

# The 200-Year-Old Lie Pushing Us Towards Nuclear War

While the West decries Russia's demand for a "sphere of influence," it ignores its own 200-year-old Monroe Doctrine. Is this hypocrisy pushing us toward a major war? And could the solution be redefining the concept as "spheres of security"? To discuss this and more, today I'm talking again to Professor Jeffrey Sachs, a Professor at Columbia University, advisor to countless governments, and a prolific analyst—I'm absolutely sure you all know him very well. We explore his powerful argument for creating neutral buffer zones between great powers to prevent catastrophe. We also break down the dangerous "with us or against us" logic driving current conflicts, the hypocrisy of US foreign policy, and why understanding history is crucial to our survival in the nuclear age. Links: Jeffrey Sachs' essay mentioned in the video: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com/p/sachs-and-mearsheimer-on-spheres> Neutrality Studies substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> Goods Store: <https://neutralitystudies-shop.fourthwall.com> Timestamps: 00:00:00 - Introduction 00:00:31 - Why 'spheres of security' instead of 'spheres of influence'? 00:17:54 - How can we overcome the 'with us or against us' mentality? 00:30:14 - What does renaming the Department of Defense to the Department of War signify?

## #M2

Hello, everybody. This is Pascal from Neutrality Studies. Today we're here with an update from Dr. Jeffrey Sachs, who recently wrote a very important essay on what he calls "spheres of security," an approach to squaring the security circle of the 21st-century multipolar world. He's here to update us on this and on what's going on otherwise. Jeffrey, welcome back. Great to be with you, Pascal. Great having you, and really, congratulations on that essay you wrote. The link is, of course, in the description of this video. Can you maybe tell us why you came up with the idea of conceptualizing not spheres of influence, but spheres of security?

## #M3

We hear a lot of resistance to spheres of influence, which is taken to mean, in US political parlance, that big powers lean on small countries in their neighborhood and regard those countries as part of their sphere of influence. By the way, the United States does that nonstop, but it criticizes any other power that would do the same as the United States does. The claim from the US and European side is that Russia is trying to insist on a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, and especially in Ukraine right now, and that that is illegitimate. My point is something else, and that is that what Russia has been saying—and I think consistently for 35 years—is that what Russia is concerned about is not interfering in the internal affairs even of Ukraine, much less Central and Eastern Europe, but not

having Russia's own security threatened by the encroachments of the United States into its near neighborhood.

This is completely different. What Russia is saying is that there needs to be a geographic sphere around Russia that protects Russia against US missile systems, the US military, the US CIA operating freely to destabilize or to overthrow the Russian government—which, after all, has been a stated aim of the CIA for decades. And what Russia is saying is there needs to be space between us and you, and Ukraine is that space. So there are two interpretations of what Russia is doing in Ukraine. One interpretation is that Russia is trying to recreate its empire, either formally or informally, and that it regards Ukraine as part of its sphere of influence.

And I think that this is wrong factually, and it certainly is not what Russian leaders have been saying since 1990 and 1991, which is that they do not want the United States threatening Soviet and then Russian security by putting U.S. weapon systems, missiles, and military bases on the Soviet border when it was, in 1990, under discussion, and on the Russian border since the end of the Soviet Union in 1991. Now, I therefore propose that we distinguish very clearly—analytically, in practice, in treaties—the concept of a sphere of security that is a legitimate claim; not only legitimate, but a completely prudential claim of a big power not to have other major powers involved right on their doorsteps with military or other security agency means that could be first-strike capacity, decapitation strikes, or subversion and covert regime change operations, and that big powers sensibly declare a sphere of security around themselves in which other great powers should not tread.

Now, I have to say this idea is—and I distinguish that from spheres of influence in the pejorative sense, as it is widely used, at least in US and European political parlance—to mean that Russia should not own and operate Ukraine as a vassal state, or other states in the neighborhood, and that Russia should not be allowed to claim a sphere of influence over its neighborhood because those countries don't want that kind of internal interference. Again, I want to state without question: the United States interferes directly throughout the Western Hemisphere in the latter sense—in the sense of a sphere of influence. It repeatedly overthrows governments, subverts governments, it has just put a bounty on the head of the president of Venezuela, it has warships in Venezuelan waters, it has threatened Panama, it repeatedly subverts the internal affairs of Western Hemisphere countries and of countries in other places.

