

Nicolai Petro: Why the West Fears Direct Ukraine-Russia Talks

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#Glenn

Welcome back, everyone. We are joined again by Professor Nikolai Petro, a professor of political science at the University of Rhode Island, who also served as the U.S. State Department's special assistant for policy on the Soviet Union. So thank you for coming back on the program. Nice to be with you again, Glenn. Well, I think it's becoming more and more evident that the conflicts of the United States with Russia, Iran, China—you can put some others in there as well—that they're quite connected. And a lot of the discourse coming out of Russia, and also those two other states, tends to be that these are, to a large extent, conflicts about a changing world order, which could explain why they're willing to risk so much. I was wondering, how do you see this discourse compared to how you assess the international system here?

#Nicolai Petro

I followed Russian foreign policy doctrine for a long time, decades. Not the other countries that are now in the BRICS and conceptually allied with Russia. But from Russia's perspective, what we are hearing today is not so much new as a refinement and a way of making more precise the type of multipolar order that Russia is aiming to create, I'm assuming together with its allies. The problem has always been that very few actors in the West, in government especially, took this rhetoric seriously, no matter who it was coming from.

It was coming from China as well, from India, and from Russia, but they simply didn't have any way of addressing these concerns within the context of a self-centered and self-congratulatory America. I mean, anyone who's lived here even briefly will know that the rest of the world is just a very fuzzy concept to most Americans. And that, unfortunately, is especially true when it comes to foreign

policy. YouTube is replete with videos of young people being asked by people on the street to identify on a map: Where is Iran? Where is India? Where is whatever country it is that is now in the news? And the vast majority get it wrong.

So I guess that just proves what H. L. Mencken, the famous satirist of an earlier century in the United States, said: "The way Americans learn geography is through war." But apparently, in the modern age, not even war succeeds in breaking that barrier to understanding and geographical awareness. So I think there's nothing fundamentally new here, but just a further refinement of the concept. The concept, I think, of multipolarity and civilizational identity really has to be discussed more in the academic literature and by journalists, by thoughtful journalists. That is where the conceptual framework, if it takes root, will flow from.

It's no coincidence, and tells us a lot about our day and age, that the term BRICS was simply invented by a financial analyst, Jim O'Neill, who said, "Look, there's this group of nations, and they're taking off. And much of the traditional Western financial markets where people are investing are stagnating." And he just gave it a name, just started to call it BRICS. And academics and analysts picked up on that phrase from the public media. So unfortunately, at least so far, there hasn't been the same response. The same hasn't occurred with the concept of multipolarity or with a civilizational identity, civilizational foreign—what a civilizational foreign policy might look like, and especially what it might look like for the United States from an American perspective.

If we took seriously the idea that America is a civilization of some kind, what would that civilization stand for? How would it be distinct from other civilizations, and what should its relationship and its means of coexistence with other civilizations be? I guess we don't have that because there's still the debate between liberals and realists, for the most part, in our foreign policy. So the realists say that sort of—I'm generalizing now, but I still think it's fair to say—that the realists feel that these kinds of identities are secondary to the essential drive of nations to survive and extend their power in an effort to guarantee security for themselves, security and influence if they can. So they're not interested in what other people call themselves, identities.

I think John Mearsheimer is very clear about that. He says it doesn't really matter. And he's had some interesting debates in China with Chinese scholars about that. But I don't think he's, as far as I know, he hasn't changed his view all that much. And the liberals also poo-poo the idea of civilization, but because all civilizations will ultimately be American civilization. That's just the liberal assumption, that at the end of the rainbow is the American liberal order, sometimes called rules-based, sometimes called capitalist, that will dominate everywhere, and those who are not part of it will be irrelevant. So there's no need to identify what is important about other civilizations and to seek any coexistence because, as Marx said, they're destined for the dustbin of history.

