

Fyodor Lukyanov: Russia's Strategy as the World Order Collapses

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#Glenn

Welcome back. Today we're joined by Fyodor Lukyanov, the editor-in-chief of Russia in Global Affairs Journal and also the chairman of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, as well as a research professor at the Higher School of Economics. So thank you for coming back on the program.

#Fyodor Lukyanov

Fyodor Lukyanov: Thank you very much for inviting me. Hi, Glenn.

#Glenn

I've been wanting to ask you both about the Ukraine war and the Iran war in terms of how the world looks from Russia, but also how especially the Iran war affects Russia. But I thought a good place to start would be the Ukraine war. Well, this war has changed a lot over the past four and a half years in terms of how it's been fought, the degree the different participants have been involved. But the participants themselves have changed over the past four and a half years. The positions of the European leaders and Russia are especially hardening, and there's more willingness to take risks. I was just wondering, where do you see this war heading now? Because it seems to be escalating.

#Fyodor Lukyanov

First of all, today as we speak, there is one day before an anniversary of the so-called Anchorage meeting, the Alaska summit between Putin and Trump, on August 15, 2025, which produced a lot of hopes and I would even say exaltation about the possibility to stop this war and to achieve a diplomatic and political solution. So, a year after this, we see that it failed, basically. It did not produce anything like an end of hostilities. More than that, the result of that attempt was actually

the conclusion on the side of Ukraine and Europe, which supports Ukraine now 100% and is de facto part of this military confrontation. So the conclusion made by that side was that it should be escalation.

In order to convince Ukraine, the American side, President Trump in particular, that his idea, that his conclusion, which he had at that time, that Ukraine is bound to lose this war, that's why they should compromise as quickly as possible and give up Donbas and fulfill Russian minimal demands. So, to convince him that that was wrong, that Ukraine is able to resist and even to win, maybe. And then what we saw during all this year, especially starting from this spring, this is a steady escalation on the Ukrainian side, supported by Europeans. So at this point, they partially succeeded. I mean, they managed to not change the mind of President Trump, but at least influence this mind. Because I think Trump's position at this point is, okay, if they can fight, let them fight. It's not the fact that he suddenly decided to support Ukraine, certainly not.

He is simply indifferent. But if they can, why not? Let them try. And coming back to your question, what we see now, we see now the escalation. And the escalation on the Ukrainian side, which started because of the increased ability to deliver long-range strikes deep into Russian territory, this escalation produced another escalation by the Russian side. And we see now that Russia delivered a strike which Russia did not want to deliver before, to target critical infrastructure in Ukraine on a massive scale. And of course, Russia suffers as well because, as I said, the ability of Ukraine is quite strong now. But what does it mean for the course of this war? I'm afraid we are now much further away from a political solution and from any kind of ceasefire than we were a year ago, when Anchorage was in place.

#Glenn

Well, what have we heard about Anchorage? Again, we don't know exactly what the deal was, but again, that was mainly based on an American proposal. Donbas obviously had to go to Russia, but there were rumors that in terms of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, this could end up just freezing the front lines where they were. Again, it's still unclear. The text was never revealed, but it was the Americans who proposed it, but also them who eventually walked away. And now we see this idea that, you know, if they just do some deep strikes into Russia, they would put pressure on Russian society and thus also the Kremlin. So Russia would be more flexible, make more concessions. But it's unclear to me, though, what they want Russia to do besides this. Is it simply to accept the idea of an unconditional ceasefire? Because it seems like this would be a non-starter. So what are the possible paths now, in your opinion, to put an end to this war through diplomacy? Or are those paths exhausted now?

#Fyodor Lukyanov

Maybe not exhausted. Sooner or later there will be some kind of path to diplomacy and to political negotiations and then settlement. But actually, if we recall this Anchorage time, Anchorage meeting

again, I think many of us, including myself, were too optimistic, while we forgot that such kind of conflicts cannot be ended just in one serious, one important meeting. Remember Vietnam. Remember that after the moment when the American administration made a conclusion, decided that it should be the end of this war, negotiations took years.

