Thucydides Trap & US Reaction to China's Rise

Ambassador Chas Freeman discusses the failure to reorganise US-China relations to adjust to new realities. The end of the hegemonic era changes the international system and America itself. Ambassador Freeman was a former Assistant Secretary of Defense, earning the highest public service awards of the Department of Defense for his roles in designing a NATO-centered post-Cold War European security system and in reestablishing defense and military relations with China. He served as U. S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia (during operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm). He was Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs during the historic U.S. mediation of Namibian independence from South Africa and Cuban troop withdrawal from Angola. Books by Prof. Glenn Diesen: https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B09FPQ4MDL Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: https://glenndiesen.substack.com/ X/Twitter: https://x.com/Glenn_Diesen Patreon: https://www.patreon.com/glenndiesen Support the research by Prof. Glenn Diesen: PayPal: https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/glenndiesen Buy me a Coffee: buymeacoffee.com/gdieseng Go Fund Me: https://gofund.me/09ea012f

#Glenn

Welcome back to the program. We're joined today by Ambassador Chas Freeman, a retired diplomat and former Assistant Secretary of Defense, who also played a role in reestablishing defense and military relations with China — a topic we could discuss today. Thank you very much for coming on.

#Chas Freeman

Glad to be with you, Glenn.

#Glenn

So, the critical time we live in is obviously the end of the unipolar era and the entry into a multipolar era. Now, this concept of the Thucydides Trap describes the dangerous dynamic that can develop when a rising power threatens to displace the formerly established ruling power. The U.S. has clearly reached the end of this unipolar order — or Pax Americana, hegemonic peace, liberal hegemony, whatever one wants to call it. But China seems to be the main country preventing the U.S. from maintaining this position, simply by its size and its rise. How do you see the U.S. responding to this dynamic — in terms of what is helpful and what is not helpful?

#Chas Freeman

Well, we're responding very ineffectually. In fact, in many respects, we're engaged in a kind of self-cannibalization. The things that made America great — the rule of law, freedom of speech, academic freedom, the partnership between the federal government and research universities, the emphasis on science and technology, and a devotion to objectivity rather than bias or prejudice — are all basically gone. We're in the middle of a constitutional crisis. In Chinese terms, we're taking a great leap backward rather than a great leap forward. And we've had the equivalent of the Red Guards in D.C., sort of mindlessly dismantling elements of the government without understanding what their functions are.

We've basically dismantled our diplomatic establishment. There was a poll done of my former colleagues — I'm long retired — but people in the American Diplomatic Service showed that one out of three is preparing to withdraw, resign, or retire. Demoralization is extreme. So we're not doing much right, and the Chinese, for the most part, are doing things right. The balance of, I guess, some sort of comprehensive measure of national strength and capacity is shifting against us. I don't like — as you probably know — the term "multipolar," because a pole is the end of a two-dimensional line, and we're in a much more complex international environment than that.

I prefer "multinodal," a node being a three-dimensional connector where you can link many things, disconnect them, or rotate the node. I think we're entering a world in which countries may have close relations in one area — say, economic — while being politically at odds. That's certainly the reality between the United States and China at the moment. Or conversely, they might have close political relations and very little economic interaction. We might even have a militarily hostile relationship, as we do with China, and yet, on another dimension — the economic one — a great deal of interdependence.

And I think we're going to see — because Europe, as a result of NATO's expansion and Russia's response to it, is in a very unstable condition — a lot of interesting developments in relations between European states. I noticed the other day that Kaja Kallas, who is the spokesperson for the European Union on foreign policy, talked about how wonderful it would be if the Russian Federation were to break up into more manageable parts. And the more I thought about that, the more I realized that NATO and the EU are actually more likely to break up than the Russian Federation is. They're under huge strain.

Europe is not responding effectively to either the Russian advances in Ukraine or the difficulties in transatlantic relations — the American threats of withdrawal from Europe, the pulling back of some aspects of American support. But it's also not responding effectively to the return of China to wealth and power. It doesn't seem to know how to operate in a Eurasian context. Macron — President Macron — is off in China, I guess toward the end of this week; maybe he's there already. And this time he's not taking Ursula von der Leyen with him. He describes it as a bilateral interaction, but he proposes to talk about broader European–Chinese relations. This all looks rather aimless to me. I wonder where it's going. So I think we're in a moment of perplexity. But in the case of U.S.–China interaction, I'm sorry to say the United States is not performing as it should.

