

The West Is Drowning In Its Own War Lies

If war is the continuation of politics by other means—as Clausewitz once said—then, logically, politics is also the continuation of war by other means. Is the US currently trying to switch back from one to the other in its Proxy War in Ukraine through the 28 point peace plan? Here to discuss this with me is Anatol Lieven, the director of the Eurasia Program and the Andrew Bacevich chair in American Diplomatic History at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. Links: Responsible Statecraft: <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/> Anatol's UnHerd articles: <https://unherd.com/author/anatol-lieven/> Neutrality Studies substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> Goods Store: <https://neutralitystudies-shop.fourthwall.com> Timestamps: 00:00:00 Introduction 00:02:52 European Sabotage & The Donbass Problem 00:08:39 Can the US Bypass Ukraine & Europe? 00:14:15 Is Peace Just a Pause to Reload? 00:19:09 Verifiable Processes & Arms Control 00:22:49 EU Membership & The "Ukrainization" of Europe 00:35:43 Signals of US Withdrawal & The China Factor 00:43:30 Internal US Politics: MAGA Splits & Populism 00:48:06 Russia's Negotiation Strategy & The Long Game

#Pascal

If war is the continuation of politics by other means, as Mr. Clausewitz once told us, then, logically, politics is also the continuation of war by other means. Is the United States currently trying to switch back from one to the other in its proxy war in Ukraine through the 28-point peace plan? Here to discuss this with me is Anatol Lieven, the director of the Eurasia Program and the Andrew Bacevich Chair in American Diplomatic History at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. Anatol, welcome back. Hello. Nice to be back.

Thanks for coming online. I'd really like to pick your brain on where you think this is going—especially if the United States and the Trump team are serious about the 28 points. The Russians have signaled so far that they're willing to entertain the idea. It might be good in some respects, not in others, but they're willing to go along. The Europeans, meanwhile, are now trying to sabotage it. But first of all, do you think this is a new approach by the U.S. administration toward the European theater?

#Anatol Lieven

Well, I think it is, at least on the part of the Trump administration. You know, Witkoff certainly seems to have thrown his weight behind this, as has J.D. Vance. But it's not nearly as clear that Rubio, the Secretary of State, is behind it. And of course, there's this tremendous ambiguity, doubt, and confusion about what he actually said to the senators when he met them about it. And we know

that Kellogg is against it. In fact, Kellogg is basically, I think, resigning over this. So it would appear that there are deep divisions within the Trump administration. But I don't think there's any doubt that Trump, in principle, wants to get this war finished.

And, I mean, what's new about this is that only last month I was told by both Russian and American officials that the negotiating teams still hadn't engaged in detail with many of these concrete issues. Well, now they have. I mean, they haven't nailed down completely some of the issues, but actually, you know, all the key points are addressed in this 28-point plan. The European response seems to me very strange, frankly, and it does raise questions. The thing is, as far as I can see, there's only one aspect of this 28-point plan that is really, really difficult for the Ukrainians—and I've always said it's very difficult, and I can understand their objections—and that's the call for withdrawal from the whole of the Donbas. Because, I mean, it seems that if you read the BBC, quite a few Ukrainian soldiers are now prepared to give it up, because, well, they don't want to die for somewhere they think they're bound to lose anyway.

But, you know, on the other hand, people who've fought and suffered for so long to keep this slice of land—you understand why they don't want to abandon it. Although, of course, in the 28-point plan, this territory is going to be demilitarized. So it's not a question of the Russian army moving forward to take it over. From a security point of view, Ukraine will have protection, but it will come under Russian administration. Now, this is only 1% of Ukraine—of the whole of Ukraine—and it's largely depopulated anyway. If the war goes on and Russia closes in on Kramatorsk, then the whole place will be depopulated. So, you know, in a rational world, this shouldn't be so difficult—but it is difficult.

But there are other things in the European and Ukrainian response—their 19-point plan, or whatever it is; I'm getting my plans confused by now—which seem very strange. I mean, one of them is this demand that the Ukrainian army be capped at 800,000 men rather than 600,000, you know, in the initial draft. Because, firstly, you know, in Istanbul at the start of the war, the Ukrainians were ready to agree to 250,000 as the cap. But also, even 600,000 is as much as the British, French, and German armies—the current ones—put together. And there's no way that Ukraine can sustain an army of even 600,000 men in peacetime. I mean, you have, of course, reserves, conscripts, who you then recall to service. But, you know, they'll never have the money to sustain that size of peacetime army.