It was not just months, years, between, I don't know, '68 and '73, '74 till '75. I hope very much that it's not the model for this Ukrainian conflict, but to expect that such kind of controversies can be settled like this in one meeting, that was absolutely unrealistic, of course. As far as the current trajectory is concerned, I think that for the next immediate period, maybe next month, couple of months to come, we should not expect anything but increasing fighting and sharpening escalation, unfortunately. On the Ukrainian side, there is a very clear understanding that they will be able to keep going as long as they support this war through engaging with Europeans, ideally with Americans, but at least with Europeans against Russia.

And this is the, from my point of view, this is the basis, the basics for the whole political machinery of this war. And paradoxically, in case of Ukraine, I even can understand it. So I have absolutely zero sympathies with them, but I understand that it might be rational for Zelensky and the whole team. What looks to me less rational is the behavior of Europeans, because they voluntarily made Ukraine and the war with Russia a core of the whole idea of the newly emerged or emerging European Union. So it should be permanent confrontation with Russia based on Ukrainian capacity to fight and European capacities to support this fight financially and technically, maybe indefinitely.

So Europeans, of course, are certainly not eager to get engaged directly in this war. I hope so. But at the same time, when I hear some statements from European politicians, in particular from German politicians, I doubt maybe they are preparing for real war as well. I don't know. Hopefully not, but nothing is sure anymore. And European unity, from my point of view at this point, is very much based on the existence of this Russian menace, Russian threat, which is not a general one anymore. This is a very concrete one, and they try to present it to the public as an immediate looming threat of a direct attack of Putin against Europe, against the European part of NATO. And that means that this logic: the longer we support Ukraine, the longer Putin is occupied with this and probably will not attack us. That's very widespread.

At the end of the day, what we have, we have a situation when neither Kyiv nor European capitals, in particular Brussels, are interested in anything but continued protracted war, which, of course, no doubt about that, creates an increasing amount of problems for Russia. It would be stupid to deny that Russia is not happy to continue this war, but there is no way being offered to try to negotiate seriously, because whatever the European politicians are saying now, some of them, like the Finnish president or some other politicians from not the biggest countries in Europe, they start to at least mention some idea that probably we need to have negotiations with Russia. But again, what kind of negotiations? They mean that Russia should engage in diplomatic talks with Europeans about what? About how Russia will give up. But unfortunately, it's a non-starter.

#Glenn

It's interesting how there's no talk about peace, only defeating Russia. I find this to be interesting, especially coming from the Germans. But again, what you're saying is what I hear from American sources as well, which is that the European leaders have become the main obstruction to any settlement because, well, not only have they boycotted diplomacy for the past four and a half years, but their only path to peace they envision is an unconditional ceasefire, which they're quite open they would use to replenish Ukrainian troops, possibly send in their own as peacekeepers.

They don't want to take NATO expansion off the table, which means there's no foundation for peace. And, yeah, the American sources also make the point that the Europeans, they're fueling Zelensky's maximalist demands. And also, yeah, the comments they have on what happened when Trump opened up diplomacy with the Russians—there was panic, essentially. They all boarded flights to Washington and tried to convince him that the only peace that can work is a ceasefire. And, you know, we can't trust anything the Russians say. And let's see, let's try to first bomb the Russians a little bit, pressure them to get a better deal. So essentially for Trump to do what Biden did. But it's hard to understand this position from the Europeans.

Is it only that unity has become completely dependent on a Russian threat, or is it the reluctance to reconsider the European security architecture? Or how do you explain this? Because I agree with what you said. It's a bit perplexing. I can understand the Russian position. They see this as an existential threat. I think the Ukrainians also reasonably see this as an existential threat. But for the Europeans, I don't really get this part. I mean, the Americans, they want to either outsource the war to the Europeans or put an end to it so they can focus other places. It also makes sense, but the European one I struggle with. Is it only this aspect of it, that they need the Russians for unity?