So even when the United States objects to any claim that Russia has or seeks a sphere of influence, it's hypocritical. But what I do want to say is that the United States made this distinction over 200 years ago, in effect, between a sphere of security and a sphere of influence, because the Monroe Doctrine, delivered to the US Congress by President James Monroe on December 2nd, 1823, said that the United States would regard it as a direct threat to US security if any European power meddled in the affairs of the newly independent countries of the Western Hemisphere. What isn't remembered, by the way, about the Monroe Doctrine is that the United States also said, "And we, the United States, will not interfere in the affairs of Europe."

So it's a reciprocal proposition. That claim in 1823 has been repeated again and again over the last two centuries, including by Donald Trump at the United Nations—as I sat in the UN General Assembly listening to him a few years ago—and he repeated the Monroe Doctrine. That is a claim of a sphere of security. It is a claim that we do not want Russian military bases in Mexico. We don't want Chinese military bases in Mexico. We did not want Soviet military bases in Cuba. We nearly went to nuclear war over that in October 1962. The United States is run fundamentally by hypocrites and dunderheads, by people who have no principles, or by people who are idiots. So I just want to be absolutely clear.

I have no tolerance for American foreign policy at all. The only two presidents who have made sense of this in modern times have been Franklin Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy. Maybe John F. Kennedy was killed because he made sense about the call for peace. The rest of our presidents, including our current dunderhead, and including other U.S. presidents, have argued that Russia has no security interest in what happens in Ukraine, no say in what happens in Ukraine, and after all, is only after a sphere of influence to subvert Ukraine's sovereignty. So the United States refuses to recognize exactly what it claims for itself in the Western Hemisphere.

And incidentally, let me add another real dunderhead. I'm sorry to use the term, but these days I feel like we're ruled by idiots. And we should say it clearly, because we don't deserve to die at the hands of these idiots who are going to lead us to nuclear war. And I'm talking about Mark Rutte, the Secretary General of NATO, who explicitly said last week that Russia has no say in who stations what troops and what weapon systems in Ukraine. After all, Ukraine's a sovereign country; it can do what it wants. This is the opposite of the Monroe Doctrine. This is the opposite of common sense.

And this is the opposite of what I am proposing, which is that we legitimize, understand, and accept as a matter of utter prudence and survival that great powers should not sit on the necks of other great powers, that nuclear superpowers should give some space. It doesn't mean to tolerate their misbehavior. It means to give some space so that we don't provoke a nuclear war. And specifically—and I'll just end here and turn it back over to you, Pascal—the United States should not be in Ukraine. The United States should not be arming Taiwan. That's also the same sphere of security for China. And China and Russia should stay clear of the Caribbean and Mexico and Central America with their military bases. We should keep the great powers far enough apart that we are not triggering World War III. And that's the idea.

## **#M2**

I couldn't agree more. And it is very important here to state that your concept of spheres of security is a passive one—not one in which one country controls that place and decides its affairs, but one in which that place passively contributes to the security of one and the other state. And very importantly, the people who deny this right to Russia, or who deny that Russia should have something like that in Ukraine, are the people who are not only in favor of a sphere of interest for

the United States, they are in favor of the next step, which is a sphere of interference for the United States.

The United States is allowed to interfere in the internal affairs of Ukraine in order to help Ukraine—whatever justification you want to use. And the Maidan and so on, of course, are just ways for the U. S. and the West to "help" Ukraine in order for it to become, in the end, a subservient vassal state—of course, one that is run by the CIA, right? The CIA and the U.S. military are still now, in Germany, with top-level generals still running a good part of the war against Russia through Ukraine. So Ukraine is not just a sphere of interest where the U.S. says what it would like to happen; it's where it actually implements its policies.