And similarly, I mean, keeping NATO membership open—they must know by now they're never going to get into NATO. I mean, it's obviously a matter of pride and a face-saving thing for both sides. But it does... I mean, the European reassurance force—even the British have admitted now they're not going to send ground troops because they don't have any ground troops. So, I mean, there are two ways of reading this. One, the optimistic version would be that they don't take these things seriously and are putting them down as bargaining counters, so that they can then say, you know, all right, we'll no longer insist on this, we'll no longer insist on that, but the Russians have to give up the demand for the whole of the Donbass.

Now, that would be the optimistic version. The pessimistic version is that this is a deliberate attempt at sabotage—at wrecking the peace process. I'm not sure, frankly. I mean, if it is a deliberate attempt to break the peace process, then this is truly malevolent, because there is, frankly, no chance whatsoever—none—that the deal Ukraine will get a year down the line will be any better. I mean, possibly it will be able to hang on to a bit of the Donbass, but everything else the Russians are not going to compromise on. Much worse, exactly. And the Ukrainians and Europeans will be risking a complete Ukrainian collapse if this war goes on.

#Pascal

Yeah, and the Russians have already said, look, it's thinkable to go to Odessa, right, and connect what they have all the way up to Transnistria. So, I mean, I think that's actually on the cards as one of the potential futures.

#Anatol Lieven

Well, if the Ukrainian army collapses completely—and it would have to collapse completely, because remember, the Russians have to get across the Dnieper River, which is not easy—one could certainly imagine them capturing Zaporizhia and a whole swathe of Kharkiv, and then trying to exchange it. I mean, we can't say that for sure. Obviously, the Russian advance over the past year has been extremely slow—grindingly slow. But then, you know, there's so much evidence now of enormous Ukrainian difficulties. Also, so much will depend on who Trump blames for the collapse of this peace process, if it does collapse. Because, you know, if he blames the Russians, then pressure continues, sanctions continue, U.S. arms sales continue, intelligence provision continues. But if he blames the Ukrainians and Europeans, then, of course, he could cut off the arms sales and the intelligence. And then the Ukrainians would be in a really desperate situation.

#Pascal

That's the real question to me. Would you do that? Because if the United States really pulls out—including the intelligence sharing, the satellites, and so on—the Ukrainians would be basically blind, and there's nothing Europe can do to change that, right? So, in a sense—and I've discussed this earlier in another talk with Michael Rossi—if it's Russia and the United States coming to an agreement, would they even need Ukraine to sign off on that? Or would they need Europe? I mean, if they agree and actually make a framework and stick to that framework, how could the Ukrainians wreck it, other than, you know, a little shooting at a couple of soldiers here and there, where in the end the defense will be?

#Anatol Lieven

Well, I mean, the thing is, this is where, you know, in so many ways, most Western reporting and analysis has been so shamefully bad. Because, of course, there's a whole range of things that are portrayed as being, you know, "Ukraine must have the final say, this is Ukraine's decision," which they aren't. NATO membership is not a matter for Ukraine. European or Western forces in Ukraine are not a matter for Ukraine. Arms provision, arms sales—those are not matters for Ukraine. These are matters for Western governments, and above all, the United States. But, of course, the Ukrainian army would have to withdraw from the rest of the Donbass—that is for Ukraine to decide.

#Anatol Lieven

Well, it's very interesting. The Russians have gone further in this initial draft than I expected on some things. I mean, one of them is that I didn't think they would be willing to leave the question of Russian rights in Ukraine up to the European Union accession process. Because after what happened to the Russian minorities in the Baltic states, all the Russians I talked to said, "We can't trust the European Union on that." But, you know, in the initial draft, that's what it was. I mean, there were also going to be certain commitments from Ukraine, but very vague ones.

#Pascal

Although we don't know, in the initial draft, what was actually cleared with the Russians and what wasn't. I mean, that might just be... I mean, it's one of those things—they ping-pong it back and forth and so on. And, you know, we don't know what was inserted at which point and what was agreed on. That's true. Yeah, yeah.