#Glenn

When we see a lot of these, especially the Eurasian powers meeting, be it in BRICS or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the rhetoric is often organized around these concepts, as you said, about multipolarity, about civilizational distinctiveness. And often the conflicts are defined in these terms. But in the West, whenever we discuss these conflicts, we tend to lean into using other words. We refer to defending the liberal international order. Do you see this being two sides of the same coin, though? The liberal international order—that's on the Western side—and this kind of rhetoric which defines the discussions here. But if we look towards BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, they speak more about civilizations, multipolarity.

#Nicolai Petro

I don't think it's—so two sides of the same coin implies that the coin is one, and there are two sides of it, but there's a fundamental commonality. That commonality, in this case, is no more than the aspiration for order, for some kind of set of rules. And that's not enough to reach an agreement. I mean, all human beings, I think, that are organized into a society are organized on the basis of some principles and some order. And yet that's then precisely what they fight over, because they can't agree on the meaning behind that order, the ideals that should be promoted by that order. So it's nothing to rely on if one is hoping for some sort of what used to be popularly known, in the late 1950s, maybe even more the early 1960s, as convergence theory.

There was a big time when convergence theory was popular, and it applied to capitalist systems and communist systems. And the argument was that, due to functional similarities in the way that large-scale political and economic units function, eventually the similarities between those units in communist countries and those units in capitalist countries, their differences in values would erode entirely, and it would simply dawn on some future generation that what they were fighting about was trivial, and they should really work toward establishing a common framework for behavior based on the compatibility of their institutions, what these institutions were actually set up to do.

#Glenn

But if we look at the power interests of Russia, seen from a realist perspective, as well as its worldview in terms of what is it that creates order, be it multipolarity or preserving civilizational distinctiveness, how do you see this translated into Russia's war aims? Because it seems the Russians are winning on the battlefield. There's no serious peace talks on the horizon, which more or less translates into the Russian thinking that peace will have to be resolved on the battlefield. And what exactly does that mean? How do you see Russia's endgame here?

#Nicolai Petro

I think it's not peace that is established on the battlefield. That would be an interesting paradox, but I don't think that's what's going to happen or could ever happen. What happens on the battlefield is,

in other words, the ability to reach an end to conflict while still holding on to your initial objectives. In other words, the defeated power only sees itself as defeated on the battlefield, but not in its own image of itself and its mind, unless, as happens or has happened occasionally in history, the defeated country is physically occupied, its elites are removed and re-educated, and an investment is made by the occupying power to re-educate the entire population by controlling all of its public media and educational resources.

And this is the lesson that some liberal analysts take from World War II. It's like, whenever our nation-building efforts fail, as they have since World War II, then it's because we didn't invest as much as we did then. Well, an interesting hypothetical, because the assumption is that we could do something like that in countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, maybe Venezuela now, others. And that model essentially becomes an updated model of colonial administrations. So we come to the colonies with American democratic and economic know-how and impose it. But we have to be ready to do that for... And this issue has been studied, actually, by political scientists who make this case sometimes. How long should it take?

Well, I remember surveys done when I was looking at this issue in Germany. And there was a World Values Survey, a famous World Values Survey out of Michigan, that traced the changes in attitude of the German population after World War II to authoritarianism. So they found a way to measure whether Germans had become less authoritarian as a result of the occupation and the Marshall Plan after World War II. And they found that the tipping point came when Germans became, according to the survey, noticeably less authoritarian than they had been during World War II and up to World War II, only in 1971. So let's calculate: 45, 55, 65, I'd say another five years. So it's 25 years, okay?

#Nicolai Petro

So that's one way to look at it, is that if this is even feasible, prepare to invest in the country you want to transform heavily no less than 25 years. And then that would be the question to pose to our current political elites: Is that possible? Is that desirable? And of course, let's remember that we're talking about Germany, namely a country with a strong European tradition, a strong cultural affinity, a familiar country in the European and American cultural context, which is not the case in Afghanistan, which is not the case in Asia, not the case in Africa, and probably not even the case very much in Latin America, where the extremes seem to swing toward affinity with Latin America, to antipathy toward Latin America, depending on personalities on both sides. So I think it's a very difficult and probably, I would argue, along with most realists, an unfeasible proposition, and one that realists certainly would reject in principle.