And the opposite of that is what you're proposing, and... One more thing. The spheres idea is, of course, one in which you have centers—power centers—and around them emanate these spheres. And the place where the spheres meet should be passive in order to create stability between them. So we are closer to a concept of caesarenity, and how sovereignty then interacts in these different spheres, than we are to a clear-cut, "here my border starts and here is yours." It's this appreciation that security is a reciprocal identity that depends on each other and not just on one or the other side.

### **#M3**

And that fits exactly with your idea that neutrality can be a key for mutual security. The idea, which the Soviet Union had—and I was reminded of this because the great historian Jeffrey Roberts sent you and me one of his articles from 2002—was about the ideas of a very senior Soviet diplomat of the 1920s, '30s, and '40s, Maxim Litvinov, who envisioned that Europe had to have essentially a zone of neutrality that ran through, in the north, Sweden and Finland, and then down through Austria to the Mediterranean. This would not be a zone in which the Soviet Union would aim to dominate, nor, as he thought, would the British Empire be the dominant power aiming to dominate. Rather, it would be neutral and peaceful.

Neither side would claim it as a sphere of influence. But it would be a sphere of security for both sides, actually, in that it would both protect the West from their fear of a Soviet incursion and protect the Soviet Union from its fear of a repeat of the Nazi Germany invasion of the Soviet Union. And it made absolutely perfect sense. It was implemented in the case of Austria in 1955, when the Soviet Union and Austria agreed that Austria would become a neutral country and the Soviet occupation forces would leave Austria on that basis, knowing that Austria would not join NATO but would be neutral. The Soviet Union left in 1955, and Austria was never bothered again by the Soviet Union or by Russia.

So the idea proved itself, and they wanted that to apply to Germany as well. And the United States, of course, turned that down. And it's so interesting, if I may say, Pascal, because I was just looking at remarks by Zbigniew Brzezinski, who I think did an enormous amount of damage in messing up the whole post-1991 potential for a real era of peace. Brzezinski said that after the end of the Soviet

domination in Central and Eastern Europe, NATO had to enlarge to fill the security void left by the withdrawal of the Soviet Union. What a weird idea—that that's a security void rather than a neutral zone that neither side bothers and that protects both sides. So the American mentality is that there is no such thing as neutrality.

There is no such thing as a security zone for anyone else but the United States, because the U.S. claims it for the whole Western Hemisphere. But Russia—no legitimate interest at all in whether the U.S. has its Aegis missile systems in Cuba, or military bases in Cuba, or the CIA. I don't mean Cuba—Ukraine, excuse me—that Russia has no interest whatsoever if the U.S. has its missile systems, or the CIA, or its military in Ukraine. That's the mentality. That's what Mark Rutte explicitly said. That's what's going to get us all killed if we don't learn to stay out of the way of the other big powers—not to let them do mischief, but quite the contrary: to stop bothering them and provoking them.

## **#M2**

That's what the "with us or against us" crowd in the US—not only the neocons, but the others, the influenced ones too—cannot understand. They are psychologically not able to have a third concept. It's either with us or against us. Anything that's not with us is automatically against us and needs to be fought against, either as the primary target, like Russia or China, or secondarily, like the neutralists—those who want to stay out—and they need to be eliminated, like Mr. Yanukovych in Ukraine, who wanted to stay out. He was not pro-Russian; he was pro-Ukrainian. He was pro-neutrality because he understood that. But he was taken out. And others are being taken out.

And just let's bring this back to where we are, because the solution is not to teach the people—the "with us or against us" people. They are lost. They are a lost cause. So we need to deal with them. The question is how to make this obvious to the places that we need to defend their neutrality. Let's take the example of Doha, Qatar, which is a tiny little Gulf state. And in the last couple of months, it has been attacked twice: because it hosts U.S. bases, and now because it actually hosts diplomatic events about Hamas, right? So basically, isn't this a primary case to show how you make yourself a target by hosting the powers or belligerents? And I'm not saying that I put Hamas on the same level and so on, because I don't...

## **#M3**

But what's important about the Hamas targeting today by Israel—bombing Qatar because of that—is that this wasn't the Hamas military. These were literally the negotiators who were considering, literally today, a proposal from Donald Trump. Israel, with this murderous regime, is against, by concept, any negotiated outcome, because what it wants is only the dominance, the power. So whenever negotiations come close—between the United States and Hamas, or the United States and Iran—Israel makes a military strike. This is exactly what happened a few weeks ago when the United States and Iran were making progress on the nuclear arms question: that Iran would agree to a monitored system to end any doubts that it does not want atomic weapons.