#Anatol Lieven

But still... I mean, you know, the Russians have backed that draft in principle, not the latest European one. They haven't committed themselves absolutely to it, but Putin said that, in essence, it's acceptable. And—wait—there was something else as well, which was quite interesting. Oh, yes, that sanctions will only be lifted in stages, and there's no timetable. I had always assumed the Russians were going to insist on the suspension of sanctions as part of the peace deal.

And then, of course, when it comes to the initial deal on Russia's assets being used for the reconstruction of Ukraine, I was told in Moscow that Russia would actually accept that, as long as it's not phrased in any way as reparations—that it's Russia's decision, basically, to give this money for the reconstruction of Ukraine, and that it would be shared between the areas under the Ukrainian government and those under Russian occupation. And then people differed. Some said it would have to be 50–50. Others said, no, we could accept 20–80, since we know it's very... Otherwise, you know, we risk losing this money altogether. But the European and Ukrainian counter-proposal is totally unacceptable to the Russians. So...

#Pascal

Yeah, I mean, I didn't actually expect anything else to come out of Europe, to be honest, because it seems to me they really prefer to let Ukraine keep bleeding if it means not losing face right now—rather than later, maybe when some of these governments aren't even in power anymore, right? Then they can say, "I did all I could, and the next guy, he screwed it up." The bigger question... You're right.

#Anatol Lieven

I mean, if they can—if the French government can keep this going another 18 months—then most likely there will be a Le Pen government, a Rassemblement National government in France. And then they can blame the Ukrainian collapse on them. But, you know, they're running...

#Pascal

They're running on time? Well, yeah. I mean, 18 months—that's a long stretch. Just something else, you know. I think one of the most pessimistic but simultaneously important interpretations of what's going on is coming from a contributor, Brian Berletic, on The New Atlas. He keeps saying tirelessly—making the argument, a very Kogan argument—that whenever the United States hits a brick wall, it doesn't switch into peace mode. It just shifts into something that looks like peace in order to, you know, reload, withdraw, reload, and then attack another day.

And he keeps making the argument: look, we had that moment when Hillary Clinton and Lavrov literally pressed the reset button and were all smiles—just for the Minsk process to kick in later on. Then the Europeans told us, "Look, it was always meant to just buy us time to weaponize Ukraine against Russia." So what if the current thing is actually the same? It's meant to buy a little more time to regroup and work on both fronts, right? The Asian one with China and the European one with Russia. And isn't that something that would be going through the minds of Russia, which I think by now has clearly understood, over the last 20 years, that there's a continuing onslaught coming at them? What do you make of that argument?

#Anatol Lieven

Well, I mean, I think the answer is that there are, as I said, deep divisions—not just in Washington, but within the Trump administration. Because, you know, we know there are people in the administration who genuinely want peace with Russia so they can concentrate on China—Elbridge Colby, for example. There's considerable evidence to suggest that J.D. Vance is part of that as well. And Trump, of course, has gone back and forth. But, I mean, there's no doubt that Trump, in principle, wants peace. He just doesn't—

I don't think there's any evidence that he actually wants this war to go on. He would like to, you know, take responsibility for a peace settlement. But of course, you're right—we know others who are still, well, so much of the U.S. media is still determined to keep this war going and hoping to weaken Russia further. But I don't think it's settled yet. And of course, there's also the point that to go much further than they've already gone in attacking Russia economically, you might actually have to start seizing Russian cargoes on the high seas. Now, that is a blockade. That is an act of war.

And the Russians are threatened at that point. They have no choice but to hit back militarily in some way. And in the end, the Russians—and the Pentagon also—I mean, of course, there are these lunatic ex-generals like Breedlove and Hodges. But, you know, the last thing the Pentagon wants is to be drawn into a war in Europe, given what's happening with China. So I don't think this is all a cynical plot on the part of the Trump administration as a whole, no. But I think a much bigger problem—which, of course, the Russians talk about all the time, as do many people around the world—is that no agreement with the U.S. now can be trusted beyond four years.

Because if the Democrats win in '28, or even perhaps if Rubio wins, as we saw under Trump, a new U.S. president can simply tear up treaties. I mean, the old principle of **pacta sunt servanda** has long since gone out the window—that if one government makes a treaty, it's not just the government, it's the country that has made the treaty. The country's name and credibility are involved, and therefore the treaty must be respected. Nobody believes that anymore. So, yeah, I mean, it's no good. It's a ridiculous line that there is no consensus at the moment for further NATO enlargement. And you expect the Russians to accept that? I mean, there was no consensus for NATO enlargement in 2007, but the Germans and French went along with it.