#Glenn

To what extent, though, do you think it's a lack of understanding of China's historical perspective? Does the U.S. understand this well, or is it misinterpreting China?

#Chas Freeman

Well, you know, the odd thing is that whatever is driving our China policy, it's not expertise. The people who are defining China policy are China hawks who, for the most part, have never been to China, never studied it, don't know the language, don't know the history, and yet are convinced they know everything they need to know about China. You mentioned the Thucydides Trap as a theory. I think it's a great description of American behavior; I don't think it's a good description of Chinese behavior. And I wonder about models that are drawn from the fractious history of Europe — with many small countries contending with each other, occasional great powers arising, great power conflicts — going back, as Thucydides did, to the Peloponnesian War, but arguably continuing more or less throughout the following two millennia of history.

Is this applicable to other cultures? I can see its application in India, which never united. It was like Europe—an extension of the Eurasian landmass with multiple polities contending with each other, often in a very vicious manner. China had that experience, by the way, a bit earlier, but the first Qin emperor united China, and ever since then it has, for the most part, been a united civilizational state. India didn't really unite until the British conquered it. And then, of course, it split into three parts, with Pakistan separating itself in the partition, and then Bangladesh separating itself from Pakistan with Indian assistance. Anyway, I'm wondering about the absence of a cultural element in interpreting the Thucydides Trap—or, for that matter, John Mearsheimer's offensive realism. I think it works in some contexts; I'm not convinced it works in others.

#Glenn

But I'm curious—what is the legitimate concern about China? Because the German economist Friedrich List wrote a book in 1827 on the national economy, and in it he contrasts America with Britain. He writes that Britain uses its economic power—its ships, its industries, its financial power—for dominance and imperialism. And he contrasts this with American statecraft under the American system. He says that when the U.S. builds its manufacturing base and all of that, it pursues economic power as a source of liberation and freedom.

So he contrasted the imperialism of the British with how the Americans used their economic statecraft. Well, as you also suggested, the U.S. seems to have taken on that role of Britain. Meanwhile, China is now, you know, presenting itself as the new America—saying, "Let's all trade together, let's get along, this is about autonomy and peace." But I guess, yeah, where I'm going with this is: how can we know that China won't also continue down this path while it's using all this

economic statecraft and embracing the rhetoric of a positive-sum game? How do we know it's not also going to go down this route and pursue a hegemonic vision?

#Chas Freeman

Well, we can't know. And you're quite right. In the 19th century, the United States presented itself as a sort of exception to British behavior—as the British superpower running the world.

#Glenn

The Americans didn't want to become like the European imperialists. They tested themselves on this.

#Chas Freeman

Exactly. And we said we wouldn't—and then, of course, we did. We did that about 125 or 130 years ago with the Spanish-American War, followed by the acquisition of a colony in the Philippines, and then a period of active intervention in the Caribbean Basin, Central America, and the Caribbean. The Trump administration is replicating that with its acts of piracy, war crimes, and illegal actions off the coast of Venezuela. So we don't know whether the Chinese will follow us into that sort of pattern. They've been very insistent, from the beginning of the People's Republic, that they would never seek hegemony. You know, my question to them always was: why do you feel obliged to say that?

Is it because you fear you might seek hegemony, or you think you will and want to conceal that until you can actually achieve it? What is the reason you deny that you're going to be a superpower in the sense that the United States and the Soviet Union once were—that is, having a global sphere of influence, or at least one in your neighborhood? I guess there are two answers to that. One is that, historically, the state system in Pacific Asia had China very much at its center, but the Chinese really were not interventionists. They didn't overthrow governments; they didn't impose their will.

They did expect deference and respect for their interests, and they got it from the nations of the region. So when people think about a country like Japan—it was invaded by the Mongols, not the Chinese. Then, of course, it was invaded by the Dutch and other Europeans, and by the Americans. But the Chinese have basically reached the geographic limit of their state. Their agricultural system, their way of life, really isn't suited to much beyond their current borders. And they're not engaged in a search for *Lebensraum*. They're not looking for colonies. They don't propose to undo the sovereignty of their neighbors. So the question is: what is the threat from China? It's a threat to American primacy.