But at the same time, the counterpoint would be that the United States would end sanctions and end attacks to undermine the Iranian government. And they were entering the sixth round of negotiations, and Israel attacked. Then the United States, because it is subservient to the Zionist lobby—which it is, totally and shockingly—went ahead and attacked Iran also, even as they were claiming to negotiate. And this is the same thing that just happened with Hamas. This isn't just an attack on Hamas; this is an attack on the negotiators trying to reach a permanent ceasefire in Gaza. I want to come back to this "us versus them" mentality, because we're completely, like you say, drawn into this. And the American mentality is that there is no such thing as neutrality.

Neutrality is... against us, exactly as they say. And we had a discussion a few weeks ago because I reread, for the first time in many years, the so-called Melian Dialogue in Thucydides' Peloponnesian Wars. Everybody should read this. It's truly chilling. What it is, is a lecture by the arrogant Athenians to the people of the island of Melos. The island of Melos, in 416 BC, wanted to be neutral in the conflict between Athens and Sparta. And the Athenian general tells the people of Melos, "You cannot be neutral. You are either with us or you're against us. And if you claim neutrality, we will kill all of you—all of the men—and we will sell all of the women and children into slavery." And damn it, that's what they really did.

The great democracy of Athens went and slaughtered the men of Melos because they wanted neutrality. That's the American mentality. And it's explained precisely. The Athenian general, dripping with arrogance, of course, explains that the mighty do what they can and the weak do what they must, and that the Melians, to survive, must do what they are told. The Athenians say you can't be neutral because we demand that you not be. And if you persist in being neutral, you are contradicting us. And if you contradict us and we let you, that shows we're weak. So we will never let you contradict us. That's the logic of the Athenian general. So we're going to have to kill you if you just want to be neutral. And lo and behold, that's what history actually...

## **#M2**

And that is the realist case for a realist neutrality. It doesn't necessarily mean that Melos should have geared up and made itself a vassal of Sparta and then gone with Sparta to war with Athens. That's not the point. The point, actually, that the realists make is that you need a minimum of security for yourself in order to protect that. So when we take this example to Qatar, what Qatar should be doing is protecting its neutral space and being able to protect the diplomats. So you need a minimum of defensive equipment to defend against Israeli strikes and others.

And you must not signal that you are a threat to Iran in order to avoid making yourself an obvious target, which is what happened, and thereby create a sphere of security. But actually, the sphere of security in this conceptualization rests upon the shoulders of those independent states that are in

neither camp but want to be friends to both and foes to neither, as to say to this... The question is how we can break through this concept, especially in Europe and other places, that it's either with the Americans or against the Americans, right? That's not what it is. We need something better.

## #M3

It's so interesting. Of course, when I raised this with our good friend John Mearsheimer—people will find our discussion about this online on your website—John said, "Well, nice idea, Jeff, but impossible." He has the idea that the big powers just inevitably clash. That's what big powers do. They will never leave good enough alone. They will never leave Ukraine neutral. So it really is us versus them because, as Brzezinski said—and I quoted earlier—it would be a void. The idea is that neutrality is like a vacuum; it will suck in somebody. So they can't—they don't accept—John doesn't believe that it's feasible to have these zones of security that keep the powers away. He's not against the concept; he just says that the big powers are locked in an iron cage where they're doomed to fight each other.

And his great book, which is a great book, by the way, is called \*The Tragedy of Great Power Politics\*. I've always said to John, "John, we need to get away from tragedy, especially in the nuclear age. We need to solve this—not only to understand it, but to solve it." So I do believe, of course, the ones in the middle should understand this. We should help them understand this. We should give ways to bolster that. But we really need... The American people, the people of Europe—maybe they already do understand that this is not the road to security that we are following. My point for the United States is that from the moment the neocons absolutely took charge in 1991 in the U.S., we have had nothing but a decline of U.S. security.