#Pascal

So... no, no, it's—I mean, Russia would be foolish to actually believe that a signature on a piece of paper would guarantee any kind of future peace, right? The only thing that would really matter are verifiable and monitorable processes, right? Something like—and I think Russia and the United States actually have good experience with this—the decommissioning of some of these nuclear weapons, the nuclear weapons treaties, where you send observers to each other's states and they record everything. I mean, that type of agreement is something you could realistically work with. But within these 28 points and so on, there's nothing that even hints at creating a verifiable process, is there?

#Anatol Lieven

Well, you know, there's talk of arms negotiations, of arms limitations. The Trump administration is actually reducing its military presence in Romania. Right. It's interesting that the 28-point agreement talks about NATO air power in Poland, interestingly. But you could read that as saying, therefore, there won't be NATO ground forces, or at least there won't be U.S. ground forces. So, I mean, I

think it's very clear that Putin and the majority of the Russian establishment do see real possibilities here in terms of a new relationship with the U.S. And, you know, look, on the one hand, if the Democrats or Rubio win in '28, then yes, this whole agreement could be in danger. But if Vance wins, it could stick, you know, and then form the basis of something else.

Whereas, you know, if the Russians reject it outright now and alienate and humiliate Trump, well then, you know, they're throwing away that possibility for the future. So I think there is something here for the Russians to play for. The other thing, of course, is that if they can, by stopping this war now, get basically what they feel they have to get, then the next question immediately emerges: European Union membership for Ukraine. Now, then you find the Europeans in really, really difficult circumstances—you know, all these promises that they basically cannot keep, or at least not without totally transforming the European Union. And then, of course, you also have political change in Western Europe—new governments, perhaps—which are categorically opposed to this anyway. And so there is, you know, also an argument for Russia to make peace now.

#Pascal

No, there definitely is. And I mean, it does hurt Russia, that's for sure, that this is going on. But then again, there are so many dangers ahead, right? On the one hand, yes—Russia, for the longest time, has said that European Union membership for Ukraine is not out of the question, right? Especially when the European Union was clearly this economic club, although recently that's not so clear anymore. But by now, isn't there—shouldn't there be—a fear in the minds of the Russians that if that happens, instead of seeing the Europeanization of Ukraine, we might see the Ukrainianization of Europe? Because the extremist element within Ukraine—having them then interact, like, look at what Sikorski did with Poland and so on within the European Union, how they managed to capture a lot of the process—isn't that something that should worry Russia?

#Anatol Lieven

Well, I think it does, but I think there is a very wide—well, certainly, I've been told by at least one Russian informant—that the assumption is one of two things will happen, both to the advantage of Russia. Either the European Union, after all these promises, does not take Ukraine in, even in second-class status—because you know what the *acquis communautaire* is like. You've got to sign up to a whole set of detailed things that the Ukrainians cannot possibly meet for a very long time to come. And then, if the European Union doesn't let Ukrainians in, you'll have a tremendous mood of betrayal, anger, and disappointment in Ukraine, which will work in the long term to the advantage of Russia.

And the Russians point to Turkey, which has become much more favorable to Russia—not really because it favors Russia, but because, well, it's different. Then, of course, Turkey has all its problems with the U.S. because of Israel, the Iraq war, and the Kurds. But obviously, the refusal of the European Union to admit Turkey also played a critical part in this alienation of Turkey from the

Western alliance. Or they think the European Union will tear up all its rules to let Ukraine in, and this will basically destroy the European Union from within. So whichever way, Russia wins.

#Pascal

Yeah, yes and no. I mean, the thing is, nobody knows what idea will come after the European Union. And I think Russia's experience through history has been that if there's one thing you can count on, it's that you can count on Europe.

#Anatol Lieven

Well, yes, but then, I mean, at that point—it's simply a mirror image of what the Europeans say about Russia: that you can never trust Russia, that Russia is always aggressive, always imperialist. I mean, at that point, there's no point in seeking agreement at all; you have to seek complete victory. But Russia isn't going to win a complete victory over the West—it just doesn't have the men or the resources to do that.