#Glenn

But would you say that's part of the conflict over Ukraine? Because it does appear to be, because of the internal divisions within Ukraine, both the West and Russia have their own, let's say, nation-building project. Because when NATO's now, well, kind of absorbed some of Ukraine's sovereignty,

we see that the logic or rhetoric from NATO is that we're democratizing Ukraine. The more it's leaning towards the West, the more we can instill these values and essentially transform it. While the Russians look at this process very differently. They say, well, NATO went in, kind of took over some of the governance. Now they're purging, with the nationalists, they're purging the political opposition, purging the media, purging the culture, the religious freedom, the language, the historical memory, and, well, again, restructuring the national identity based on the nationalists in Western Ukraine.

But also, you hear this in the rhetoric of the Russian, you know, some of the commentators, is once Ukraine has been defeated, not only is a regime change required, but all of these things which have been done to Ukraine since 2014 have to be reversed effectively, right? So is this a way of looking at the conflict, the competing nation-building, if you will?

#Nicolai Petro

Yes, I think that is the longer-term perspective, which we are now beginning intellectually, I think, among analysts, to understand. Those people who say this is not a war that has been going on, you know, five years or 13 years or another four years, another 10 years, going back to 2004. This is a long-term project aimed at toppling or changing the regime in Russia. And if we topple the regime in Russia, that at least opens the door to the possibility of transforming Russia's geopolitical weight in the world, which can only be accomplished ultimately by dismembering it. It's too large. It's too large to deal with as an adversary.

It has too many resources, too well endowed. And as a result, there has to be a way to defeat the Russian imperial consciousness, its sense of its identity as a multinational and multiethnic state, in order to divide it ultimately, which is the only true guarantee of Western victory or Western security. So I agree that, you know, that analysis is correct, and the West has its long-term ambition and Russia has its long-term ambition. And I take that as given. What I find interesting to debate now is whether, given the geography, culture, religion, and language, whose vision is likely to succeed over time—20, 30, 40, 50 years?

Who has the better, to use Trump terminology, who has the better cards to play in this poker game over who gets Ukraine into their camp, the West or Russia? And I don't see much in any of those areas, I'll say, the cultural-historical agglomeration that has historically defined Ukrainian identity, that has given us Ukraine, essentially, the consciousness of a Ukrainian people that the West can rely on in terms of pulling it over to its side. I mean, with Poland, you know, that started in the 10th century, right, and had to be constantly fought over with the support of the Catholic Church and German Teutonic Knights.

And even that was a very bloody and uncertain conflict until the dimensions of Poland were shrunk from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and the eastern third of the country, which was overwhelmingly Orthodox, was sacrificed to give us a much smaller but homogeneous Poland, which

could plausibly be culturally part of the West. There is only one segment of Ukraine in which a similar strategy could plausibly be pursued, and those are the four western provinces of historical Galicia and Volhynia to the north. So, moving anywhere further east or south in modern-day Ukraine, there is very little that can be relied on. Which is why the West makes no cultural arguments. It makes an economic argument. It says, forget about all of that. If you join the West now, today, we have a special deal for you.

It's like a fire sale, you know? It's like, hurry up, hurry up, hurry up, buy it now, or the price—you know, this offer will disappear today, or tomorrow. So, the argument is that if Ukraine commits, then the West will invest heavily, will support financially the well-being of Ukrainians. As Ukrainians, average Ukrainians believe, this is a pledge to bring the standard of living of the average Ukrainian up to the level of a Norwegian, for example, or a Pole, or something like that, but, you know, much, much higher than it ever was. And unfortunately, the impact of that has not been the case. So one is the economic argument. The other is a security argument, which is being demolished as we speak.