#Fyodor Lukyanov

You know, of course, I don't know, because as a person banned from entering the European Union, I cannot feel the atmosphere there. But looking from the outside, I would say there are two reasons. One reason, which we already discussed, is this necessity to have something which unifies. And to some extent, Europeans try to reconstitute the model of the Cold War, when the Soviet threat, which was real, created a very strong impetus to European integration. And I think Stalin and other Soviet leaders after him should be awarded something like a Charlemagne Prize for contributing to European unity and so on. So now I think that Europeans try to get something like this. The difference is that the Soviet Union was part of the global confrontation, and Europe was a centerpiece of this confrontation.

In this regard, I don't believe that the Soviet Union at any point in its history really wanted to invade Europe—Western Europe, of course. But at least strategically, it was reasonable to believe that some kind of war which would devastate Europe could happen between the Soviet Union and the United States on European soil. While now, of course, the whole reasoning around the Russian threat is

very much controversial because, on the one hand, Russia is being presented as an extremely weak, declining power which cannot defeat Ukraine, even Ukraine. At the same time, Russia is a terrible threat which will invade Europe immediately after Ukraine, or maybe even during Ukraine. So that's really absolutely absurd.

But anyway, okay, this is the internal reason. The external reason, which I would suggest exists, is a little bit more complicated. So looking at the international constellation today, and especially in years to come, we can assume that the role of Europe will decline. Objectively, it's not about liking or disliking; it's objective. The general situation, the international situation, is changing towards something completely different than it used to be in the 20th century or the beginning of the 21st century, when Europe played a significant role internationally, geopolitically, economically first of all, and so on. And there are no obvious means, no obvious ways how Europe could be able to reverse this trend, actually.

So the only issue where Europeans can demonstrate, or at least pretend, the big international role, this is confrontation with Russia. This is confrontation with Russia which is being fueled through the Ukrainian conflict. And if the calculation is such, I can understand it. Cynically, maybe, yes. I think it especially would reflect the possible approach of the United Kingdom because they used, mainly after the British Empire collapsed and UK became the little England, as we remember that syndrome from the '60s and '70s. So they managed to seek and to find ways how to imitate an international role with Europeans, with Americans, with the former empire, etc. They are very skillful in that. And now I think that Europeans at large, in fact, try to repeat these tactics of the British.

Whether they will be successful or not, I doubt, just for one reason. Whatever Europeans will do, European politicians might be successful—I doubt—but they might be successful in convincing its own public of the terrible Russian threat. But globally, on the world stage, in general, it's not anything. I mean, the Ukrainian conflict and confrontation with Russia, between Europe and Russia, it's not anything which actually interests the big majority of people in the world. They see it as another strange conflict between those white former colonial powers. Okay, let them do what they want. It's not a global game. It's not a big game. It's actually very much a local game. While Europeans believe that through this they might come back to this central position in international affairs, they will not do it. It's impossible.

#Glenn

Well, the idea of going back to the Cold War as, well, almost a golden era for the political West in terms of unity. As you said, there are two problems, though. That is, the distribution of power has shifted. Well, first of all, the Soviet Union isn't there, and it doesn't pose the same kind of threat as the Russian Federation would. But second, also, in this multipolar world, not only are the Russians shifting focus to the East, but the Americans as well. I mean, I think this is the first time in U.S.

history when Europe is not on top of the priorities in terms of foreign partners. So it's going to be hard to convince the Americans to devote their resources when they're in relative decline. They need to focus on East Asia and the Western Hemisphere.