#Pascal

Which, you know, brings us—everything you pointed out brings me back to this question and to that very brilliant essay you wrote, one I'll never forget. You wrote it in early April 2022. It was called *The Nature of the Future: Future Ukrainian Neutrality*, or something like *the neutrality of Ukraine, the future neutrality of Ukraine*. And you laid out how, back then, we were going through the Istanbul peace process. It all looked very good. It looked like Ukraine finally understood: okay, if I remain neutral and act as a buffer state, then I can maintain even the Donbass, preserve my sovereign integrity, and play a constructive role.

Zelensky even said as much, and all of that was torpedoed and so on. But it now looks as though the forces—also what you laid out, with the European Union never living up to its promises, with NATO membership never coming—at some point, even the nationalists, even the ultra-right-wing elements within Ukraine, must understand that they have to seek some form of independent role, not as an appendix to this or that institution, or to Russia, right? Do you think that within Ukraine, at some point, this realization will come among the militarists and the right wing—that, okay, look, the best thing we could do is do it on our own?

#Anatol Lieven

Well, I mean, I think what the Russians are hoping for—the sensible Russians, the moderate ones, not the real extremists who still dream of subjugating the whole of Ukraine—is, in the long run, something like what happened in Georgia, where you get a kind of nationalism similar to that in Hungary, or even, in a way, in Poland. Except the Poles, of course, are so hostile to Russia that it doesn't work in the same way.

But basically saying, look, we are for ourselves—Italia Farada, so to speak—and that means we're not going to become subordinate to Russia, but we're also not going to allow ourselves to be played with or dictated to by the West or the European Union. Of course, it's going to be different in Ukraine, because obviously the Georgian war didn't last very long; this war has lasted for almost four years, and so many people have been killed. But, you know, the thing is, of course, about the Ukrainian ethnic nationalists—like the Hungarians, or the Poles, or the Georgians—they're not attached to what the European Union now calls "European values," which are really the values of the European liberal elites over the past ten years. I mean, they have no deeper historical basis than that.

Yeah. And then, you know, the European Union, once again—unless it's going to basically tear up the *acquis*—is going to be asking for things that the Ukrainian right will find very, very offensive. And, you know, well, I mean, I don't know, the EU has turned a blind eye to so many things, but if it... I mean, the point is, when you actually start thinking seriously about EU membership, then everybody who's against it for their own economic reasons—the farmers in so many countries, the truckers—will really start looking at Azov, and Svoboda, and Bilyatsky, and this whole thing, and say, no, we can't, we cannot have Ukraine with these people in the European Union. Ukraine must do something to suppress them. Well, these people are very heavily armed.

#Pascal

Yeah, by your own side, yeah.

#Anatol Lieven

So, no, I mean, yeah, but this is it. We've been lying for so long. We lied in 2007, and from then on, that we were going to bring Ukraine into the European Union, even though we never had the slightest intention of fighting to defend Ukraine or making a real security commitment to Ukraine. Then, of course, the European Union lied in 2013 with this association agreement. You talk to people in Europe then, and they never had the slightest idea—this was not a path to membership. It was introduced by the Poles, the Balts, and the Swedes to block closer economic relations with Russia. It was a purely negative thing. There was no money in it for the Ukrainians. It was, you know, deliberate sabotage. There was no intention of bringing the Ukrainians in.

But now, of course, we're trapped by our own lies. I mean, in another and better world, Rutte and—God, I've forgotten his name already—Stoltenberg, and all the others who said "future NATO membership is irreversible" and so forth, should resign. They should say, "I was committed to this, but it's clear that this is not going to happen. Therefore, I step back. I give up." Of course, they're never going to say that. But you've got all these governments who did say it, and who are now, in a way, stuck with it. And, well, in the end, if America—if the Trump administration—really cracks the whip, they'll have to give this up. But we're going to see in the next few days how far that will be the case.

#Pascal

Yeah, no, the question, though, is, you know, at least for the Europeans, we've seen so many times how they were willing to walk things back or just forget what they once said, right? I mean, the NATO Secretary General is a prime example. One day he says the path of Ukraine toward NATO is irreversible, and the next day he says, "Oh, we never promised membership. We never said they would be. We always said we would work toward it." I mean, it's so...