Just by its existence and progress—since it now has an economy about one-third larger than that of the United States in purchasing power terms, and is the largest trading power on the planet—it's the pace-setter for the global economy. It has over one-fourth of the world's scientists, engineers, and mathematicians. It now leads in multiple areas of science and technology. The Australian Strategic

Policy Institute, which monitors this, says that China now leads in 57 of the 64 categories they track, with the United States leading in five and South Korea in two. Europe isn't on that list, and that's very significant because, frankly, I think European policy at the moment qualifies as weird.

You know, how can you imagine that you can resuscitate, revive, or revitalize Europe with a combination of budgetary austerity, cuts to social services, increased defense spending, and a simultaneous cutoff of cheap Russian energy and other resources—which they just did the other day, in theory anyway? No more Russian gas, I guess. But I'm not convinced that Europe can, in fact, continue without Russian gas. Europeans seem to have taken interdependence as a vulnerability. But as far as I can tell, Russia never cut off the gas. I think someone else blew up Nord Stream 2, and I think we know who it was.

So it's been very good for the United States, by the way, in terms of gas sales. I don't know that the Chinese really fit the pattern. And I think, in fact, there's a good deal of global dissatisfaction with the fact that while the United States withdraws from responsibility for guiding world affairs—doesn't even show up at meetings, withdraws from organizations, opposes reform or refunding of legacy institutions—the Chinese aren't really stepping up. I mean, they're not... they are de facto doing a lot in the area to combat climate change, but they're not taking the lead internationally in that.

They haven't developed a substitute for the vanished American foreign assistance program. They're not in the lead on non-proliferation. These are issues normally thought of as global, where the United States historically took the lead. Nobody's leading now, and the Chinese don't seem to want to take up the burden of leadership. So the two answers are: historically, they didn't fit into this pattern of assertive hegemony—they were certainly the primus inter pares in their region—and they don't seem to be showing any sign of wanting to take charge now.

#Glenn

Yeah, history is a good indicator, though, that there might be a different kind of power—that they won't necessarily follow in the European and American footsteps. But it's interesting, the point you made: if you're not going to pursue hegemony, there's no reason to talk about it so much. I always get the impression that, well, if you look now, the United States keeps going on about how it's the most powerful country in the world. The Europeans keep going on about the wonderful values we have in Europe. I mean, they won't stop talking about it. And it's a good indication, too, that U.S. power is slipping, and the values of the Europeans aren't really upheld anymore. But they insist on mentioning it almost every single sentence.

#Chas Freeman

Yes, that's Shakespeare's—"he doth protest too much." A very defensive sort of boastfulness. You know, "we're really not as terrible as we appear." But as I said yesterday in a talk at Brown, on the question of whether the United States is ceding the future to China, Europe is now the sick man of

Eurasia. And not asserting itself, Europeans seem determined to remain much less than the sum of their parts. And I wonder how long the parts can hold together. Let's imagine, for example, that the Russian advances in Ukraine result in a decisive victory for Russia—which is entirely possible. Ukraine has lost the war.

Europe and the West generally are in denial about that. But denial is not really a strategy. Trying to pretend that the war can continue successfully—which is basically what Europe is doing—doesn't get you anywhere, as we've just seen with the Wittkopf-Kushner discussions with Vladimir Putin in Moscow. Whatever you propose in the nature of a peace proposal has to be grounded in reality, not in delusion. Well, let's suppose that Russia does, in fact, decisively, openly, undeniably defeat NATO. Will NATO hold together? Will the European Union hold together?

I mean, there are enormous, precipitous tendencies—to borrow the Indian phrase. We already have dissension in the ranks. Spain is taking a very different course from Germany. Poland is on yet another course. Czechia and Slovakia don't agree. The Hungarians are off on their own course. Britain has left the EU and is floundering, in my view. We have weak leaders—none of them popular—fractious politics, and unrealism on every level. As I said, they're not dealing with the new realities of Europe: the consequences of NATO enlargement, the rise of China, the growth of what I call a multinodal global system.