I did want to ask, though, what is your feel in Moscow about the Russian position hardening? Because over the past four and a half years, we've seen NATO's deepening involvement. Especially the Europeans are more open about this. But of course, Americans are still also very much involved. But it's the sense that Russia's deterrence has been weakening. And one gets the impression sometimes that they reached a conclusion in Moscow that restraint now is dangerous, and it's dangerous appeasement, if you will, of NATO, given that they no longer fear Russia as they did before. The deterrence is gone. So it's time to harden the position against the NATO countries, especially the Europeans. Do you see any of this thinking, or does it manifest itself beyond rhetoric? Do you see any actions shifting?

#Fyodor Lukyanov

Yes, you're right. To be very frank, if we would imagine that the war will end now, stop now, and the freezing will be according to the current configuration, both on the battlefield and geopolitically in Europe at large, then it will be a failure for Russia, because there is no big secret that, compared to the situation, say, in 2021, the strategic landscape in Europe changed significantly, and not to Russia's favor. So that's obvious. So NATO has been revitalized, new member states joined, and so on. Ukraine became de facto part of NATO. So they basically do not need this formal membership anymore. So I think people in Moscow are realistic about that. Symbolically, it's important, but in real terms, not anymore. So we are in the middle of a very profound reshuffle of the whole European security situation.

I would even say Eurasian security situation. We should not make a distinction between Europe and the rest of Eurasia anymore because, at the end of the day, conflicts we see now, be it in Ukraine, be it around Iran, be it theoretically, hypothetically, in East Asia around Taiwan, or I don't know which conflict can erupt there. Of course, each of those spots are very much different. They have their own genesis and history and reasons and so on. But at the end of the day, it doesn't matter because, in a way, actors are the same. If we think that actors are the West, which is trying to revitalize, to revive its dominance in the world, and the rest, which includes Iran, Russia, China, in a very much different way. There's no comparison between Russia and China, between China and Iran, between Russia and Iran, and many other countries.

But to put it in a more global picture, I hate this notion, but there is something in it that people say about the Third World War, which is being fought differently. So it's not the frontal collision of the biggest powers as in the 20th century, but something else. But also, this is a world war as well, a new one. And that means that, coming back to your question, that means that if we look at this from this perspective, then a decision to launch the special military operation four and a half years ago can be seen differently than it looked at the beginning. Because at the beginning, many people,

including myself, did doubt whether it was necessary or not, whether it was so imminent, maybe we could do differently, and so on.

And I still believe that many things which happened at that time should be carefully studied afterwards, not to repeat mistakes made by all sides, including the Russian side. But having said that, now, as we see, this is a part of the global reshuffle with very violent means, without any rules of the game. And from this point of view, a Russian task is, so to say, to strengthen its position by all possible means available. And it is not about defeating Ukraine or even defeating Europe. It's about the future positioning of Russia on the international stage. Whether we are successful or not, I cannot answer yet. Unfortunately, it's a very, very long and very, very hard struggle. But now, as an initial skeptic, now I see much more reason in what started in 2022. And I think that now...

#Fyodor Lukyanov

We might be dissatisfied with how the situation in Europe changed. But we shouldn't look at this through European lenses only. This is an element of a very, very big international reshuffle. And the whole reshuffle, not just the European part, will have an impact on Russian interests. And Russia should demonstrate, first of all, its resilience; secondly, its strength.

#Glenn

Well, if you would argue a few years ago how a world war would start, you would look at the distribution of power, I guess. And if you see what defines our era is the decline of U.S. hegemony, you would expect, well, the most predictable conflict would then be from the U.S. trying to protect its hegemonic position by pushing back on rival powers. So that means an economic war on China, a proxy war against Russia, possibly a direct war against Iran. Well, we're kind of seeing all of this. And then you see some of these wars merging a little bit. It looked for a short time that Zelensky might look to merge the Ukraine war with the Iran war.