#Anatol Lieven

I know. Well, I think, you know, my hope is that these will be given up, because actually, you know, they're meaningless to a great extent, this kind of thing. But for me, the real difficulty is the question of Ukrainian military withdrawal from the rest of the Donbass. That is true, because that is genuinely very difficult. You'll see—I mean, I think you'll see—a lot of Ukrainian soldiers who would be happy to do that in return for peace, but undoubtedly you'll see a lot of others who will say, "No, we fought too hard for this. We must keep it."

And also, they have been—and Westerners too have been—hyped up on this idea that these so-called fortress towns are critical to Ukraine's defense, and you have all these parallels to the Sudetenland in Ukraine. But of course, the point is, this is a very small part of the Ukrainian front. And actually, the Russians have made equally slow progress elsewhere, in areas that aren't built up or fortified. It's just open countryside, and when it comes to drones, in some ways the open countryside is worse because it's exposed. It's very difficult to advance across open fields; it's actually easier to do it from within urban areas.

We see now with this Russian infiltration into Pokrovsk. But, you know, once you've had this line hammered into you—I mean, I was surprised to find Westerners who I thought were well-informed also saying, "Oh, but these towns are absolutely critical to Ukraine's defense." And I said, "But hang on, the Russians will not advance. We can help the Ukrainians build a new line of defense," which, after all, is what they've been doing so far. They've fallen back from one line to another. I mean, this in itself is another meaningless argument. But the political point about the difficulty of giving this up—that's real and hard.

#Pascal

Yeah, yeah. I guess that's why the 28-point peace plan tries to frame it as becoming a kind of no man's land, right? A buffer zone. And so the Russians would also commit to not going in there, to make that somehow more digestible, right? But the role now of the Europeans, again, I think, is one of sabotage. Maybe let's focus on one more thing—the things we don't see, the things that aren't happening. One of the things I find interesting, in terms of NATO and U.S. troop stationing, is that, as you already said, a couple of troops are being pulled out of Romania at the moment.

The United States has, since last year, bilateral agreements with Sweden and Finland to build new bases—17 and 15 respectively; I forget which is where. But except for one single base in Finland, as far as I know, the U.S. hasn't actually started putting personnel there. So they're holding off, although they now have the legal framework that would even allow them to place any weapons they choose, including nuclear weapons, on that territory. They're not doing that. Is that one of the things that are not happening? Does that also tell us something about this understanding between Moscow and Washington that may be emerging around us?

#Anatol Lieven

I think so, because, you know, we know that the Trump administration, in principle, wants to draw down U.S. military commitments in Europe. I mean, once again, not all of the Trump administration, but, you know, there are these elements. But it makes good sense to put forward a bargaining counter, but not actually confirm it, and then be willing to negotiate over it. So I think, in principle—now that the Trump administration appears to be finally able to negotiate things in detail, which for months it wasn't—if you can get over these Ukrainian and European blocking attempts, I'd be modestly hopeful that the U.S. and Russia could actually pursue a disarmament process. I mean, some of it is actually pretty obvious, to be honest.

I mean, the problem is, of course, that the previous agreements were good agreements, and then they had faults on both sides, but they broke down. I would say, starting with the United States, the abandonment of the ABM Treaty was what really started unraveling everything, along with the refusal to ratify the CFE Treaty. But, you know, you can begin with something absolutely obvious: the Americans do not deploy these intermediate-range missiles in Germany, and Russia pulls them out of Kaliningrad and Belarus. That should be pretty open and shut. The U.S. commits not to put ground troops in Poland, Romania, or the Baltics, and Russia promises to limit its troops in Belarus to basically what it has now, which is an insignificant force in terms of numbers. I think, you know, that could work—but it does depend.

I mean, you know, the guy in the Trump administration who's really been pushing this most of all is Elbridge Colby, who's the Deputy Secretary of Defense. He just got confirmed by the Senate. But his two deputies—the latest news is they're most likely to be blocked by the Senate as part of this whole pushback against Colby. So there are tremendous things going on under the surface. Sorry, can you help me with Elbridge Colby? He's on which side? He's on the escalatory side? No, Colby wants to concentrate on China. He wants to draw down commitments to Europe. But the thing is, Colby is also a hawk on China. He's a hawk on China, but he also opposed the U.S. attack on Iran, and he supported the JCPOA. So he's got two big lobbies against him, and they are determined to get him, basically.