So the values they profess are not applied to West Asia, where they tolerate and support genocide, even as they denounce Russia for far lesser violence in Ukraine. You have von der Leyen saying it's inadmissible to acquire territory by force, but then joining the United States in letting Israel do that, even as they opposed it in Russia's case in Ukraine. So the vaunted values of the West don't have much credibility at the moment, and perhaps that's why they're asserted so forcefully. Maybe it's like the peace process in Palestine, which was a convenient excuse for not having peace for quite a long while.

#Glenn

Yeah, well, I'm also... I don't see a very bright future for NATO either. Its role will unavoidably change based on the distribution of power. During the Cold War, when you had two centers of power, it had a clear mission—collective defense and deterring the Soviet Union. After the Cold War, of course, it needed a new reason to exist. It looked like the new mission became collective hegemony, to build up the unipolar order, which then aligned the interests of the Europeans and Americans for three more decades. But in a multipolar or multinodal system, with many centers of power, it's not clear to me what the role of NATO will be, because the U.S., in such a world, has better priorities than Europe, so it wants to draw down.

Russia obviously can't be pushed out anymore as one of these key centers of power. So the whole objective of creating a Europe without Russia—just denying it a role in institutions and hoping it will go away—this isn't going to work. If it doesn't have representation, it will assert itself, as we see

now in Ukraine, through other means. And as you said, the idea that Spain and Germany should have the exact same foreign policy doesn't really make sense if foreign policy is supposed to deliver on some basic national interest. Ireland and Latvia have the same policy, don't they?

#Chas Freeman

I see Macron breaking out of the lane on this, and I don't think he's the only one. Think about it for a moment—the stress that NATO is under. Its principal member, the United States, is no longer reliable. We Americans are no longer in the business of protecting other people. It's supposedly "America First." Of course, it isn't really, because it's "Israel First" in West Asia. But Trump went to Busan in South Korea and met with Xi Jinping, and the conclusions from that meeting were basically that China is the equal of the United States. Trump seems to personally recognize that the United States can't outcompete China and can't win a war with it. Therefore, the assertion of American primacy in the Pacific, which the establishment is committed to, is now perhaps not accepted by the supreme leader of the United States.

And Europe, meanwhile, has basically been handed the bag for the Ukraine problem. Europeans have to pay for it. And some Europeans have begun to talk, very aggressively in some cases, about going after Russia—which led Vladimir Putin to say, essentially, "If you want to do that, we're ready. You want a war? We don't want a war. But if you want a war, you're not going to come out of it very well." So you have quite different views on the Ukraine war at the mass level and the leadership level, which suggests the whole thing is quite fragile. You even have differences openly expressed by people like Robert Fico and Viktor Orbán—quite different views. So is this a framework that's solid, that will survive the shock of a Russian victory in Ukraine, which I think is what we're beginning to see?

There's a question about Ukraine that I haven't heard anyone raise. I think, you know, if you're talking about the establishment of agreed frontiers between Russia and Ukraine—which is what we're really talking about—the Russian Constitution has incorporated Zaporizhia and Kherson, as well as Luhansk and Donetsk. That means the Russians are not going to give up that claim easily, if at all. But think about frontiers: if they're not anchored in geography—say, a river or a mountain range or something that makes them plausible in reality—they become excuses for renewed warfare. And it seems to me that, at least from the Russian interpretation of Europe's position on Ukraine, Europe wants a ceasefire so that Ukraine can reconstitute and go at it again on behalf of the rest of Europe.

I don't think many Ukrainians are very enthusiastic about that prospect. We're told there's one desertion every two minutes from the Ukrainian army, that half of it is in fact absent without leave, and that recruitment levels are falling short of casualties plus desertions by a very wide margin. We do seem to see the front crumbling on the Ukrainian side. So I guess the Russian position is: you're not prepared to deal with us at the negotiating table, so we'll just take what we have to take on the battlefield, and you can live with it one way or another. But we could end up with a Europe in a state of Cold War between part of the West—though not all of it—and Russia, with Ukraine greatly

reduced in size and influence, and still not qualified to join the European Union because of the absence of democracy, the high level of corruption, and all the other problems Ukraine has, not to mention French and other objections to Ukrainian agricultural potential.