It's been the toughest period. It's been wars of choice. It's been overthrows of governments, such as the Maidan in 2014. It has not brought U.S. security. And I cite the Doomsday Clock of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, which was 17 minutes from midnight when Bill Clinton inherited the post-Cold War, supposedly. But then he messed it up, and then George W. Bush messed it up, and then Obama further messed it up, then Trump further messed it up, and then Biden further messed it up. Every president has left the Doomsday Clock closer to midnight than when they arrived in office. So is America safer by having overthrown a government in Ukraine, by having pushed NATO enlargement, by having denied Russia a sphere of security, by having said to Ukraine, no, you can't be neutral?

And by the way, saying it literally to Zelensky in the spring of 2022, when Zelensky was about to sign a peace agreement with Russia based on neutrality, the United States and Boris Johnson at the time—both Biden and Johnson—said to Zelensky, "No, you don't sign that, you fight on." That's about 1 million dead in Ukraine since then. So I want the American people to understand this is a disaster for our security. This isn't that we're somehow struggling against Russia because we have to. We should be leaving precisely a neutral zone so that we aren't in each other's face, so that we have some distance. And of course, the hypocrisy of the United States knows no bounds.

Donald Trump has gotten very exercised about the fact that in the Panama Canal, there are two port service operations owned by—oh my God, heaven forbid—Hong Kong companies. That's in Panama. That is port services by Hutchison, a long-distinguished Hong Kong shipping service. And Trump says that is a threat to American security. Now, in the meantime, NATO is on the Russian border. Oh, no problem. Trump, once in a while, seems to accept that, but he never says it clearly to the American people, nor to the Europeans. And the Europeans, to this moment—and Mark Rutte, the Secretary General of NATO—say exactly the opposite: that Russia has no security concerns that are legitimate.

## **#M2**

Very last question, and I'll let you go right after that. Donald Trump decided to rename the Department of Defense back to the Department of War. Do you think we are getting closer to a moment of, let's say, clarity about what we are actually dealing with when it comes to this whole security issue? For the longest time, especially in Europe and the US, we've been pretending that everything is about defense, when in fact what has been going on is very much offense—very much offensive, war-making in various stages. Do you think we are at least getting more clarity about this fact, or what does this indicate to you?

## **#M3**

Well, it indicates to me, yes, that it is more truthful, given the way we behave, to call it a Department of War. But it's also more frightening, because I would rather have a Department of Defense that actually operated on the basis of defense than have a Department of War that actually operates on the basis of war. If I had confidence that the American political system would deliver peace, one could then say, well, at least that's semantic clarity. But the truth is, the American political system delivers war. The American system is currently actively engaged in a genocide in Palestine.

This is not just an Israeli operation; this is an Israeli-U.S. operation. Israel is, you know, pushing the buttons and pulling the trigger, but the weapons are American weapons. The so-called intelligence to do this—which is also a cruel misnomer—comes from Palantir, Microsoft, Amazon, and other big tech companies that are providing cloud services and AI to the Israeli defense forces, as a genocide and mass starvation take place. So we really have a Department of War, but there is nothing to be happy about with that relabeling. It's absolutely horrifying. Our Congress is completely mute on this.

We are in the hands of basically—well, completely—a security state apparatus, and at least nominally in the hands of one person who does what he wants and announces it on Truth Social, and it's all very bizarre and unstable. And the fact of the matter is, we don't have clarity on any issues: the U.S. vis-à-vis Russia, the U.S. vis-à-vis the Palestinian people or the Arab nations, the U.S. vis-à-vis Iran. We negotiate for five weeks and then bomb them on the sixth week. The U.S. vis-à-vis China. This is an extraordinarily dangerous situation. Nothing is rational and logical in the



traditional sense. We're in the hands of whims, of secrecy, of game playing, as if this wasn't really the nuclear age that it is.

## **#M2**

Yeah, we need to get out of the game and back into reality. And of course, in reality, your Constitution tries to deal with that—it invests war-making power in Congress and not in the president. But all of that is mixed up and messed up, and it needs restructuring. Jeffrey Sachs, thank you very much for your time today.

## **#M3**

Oh, great to be with you. Thanks.