Because there is no lack of arguments now in the Ukrainian media, in the Ukrainian Rada even, and even sporadic low-level government officials who have left office, who say candidly, "We were consistently lied to by the West in terms of the kind of support that we thought they would be offering. We assumed that when they said, 'We are fully in and we are supporting you with everything we can,' that that actually meant full military support. And it turned out instead to be insufficient—an insufficient effort, both financial support even for the war, and not to mention for the defense of Ukraine." And this is now an existential crisis for the Ukrainian elite, which really cannot be resolved while the war is on, because first you defend your country.

After the conflict ends, the military conflict has been settled. However, there will be a reckoning with all the people who promised that life would be so much better if Ukraine pursued this Western strategy. And I think the political arguments—not pro-Russian; they'll be dismissed in those terms—but they will not be pro-Russian. But there will be a space, not for pro-Russian political parties, but for pro-Ukrainian political parties who will say, "We were subjugated, and there was an attempt made to subjugate us by the Russians, and the West lied to us at the same time. Therefore, we need to rely on ourselves first and foremost." And I think that will receive some considerable attention after the war.

#Glenn

Yeah, because I was going to say that Ukraine could only have been used as a proxy if—well, it wouldn't have been possible if it wasn't so divided within, that is, between the East and the West. Well, not to oversimplify, there's other elements as well. But how do you see the, I guess, the whole trajectory of this internal division in Ukraine having shifted? Because the Ukraine from 1991 to 2014, it's not the same Ukraine anymore, obviously, but we don't really know much about the opposition because they're being, as I said, purged.

But what do you think it could look like then after this war? Because I also think this is the direction they will probably go. The conclusion after this war was: the West used them as a proxy, and the Russians destroyed them and stripped them of territory. So I don't think they're going to be overwhelmingly either pro-NATO or pro-Russian in the foreseeable future, but they're not going to be a homogeneous group nonetheless. So how do you see nationhood developing in Ukraine after this war?

#Nicolai Petro

So in 2022, after the invasion, I was struck by a number of journalists and political analysts who highlighted how this attack by Russia had not yet fundamentally changed people's pre-war outlook.

#Nicolai Petro

But over time, I think positions have hardened and solidified. And as a result, now we still have vastly different narratives and vastly different perceptions of Ukraine's role in Europe and the world. In order to talk about how this might evolve in the future, we need more information than is available to us right now. Because, one, we don't know what the borders of Ukraine will be, and so we don't know what the population within those borders will be. Because if we're talking about eastern and southern Ukraine, I think they remain, as they have always been, largely Russified. With respect to western Ukraine, they remain, as they have always been, largely Russophobic.

In the center, where people speak, by and large, I mean, on a conventional daily basis, some mishmash of Ukrainian and Russian called Surzhik. But in those areas, support for Ukrainian independence and for Ukrainian self-identity has definitely increased. But we don't know how that will all play out because we don't know, again, who will be voting. One, that's of the people within Ukraine. Secondly, what about the people outside of Ukraine who are technically still Ukrainian citizens? Which of them will the government allow to vote and live abroad? Which of them will the government allow to come back to Ukraine, and under what conditions? Well, that also is a big question mark.

You might think that, well, Ukraine has undergone such a disastrous demographic decline, losing roughly half of its population to war and immigration, that they would welcome the return of every Ukrainian. But if you listen to Ukrainian officials, ever since 2014, that has not been the case. There were public plans adopted by the Minister of Interior and then subsequently Minister of Defense Reznikov with respect to liberated Crimea and liberated areas of Donbass after Ukraine's victory in those regions before 2022, that involved the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of people deemed by the state not loyal. So they were planning essentially their own depopulation campaign in order to only retain people what nationalists view as true, true Ukrainians.

And the profile of a true Ukrainian is very narrow. It is someone who speaks only Ukrainian as a matter of personal choice as well as political obligation, who votes specifically for Ukraine's NATO

and EU membership, and is a loyal follower, if they are religious, of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. Now, there is an alternative that is more or less acceptable: the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which is the state-sponsored version of the Orthodox Church. But the ideologists of the Ukrainian national movement have never come from the Orthodox community. They have come from the Greek Catholic community, which was always historically rooted in Western Ukraine. So, as former President Kravchuk said, you know, the big problem in Ukrainian history has been the effort of Galicia to expand its version of Ukrainian identity over the entire country, and this has led to pushback by the rest of the country.

