014. I think that there was a great fear on the Russian side about the sanctions. In the end, Russia, Russia was able to write out the EU and US sanctions in 2014 2015. But that wasn't self evident. At the time, at the time, the Russian economy was very enmeshed in the economy of Europe, and an aspects of the global economy with the United States is able to, to influence and so I think that there was a natural limit there in terms of how far Putin was willing to go to rupture, Russia's economic relations with the West and 2014, he has between 2014 2015 and 2020, to sort of seven years to work on that problem. And that, I think, bolsters his confidence in 2022. And all things considered, when you look at the Russian economy today, it hasn't been devastated by the war of the last two and a half years. So some of what they learned in those

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years, some of what Russia learned in those years was, was put to practical effect. I think, in another sense, the sort of military modernization for which Putin was responsible when we had the president and Putin was the prime minister had gone relatively far in 2014. But there was still a way to go. So I think that there are economic reasons, and there are military reasons not to go all in. And in addition to that, I think that there was the Russian hope, you know, maybe unrealistic after the annexation of Crimea, but there was the hope that Ukraine would naturally come back. After all, a major war in Ukraine is bad for Russia in so many ways. Its loss of life, its rupture with the West, it's the inflicting of suffering on a neighboring country. All of those are our negatives, and so better if Ukraine sort of shifts as it did, right, you have the Orange Revolution in 2004. And it seems like Russia is losing Ukraine. Gleb Pavlovsky says it's our 911 and then in 2010, you have the election of a pro Russian figure of Yanukovich with whom Putin was very comfortable doing business, I think we could still hope for the Kremlin still hoped in 2015 that ionic COVID might come back or maybe taking on Yanukovich himself might come back to power in Ukraine. So that's another reason not to invade completely. If that's what you're hoping for, you know, maybe there was a bit of anticipation around Zelensky. In that respect he campaigns as a peace candidate. He's a Russian speaker, he lived in Moscow for a few years had a kind of Russian career. But that too didn't come to pass for, for Russia. So I think when you put economic military and you know, regional politics, in line, you can see why 2022 is preferable to put in for an all out invasion preferable to 2014 2015 No doubt, the growing relationship between Ukraine and NATO. It's not that Ukraine becomes a member but NATO does have training facilities in Ukraine. They do exercises together Ukrainian military and NATO. That's something that set off alarm bells. In, in Russia, a growing relationship, intelligence, military, political between the United States and Ukraine is very much not to Russia's liking. And if there is a matter of timeline, it seems apparent that Putin could have made the projection that if Ukraine had gone five steps toward the west in these domains, between 2014 and 2022, that if nothing was done, Ukraine would go five steps further, or 20 steps or 50 steps in this direction. And for Putin, that was that was intolerable.

Anatol Lieven 51:12

Question, how would you regard the such the suggestion by President Macron, and others that some NATO countries might actually send troops to defend Ukraine? Is that a well a Is that a realistic possibility? And is it a good idea?

Michael Kimmage 51:30

I don't think it demands a lot of careful analysis, Emmanuel Macron missed an extraordinary career as the director of a think tank where he could have captured everybody's attention with these kinds of phrases. You know, NATO is brain dead is another sort of example of a Macron phrase that was much discussed at the time and didn't really have a great deal of, of of traction. I mean, first of all, there was Macron's failure to coordinate with Berlin, which very quickly dashed cold water on this idea of sending sort of uniformed European troops into the battlefields. In Ukraine, it seems to me impossible that France would consider doing this if the United States were not also on board. And President Biden has been adamant about not

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sending uniformed US soldiers to Ukraine. So you know, it's not the first time in microns career, but it's a kind of rhetorical trial balloon. But I think it filled mostly by hot air.

Anatol Lieven 52:24

And other questions loosely. Yeah. Do you take seriously the idea of a Russian, a deliberate Russian attack on NATO? And as I understand from your book, you're probably more worried that we would unintentionally stumble into conflict as a result, for example of revolution in pro Western revolution in Belarus.

Michael Kimmage 52:48

Yeah, it's difficult to be I find optimistic about any aspect of the war. But there might be one aspect, that over time, we should acknowledge and think about, and it yields a bit of optimism, which is that this to me seems like a conflict far more fluid, dynamic and unpredictable than almost all of the cold war conflicts. Certainly all of the cold war conflicts in Europe were much more contained than than the current war in Ukraine. So there's an enormous potential for overspill for accident for misreading, you know, sort of Cuban Missile crises that could be embedded in the tensions that have emanated out from this from this conflict. And yet it does seem that Moscow, Washington and the other relevant capitals have been able to manage this pretty well. Maybe it's dumb luck. Maybe it's deft behind the scenes diplomacy. You know, whatever it is, it's it's worked so far. And I think that that does speak to the basic fears of the nuclear age still being self evident, you know, Putin has indulged in some loose nuclear rhetoric, and the people around him have done the same. But he's certainly not used nuclear weapons in Ukraine. He's not done the kinds of things that might compel certain NATO countries to come into the war. And likewise, a lot of President Biden's cautionary rhetoric is about not stepping too directly on Russia's toes. With this with this with this conflict, so yes, I think it's it's cause for a bit of optimism, in a sense, I don't see what attacking a NATO country would bring Russia. It's very little use to Russia, it could create huge problems at a time when the war in Ukraine has anything but finished for Russia. And it's not as if Russia is wasted in the war. It's increased its defense industrial capacity, it has been able to conscript soldiers or to, you know, sort of pay soldiers to fight for the military. It's not as if Russia is down and out. In terms of the words some people occasionally suggest, but if Russia is struggling to the degree that it is to take Avdiikva and Bakhmut, the notion that Warsaw or, you know, Narva, or, you know, Riga are going to come into play, it just, it defies any kind of, I think, reasoned military analysis of the of the situation. So there do seem to be sort of larger mechanisms in place to avoid the worst case scenarios. And there just isn't the motivation, I think there to to broaden the conflict. So we have to hope that accident and misinterpretation don't change this part of the war.