We see NATO involved in attacks on civilian infrastructure in Russia. Freedom of navigation is shutting down. We see North Koreans fighting in Europe. Only now, recently, Putin was in Japan because Japan gets involved, so he shows up in the Southern Kuril Islands, and then the Japanese are upset. And of course, with the war in Iran, almost all the countries now in the Middle East are somehow involved. So it does look like a world war. If you would assume how it would begin, how it would play out, it's more or less following the script, it seems. So that's the source of concern, of course.

But I did want to pivot a bit just towards Iran at the end. That is, the Iran war obviously diverted much of the American focus and military assets away from, well, not just Europe, but East Asia, towards the Middle East. But instead of being used against Russia, it's being used against Iran. So this has one impact. I would put that in the column of advantage for Russia. However, you know, we don't want to oversimplify either. And I was wondering, how do you see the consequences of this

war in Iran for Russia, especially the long-term consequences? Because, you know, when this is over, the world will not look the same.

#Fyodor Lukyanov

First of all, beyond the immediate impact, which you mentioned, that the United States is very much occupied with this conflict and started to count what they can give Ukrainians, Europeans—not give, sell—other countries, whether they have enough ammunition and so on, that's obvious. That's the immediate impact. But I would guess that this is pretty much a short-term issue. I trust the American military-industrial complex. They will make big efforts to catch up. They will just use this to get more work, more money, and so on. In a long-term perspective, that's an interesting question, because Iran is a very close partner of Russia, but I wouldn't say it is an ally, because Iran has a very special way to conduct foreign policy, very concrete interests, which are not necessarily the same as Russian interests, or just they are in different levels, different areas.

I guess that the main lesson from Iran is that a country which is by far weaker than the opponent, than the aggressor, can effectively resist and deliver significant harm if it is committed to immediate and inevitable response. So we see that whatever Trump is saying—and he said so many things starting the first day of this war, and he declared victory I don't know how many times, maybe 50 or something like this—but he cannot achieve anything he wants still now. And Iran, which actually, in terms of military capacity, is absolutely no comparison to U.S. plus Israel, but they cannot do anything to Iran, at least now. I think Iran will suffer enormous problems and damages anyway. But at this point, this is a war of survival, and they fight it and they win it so far.

And of course, for any big power, including Russia, by the way, this is a lesson to learn: that you cannot expect an easy, or difficult but military, win over a country, a power which is much smaller than you by default. Maybe even more in the contemporary world, with all those very complicated new ways of warfare. It favors smaller states despite the discrepancy and disbalance in military force. Whether Americans, at the end of the day, will succeed or not, I don't know. The political price paid by Trump is a huge price in terms of how much this non-victory catalyzed other countries' wishes to be prepared for this kind of pressure and to resist in the same effective way as Iran does. I think that's a big thing. That's something which will make a greater impact in years to come.

It's not how to formulate it. The Iranian war demonstrated that you are absolutely not bound to fail if you are being attacked by a much stronger enemy. And I think it's a very important lesson. So, in concrete terms, what does it mean for Russia? I think that if Iran survives and continues as a strengthened part of the geopolitics in the Middle East, Russia will be able to use its special ties with Iran to regain some influence in the region, which Russia, of course, partially lost during the Ukrainian war because of a concentration on a different issue. And the support which Russia gave to Iran—I think Iranians are not easy counterparts, but they remember good things which were done to them, as well as they remember bad things very much.

#Glenn

Sounds about right. Well, as we see, I guess, the old system dying off—that is, the hegemonic order, which then manifested itself in NATO expansion—you know, this is being balanced. You see the US being balanced in the Middle East. But as the distribution of power shifts, you would hope that some of the rules would remain, even though institutions would have to change. But it seems that nothing is being preserved, though, as you suggested before. The rules, the institutions that everyone essentially benefited from, it's all being burned down, it seems.