This hasn't changed. And you can see it manifested daily today, even in the struggle of the state by raising fines on the public usage of any language but Ukrainian—well, specifically Russian. And, you know, efforts to tailor the national curriculum, the historical curriculum, to reflect only Western Ukrainian national heroes, even during World War II—the people that historically we in the West have considered Nazi collaborators—as elevating them as the true heroes of Ukraine, and the 95% of Ukrainian Soviet soldiers who fought for the Red Army as essentially questionable in their motivation because they fought against those who wanted Ukrainian independence under a fascist regime or allied with Nazi Germany.

All of this does not portend any sort of peaceful resolution and future reconciliation, which I think—there have always been calls for reconciliation. There have always been calls for governments of national unity. And why not leave—why not avoid politicizing individual people's choices, be it to speak this language or go to this church or have their own community celebrations, whatever they are? Why not have an inclusive Ukrainian identity rather than an exclusive one? That is not in the cards right now. And I was going to mention another thing.

So recently, again, pointing out how even today, during the fighting itself, this issue is not resolved and it is affecting people's attitudes toward the war itself. We have popular singers who have recently said, you know, "I'm tired of being forced to avoid speaking my native language, which is Russian. Even though I'm a proud Ukrainian, I support the war effort, but I'm tired of being told that I can't be a true Ukrainian if I speak anything else." And it's this kind of minuscule effort to offend people based on the way they were raised and the families that they grew up in and the histories that they have that does not portend well for a peaceful and prosperous future for Ukraine after the war ends.

#Glenn

I was going to say, this argument, or a similar one, has been made by the former advisor of Zelensky, as you know, Oleksii Arestovych, who made the point that this was probably the biggest mistake of Ukraine: to have that minority identity, the Bandera supporters essentially imposing their position on the whole country, because what they did was alienate huge portions of the country and then ask them to die for this new Ukraine.

#Nicolai Petro

What are we dying for? A Ukraine that doesn't accept us? Why am I fighting if I can't fight for a country where I would be recognized and valued as a loyal citizen? There's another part of this which I think people don't touch upon. Let's say you are a Ukrainian in the center somewhere, not a Western Ukrainian, thinking and raised only in that specific culture. So you're somewhere in the middle, and then you have an Eastern Ukraine, which is now under Russian rule.

But in fact, in those territories, let's assume they remain in Russia after the war, they're technically part of Russia, but already ideologically and in terms of political aspirations, the current government and presumably every future government will still say those are Ukrainians and we want them back. Well, in fact, you will have competing models of Ukrainian identity coexisting right there, between Western nationalism and an Eastern section where people freely are able to choose whether to speak Russian or Ukrainian. Hopefully that will be the case. I understand that now there's really an effort in the schools to reintroduce and stress the usage of Russian, which has been subordinated to the state language for the last 30 years.

But I think historically, those territories, Donbass and Novorossiia down to the south, and even Crimea, although Crimea is a different case, they're not going to stop thinking of themselves as Ukrainians. They're going to say, "We are Russian and Ukrainian," which is what they've always been, always thought of themselves as, for as long as those areas have been set up. So there will be these two competing models competing for the sympathies of the people in the middle. And I would say the Russian coexistence, the areas where it would be possible for Russians and Ukrainians to coexist in eastern Ukraine, if it turns out that way, will have a powerful appeal in central Ukraine, more so, I would suspect, than a harsh and narrow Ukrainian nationalism proposed by western Ukraine.

#Glenn

So if you have two identities in Ukraine, one being that Ukrainians and Russians are brotherly people versus the other, which is that Russian culture is simply an imperial relic which should be essentially snuffed out of the country, then obviously the former will be more appealing, I guess.