#Pascal

So there's still—I mean, since you're in a think tank in Washington and you interact there—is there, for lack of a better word, some kind of internal civil war about who to engage next? Is that one raging in Washington? Because there's also Venezuela, which is kind of just sitting there on pause. There's still Iran, right? And, I mean, Israel—I don't know what they're scheming right now, but they must be scheming something. So there are these different theaters that could blow up at any time. The one that's kind of silent at the moment is the China front, although the Japanese and the Chinese have a spat. But I think that one is a little bit separate from the American one.

#Anatol Lieven

Yeah, well, I mean, Rubio—and obviously the hope must be that, not exactly a hope, not if you're Venezuelan or Colombian or whatever—but that Rubio is so personally focused on Venezuela, Central America, and Cuba that he also wants to get this war in Ukraine over with so he can concentrate on what really interests him most emotionally. The Israelis—I've always been surprised that they haven't tried harder to defend good relations with Russia. Because obviously, I mean, this is a great distraction of U.S. attention from the Middle East. But of course, especially since the latest Israeli successes, I think they're in a mood where they feel they don't really need anybody and can do whatever they like.

Yeah, I mean, Washington is very, you know, very divided at the moment. But if you look at the response in Congress—with some exceptions, a few more than in the past—still, certainly among the Democrats, but many Republicans as well, I mean, they're almost pathologically opposed to peace with Russia and to any peace settlement. And of course, one of the reasons the Russians have accepted the idea of sanctions being lifted in stages is because they know there's no chance of the U. S. Senate voting for immediate sanctions relief anyway. So, in a way, Russia loses nothing—why make it a sticking point if it's not going to happen regardless?

#Pascal

Yeah, exactly. So this complicates the matter, of course—plus, people must already be starting to scheme for the next two and a half years, right? I mean, the midterms are only a year away, less than a year, right? And we see the power struggle within the Republican Party, where MAGA seems to be splitting, and we have this very bizarre, very interesting decision by Marjorie Taylor Greene—basically one of the spiritual leaders of the non-interventionist arm of the Republicans—just quitting on this, saying, "January 6th is my last day." What do you make of that?

#Anatol Lieven

Well, I mean, there are, if you like, the real MAGA types, you know, who are bitterly opposed to the Washington establishment and who are also, of course, to some extent, genuinely economically populist—at least in their basic instincts. And, you know, they promise their base all sorts of things

that they're not getting. I mean, Epstein was only the last straw from that point of view, because, you know, before that there was the attack on Iran, which they really disliked. And, you know, that wing of MAGA didn't like the big, beautiful wall either. They haven't really come out against it, but they don't like these tax cuts for the rich.

They don't like the rich, basically. I mean, the thing is, if it weren't for the first-past-the-post system, the Republican Party would long since have disintegrated into at least two or three parties—and so would the Democrats, by the way. They both have such incompatible elements within them. And of course, that makes predicting the future even harder—well, even harder because, you know, after all, Trump did himself terrible damage by resisting the release of the Epstein files, drove Taylor Greene into revolt, and so forth and so on.

And now he's actually agreed to it, in the hope—it seems, and only partially fulfilled so far—that it will be even more embarrassing for the Democrats. But it's hard to understand why he didn't do it earlier. Then again, you know, it's true, everyone says he's a very, you know, uncontrolled and impulsive individual. But this is going to be a huge problem, I think, for Vance in 2028, because he's going to face the same question that was asked of Kamala Harris: "Look, you're saying all this now, but you've been vice president for four years. Why weren't you saying it before? Now you say you're an economic populist, but you supported this big, beautiful bill." And then, of course, if the economy has gone down and inflation keeps going up...

I mean, I almost feel that Vance might do better not to run for president in '28, and then try to come back later as a real populist—you know, do a Trump at some stage in the future. Because the way things are going, there's a genuine, big populist upsurge in America, as there is in Europe. And as we see, I mean, sometimes, as you well know, with Bernie Sanders—but again, with Mandani—a good many of the voters who supported Mandani had previously voted for Trump in the presidential election. Basically, they're just utterly fed up with the existing establishment, and they'll vote for anybody they think is going to take a hammer to it.