Anatol Lieven 55:24

Absolutely, question, when Hillary Clinton was Secretary of State, did the US have, of course, an unannounced but a de facto policy of seeking regime change in Russia?

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Michael Kimmage 55:42

I think the answer to that has to be an emphatic no. There is a sensitive period from 2011 to 2012. And this demands, you know, I think, textured historical inquiry. The US is not overjoyed about the departure of Dmitry Medvedev and the return of Vladimir Putin to the top position in the Kremlin. And that's you don't have to read between the lines to see that disappointment. And Hillary Clinton in particular, identifies any number of election irregularities that were there, in 2022, in 2012, to Putin's great displeasure. Now, we could ask the question on the US side, whether it's smart American diplomacy to make any comment at all, about Russian elections, and we can ask on the US side, whether it was smart to play favorites with the election, and obviously to prefer Medvedev staying on to Putin's return, all of that, I think contributes to Putin in 2012, becoming Russia's president, once again, in a very foul mood, and very predisposed to dislike not just the United States, but to dislike the individual leaders in the Obama foreign policy team. So that's a price paid perhaps for certain statements that were made or attitudes that were held. None of that, to me, translates into a regime change agenda or anything resembling that. In in Russia itself. I have not seen evidence of that I can't imagine that a president like Barack Obama, with his, you know, basic attitudes toward Russia from 2008 to 2012. would entertain those notions obviously, there's a great deal out there in the sort of the in cyberspace about precisely these things and frequent claims from from the clamp Kremlin that there was such an agenda, but I No, no, I know of no evidence that supports it.

Anatol Lieven 57:36

I mean, by 2012, Medvedev was also in a foul mood as a result of Libya, Syria, and the also the dismissal of his proposals, you know, to for a new European security architecture. Russians, I have to say, found US policy on Syria and Libya, absolutely incomprehensible. Because after the disaster of Iraq, they asked I mean, how can the US set out to conduct more regime change in the Middle East with the possibility? The very strong possibility is I believe the CIA warned of a resulting victory for ISIS. Many Russians could only explain this to themselves. They don't, of course, understand the idealistic strain in in in America, but they explained it to themselves simply in terms of of automatic and, and pathological hostility to Russia. One does remember that Hillary Clinton, having advocated according to Clinton, to Obama's memoirs, supporting the regime of Mubarak in Egypt, a few months later described Russian support for the Baath regime in Syria as despicable, which seems inconsistent. Why did we not why since we have the same enemies in the Middle East to a great extent, why did we not do more to try to understand Russian perspectives and can continue cooperation with Russia in the anti extremism field?

Michael Kimmage 59:20

Well, first Speaking of 2011 2012, of course, there is a decent degree of cooperation between Russia and the US on counterterrorism after September 11. Right, there's the Northern Distribution route and assistance that Russia rendered for the US war in Afghanistan and, you know, not perfect relations between George W. Bush and Putin, but multiple visits to Crawford, Texas, I was somehow surprised to learn in the research for the book that in 2007, Putin went to

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Kennebunkport, Maine and visited the Bush family compound there which just seemed friendlier than I sort of remember the the climate being in that In that year, I think in 2011 2012, when it comes to Obama in the Middle East, I just don't think Russia was that important of a factor, period, you know, sort of keeping Russia on board or alienating Russia wasn't first and foremost in the minds of, of many, or perhaps even if any, in Washington, after all. With Libya, you get the abstention, the Russian abstention from a video about NATO military action there. That's something that would VGF gets raked over the coals for it. But it was a decision that he made and Russia is not really back in Syria, of course, until 2015. So the sort of US response in 2011 2011 2012 is, is not conducted with I think Russia in mind at all. So for good or for ill Russia, I think was a nonfactor for Obama administration, Middle East policy until 2015, when Russia comes in a big way to Syria and you know, sort of reasserts its position in the region. And then there's some deconfliction. But that, of course, occurs after the annexation of Crimea, and after the US and Russia have collided over Ukraine. So it's it's much, much more difficult for the US and Russia to cooperate, then. So perhaps it's a story of limited engagement after September 11, not engagement for quite a few years after that, and then very tense engagement in 2015.

Anatol Lieven 1:01:24

Well, I'm afraid we're out of time, Michael, but thank you so much. This has been a fascinating discussion. And I apologize, so many questions, but I couldn't get around to them all. And I hope that many of you will attend our webinar on the possibilities of peace for Ukraine tomorrow at the same time. So Michael, thank you once again, and I hope that many of the audience will rush out and buy your book.

Michael Kimmage 1:01:48

Thank you so much, Anatol, for so graciously hosting this event and for the very stimulating questions.