That is, international law, freedom of navigation, not stealing sovereign assets, the informal rules of proxy wars, just basic diplomacy. All of this is going away. And, well, sometimes I think of Friedrich Nietzsche, because he always made the point that change always—or for something new to be created—it always requires the old to die first. But if the old dies and nothing replaces it, you essentially have anarchy. And that kind of seems where we're drifting into now. But do you see what is the potential to replace what is being lost now, though?

I mean, if we, for example, look towards Europe, because since the end of the Cold War, and especially after the Soviet Union dissolved, the Russians were pushing hard for a common European security architecture, first with the OSCE. Then you had Yeltsin and Putin suggesting they could join NATO. In 2008, you had a proposal for a pan-European security architecture. Later, you had the EU-Russia Union suggested by Putin. And, well, all of these goals of a common European home, if you will, are now more or less out the window. So do you see any institutional framework or something that can, I guess, reorganize the world as everything is falling apart now? It's a very vague question, and I'm aware of that.

#Fyodor Lukyanov

You know, I'm afraid not. I don't see it. When it comes to Europe, we should probably, as scholars, as commentators, dedicate a lot of our effort and time to studying what happened after the end of the Cold War, analytically understand why it failed, because unfortunately, at this point, we are very much emotional on both sides about this period. And sooner or later, time should come to carefully study what happened. But whatever conclusion will be of those studies, I don't think that that period can be used as a model for anything in the future, because that was a very much unique moment in history. And this moment will never come again. It's done. To what extent we can expect a new framework to emerge?

In Europe, probably not. Because at this point, we just can conclude that the hatred and confrontational mood between Russia and the rest of Europe is enormous. And I simply don't see from which ground anything can rise which would be a prototype for a new agreement or framework. We know from history that European orders emerge after big wars. Otherwise, it's absolutely senseless to try. No one will follow rules. And whether we will need a big war again, I hope not, simply for one reason: because the European framework is, in fact, much less important

than it used to be in history, because Europe is much less important than it used to be in history. And the new constellation should emerge globally, not locally.

Whether it can emerge globally sooner or later, probably yes, but not rather later than sooner. And what we see now—I read yesterday, I think it was the Financial Times, the interview of Mr. Grossi, who wants to become next Secretary-General of the United Nations—and he directly said that the United Nations is slowly dying. And I think he unfortunately is right. Because what we discussed all years before this moment, quite a long time, starting from the end of the Cold War, beginning of the 21st century, that we need to change some procedures, some forms inside the UN to make it efficient again, to keep the idea, to keep the Charter, and then to change some procedures to catch up with the efficiency.

I'm afraid that now the mood is slowly changing towards something else. It's not about procedures. It's about the essence. The essence of the UN Charter, the UN idea, might be outdated already. It sounds terrible. I'm not happy to say it, but I'm afraid we are as far as there now already. It's the beginning of the realization that all the institutions, including the UN, cannot be seen as a framework for the next world order or next world institutions. Whether and when we will arrive at the new constellation, when the EU might be preserved but changed, not formally but essentially, I don't know. Frankly, at my age, and I'm almost 60, I don't expect to see it in my active professional life.

#Glenn

I was going to say that was a depressing way to end this. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

#Fyodor Lukyanov

Hopefully, I'm totally wrong.

#Glenn

Yeah, hopefully. I suspect you're right, though. It's hard to imagine, as you said, such a shift in world order from a hegemonic system, not even towards a multipolar, but something we haven't really seen before—a global multipolar one where the leading power will likely be China, which isn't even a Western country. I mean, it's what we haven't really seen before, the idea that politicians can adjust to such a new order, institutionalize it without a great war. There's not much historical precedent for this. Usually we do need a big war before countries are ready to sit down and make painful—well, not necessarily painful—but reorganize the world. I don't see it happening. At least when you can't even pick up the phone and talk to each other, then it looks very grim. Yeah. Anyways, thank you so much. I know you're on holiday, so I'm sorry to disturb you, but I appreciate you taking the time.

#Fyodor Lukyanov

Thank you very much, Glenn. Bye-bye.