#Pascal

If we take all of this into consideration—the internal turmoil inside the United States—what do you think that does to the Russian negotiation strategy? I mean, again, we're at the point where even if they come up with something they can sign, there's no realistic way to believe it would actually be implemented as agreed. So what do you think the Russians are calculating in order to hedge their bets or create something they can work with down the road?

#Anatol Lieven

Well, I mean, my sense is that—I could be wrong—but I was told in Moscow that Putin has to get hold of the Donbass. That's the minimum with which he can genuinely present this as a victory. Because, you know, don't forget that, given Russian history and what Russia hoped for at the start

of this war, it's been a disaster for Russia in so many ways. And also, of course, the war was abominably planned. Now, people in Russia try to avoid, even in private, criticizing Putin, but the number of people who said to me that Gerasimov and Shoigu ought to be shot for planning this war so badly—well, they did.

I mean, you know, the invasion was a disaster—an intelligence disaster, a planning disaster. And then, of course, Putin is also vulnerable. This is where Western reporting is, once again, shamefully bad, because Putin is vulnerable to attacks from the right for having trusted the French and the Germans. And he himself has admitted that: "I trusted the Europeans too far." So he can't—there's an irreducible minimum. And I think what I was told was that neutrality, meaning no NATO membership, cannot be given up by the Russians. They just can't. And perhaps the whole of the Donbass as well.

But I think my sense is, I mean, they're clearly very anxious to stay on good terms with Trump, and no doubt with Vance in the future. They really don't want to break with him or alienate him. And then, you know, if they can get a moderately satisfactory agreement that meets their basic conditions, there's a strong argument for basically sitting back and waiting to see if, in fact, the Rassemblement National wins in France. EU membership for Ukraine is almost certainly dead in any case. And I really don't see Bardella pushing for a new, aggressive policy against Russia. You can hope then that if Vance wins in '28, you have a very different configuration in the West.

Because then you actually have an alignment between France, the United States, and Britain—if Farage wins in Britain. And then, of course, German politics start to look very interesting. So, you know, obviously Russia has survived very well so far economically. But there are grave concerns. Living standards are suffering, prices are rising, and after all, they're paying enormous amounts to this volunteer army. There's not much point in doing that if those wages are immediately eroded by inflation. So there are also good economic reasons for trying to bring this to an end.

#Pascal

Okay, so in a sense, on all sides, you're actually seeing reasons why this should be—or why winding it down should be—more and more in the interest of the different parties. But on the other hand, the way these forces are distributed at the moment will create something questionable at best, right? However long it takes, it won't be a 1945-type, you know, clear-cut end to this.

#Anatol Lieven

No, because, you know, the... I mean, that's the absurd thing on the Western side—this idiot "Callison Company." The things they were hoping for, you could only achieve if NATO marched into Moscow to take the peace. Ridiculous. But equally, well, you know, Russia, I don't think, can march into Kyiv. And actually, it would be a grave mistake if it did, because it would then have to run the place, as opposed to keeping it at a certain distance and then watching, perhaps, Ukraine collapse

internally. But also, I mean, when it comes to the real hardliners who say, "We can't trust the West at all, we must somehow defeat or crush the West"—well, I mean, what does that even mean?

That means the Russian army marching into Paris like in 1814, or marching into Berlin as in 1945. No, that can't happen. So... and also, of course, there's an ambiguity here when it comes to the Eurasianists and people like Karaganov, who say Russia should really reorient toward Asia, break with Europe, and so forth. Well, at that point—sure—but at that point, you actually do want to try to pacify this. Not surrender, but you want to extricate yourself from this Ukrainian mess. If Europe is not the future and not really important, and if economic growth and the future center of the world are in Asia, then you don't want to wreck that for the sake of a few ruined towns in eastern Ukraine. No, I mean, you actually want to achieve your minimum and then...

#Pascal

A proper border, and then let it rot on the other side—whatever it's going to be. Well, Anatol, I've stolen an entire hour of your time. Thank you very much for that. If people want to read more from you, they should go to **Responsible Statecraft**. Is there any other place where you publish sometimes?

#Anatol Lieven

UnHerd. I write a lot for the UnHerd site. And I'm hoping there'll be a piece from me in **Time** magazine in the next couple of days as well on this. So, writing away.

#Pascal

That would be wonderful. I'll put the links in the description box below. Anatol Lieven, thank you very much for your time today.

#Anatol Lieven

Thanks a lot, Pascal. See you soon.