#Nicolai Petro

The key point being, if individuals and their families are allowed to choose in the east the degree to which they want to be Ukrainian, whereas in the west they won't have that choice because they will have no opportunity to even identify with the historical Russian identity of what historically western Ukraine has been known as, in other words, Red Russia. And at the time of World War I, it was one of the most patriotic areas supporting the fight of the Russian Empire against Austria-Hungary.

#Glenn

Well, just as a last question, how do you see, given all of these internal problems, how is this affecting the ability of, I guess, Zelensky and his leadership to hold on to power now? Because we see a lot of cracks in the military, in the economy, socially. The busification is really starting to cause a lot of anger and, of course, a political crisis, which continues to brew. And all of this seems to come together, and, yeah, when do these identity issues get impacted by this, or how long is it possible for Zelensky to keep all of this under wraps, or when does it start falling apart?

#Nicolai Petro

I don't think that Zelensky has any choice, so long as he is in power, but to pretend that he is in charge. So I would rephrase the question as being: what would lead him to resign? I don't think the West, basically under any foreseeable circumstances in the near future, absent an obvious and catastrophic collapse of the front, would support the ouster of Zelensky. Because the individual political leaders have too much history with him in the West. All the Western political leaders—there's too many photos of them with him, too many congratulatory statements about how he is the indispensable leader of Ukrainian independence, and no one but Zelensky, et cetera, et cetera. They've supported him all the way, even through his postponing of elections, his putting the Constitution on pause. All of this has been described in glowing terms as examples of democracy.

So there's simply too much linkage there that Western leaders cannot plausibly cut their ties to Zelensky in a way that would lead them to force him out. But if he should choose to go, he might be encouraged to do so. And the only reason I think that that is still a question up in the air right now, and why it doesn't occur, given all the obvious indications of the corruption scandals which are circling and narrowing and focusing, coming closer and closer to Zelensky's inner circle—the military strategy, which has been a failure. He's gotten reformers in, then he's fired those same reformers. The military command is a rotating set of chairs. Now, what's the strategy? Nobody knows, to get us out of these doldrums on the front line. What's going to break the tide in favor of Ukraine, finally? So Zelensky doesn't have any answers to this. But the problem with removing him is that there is no other better candidate yet.

Look at how Fedorov, Mikhail, the young Minister of Defense, took off like a rocket, and then poof, now he's gone. He didn't even stay in Ukraine, which he promised he would do. Now he's a strategic consultant to the Italian Minister of Defense, which means he just gets to live in Italy until the end of the war and make money for himself and his companies. So could Zelensky be offered the same thing in Britain? Of course he could. And it might even be an attractive option for him and his family. But that doesn't solve the West's primary problem, which is who could they get who would have at least some sort of plausible authority within Ukraine, be able to unite different factions in Ukraine, and would be beholden to Western interests.

Because right now, the West has Zelensky exactly where they want him, which means that he can be coerced into making concessions with the threat of scandal, with the threat of being identified as

at the center of corruption. Although there are limits to that strategy, because if they push too far, he can bolt and say, "Well, I'll just go... I'll just negotiate myself with Russia." That's the great fear. The great fear in the West is: what if Zelensky actually decides, along with key members of his entourage and the military, to initiate direct negotiations with Russia and say, "To heck with the West. We lied. You didn't give us the assistance we need."

We can get a better deal ourselves. So that's a difficult thing to project, how far the West can push its control over the current Ukrainian government. But again, there's just—there are so few plausible alternative candidates to Zelensky. He has cleared the political spectrum, the political field, of any viable alternative to him, sending them away to be ambassadors or, you know, just keeping them under wraps. But it's very difficult to predict. But I do think if there is going to be any change in the political power and the policies pursued by the government, it will be after Zelensky leaves office, under whatever circumstances that might be.

#Glenn

Yeah. Well, Nikolai, thank you so much for taking the time. And yeah, I know you're studying the internal workings of Ukraine, so thanks for sharing those perspectives.

#Nicolai Petro

Thank you.