#Glenn

Yeah, I've always made the point that, since the '90s, the curse of Europe now is that we've once again redivided the continent. I think Europe can still remain a relevant player in this new world if we can overcome this dividing line. But it's just very strange with Ukraine. We've really dug into this narrative that it was simply an unprovoked imperialist mission by Russia. Once you accept that narrative, there are no solutions anymore. Because if we recognize that we started this war in 2014, that we provoked the Russians to intervene, then at least you have a path to a solution—some format for indivisible peace. If you can end the dividing lines in Europe, the Europeans, which would then include the Russians, could diversify more.

That is, the Europeans could prosper. Russia wouldn't be so dependent on China either. This is kind of what the Americans would like as well. So it just seems very self-defeating to go down this path. But I've noticed the only acceptable discourse in Europe is that they want to hear you don't challenge the divided Europe. This is written in stone. They just want to make sure you're on our side, that you're in the trenches with us. So if you suggest maybe we shouldn't have this—maybe the division of Europe itself is a security threat—then that's not a loyal comment. That's not something they'll accept. And if you're not with us, you're against us, pretty much. That's the sentiment.

#Chas Freeman

What you see happening is not greater cohesion in Europe, but greater fission—separation. So Europe cannot play the role it should play as a geoeconomic or geopolitical great power unless it's able to unite far more than it has. And it's not uniting; we're seeing separations. Brexit was a harbinger of this, but we see others at odds with the majority and an inability to make rational decisions. So, cutting off Europe from Russian gas by 2027—first of all, it's probably impossible—but is that a good idea? I mean, what happens to European industry if energy prices are as high as they're likely to be in those circumstances? And is it better to be dependent on Algeria than on Russia? I mean, really—or on West Asia? I don't understand the strategic reasoning, which leads me to believe there is no strategic reasoning.

#Glenn

No, there's not. And I think this transition in Europe is a mistake because, as you said, the EU was a geoeconomic bloc. You used collective bargaining power to get better deals with other parts of the world, including the United States, and you had that synergy between the European economies. That was what kept the EU together then—the ability to deliver economic gains. But once it

transitioned into what it calls a "geopolitical EU," meaning now we're going to confront the Russians, the problem was that geoeconomic Europe only functioned because we had proper working relations with the Russians.

If the new unity is based on a shared hatred of Russia, then we can't have economic prosperity. So I think it's very, very unsustainable. We can't keep this level of hatred going for so long. At some point, if you keep undermining national interests, some of the European countries are going to start rethinking this madness—the lack of strategy, the inability to prosper. And you're going to have people like Orbán or Fico who start to question it, the reason behind all of this.

#Chas Freeman

Well, I go back to my earlier point. How does a Europe that relies on Russophobia to unite itself respond to a Russian victory in Ukraine? Does it double down on Russophobia? Or do people say, wait a minute, maybe we really do need to think about coexistence with Russia, with Ukraine as a buffer and a bridge between us and the Russians? You know, what is the reaction? I don't see how relying on hatred or fear of Russia—which doesn't have a very strong evidentiary basis to begin with—can survive a Russian victory.

And I think we're looking at the very real prospect that the Russians are stringing the Americans—the Trump administration—along in talks while they gain ground. So they're creating facts on the ground while using negotiations as a delaying tactic, since there's nothing on... Well, actually, the 28-point proposal has quite a bit in it that the Russians could agree with. But of course, the Europeans then tried to, you know, walk back everything in there. And so, the one thing that everybody seems to be coming to agreement on is that Ukraine can't join NATO. It's taken a long while for people to realize that, but they seem to have come to grips with it.

#Glenn

Let me ask, though, because one of the problems, again, with Europe was that by cutting Europe off from Russia, this has been the historical British approach—later inherited by the United States—because it would prevent a collection of states from possibly threatening the U.S. I've always suspected that a lot of this goes back to the Napoleonic continental system, which frightened the British. Yes. But it's worth noting, when assessing China, that the world isn't allying with China against the United States. There seems to be a very Cold War mentality at work, where you assume you belong to one bloc—either led by the U.S. or by China. But BRICS should be evidence number one: India would never join a Chinese-led alliance against the Americans.

#Chas Freeman

It doesn't make any sense. No, and we're entering a world in which middle-ranking powers have new freedom of maneuver. That's the nature of the multipolar system. And I know that the Chinese

don't propose to export their system or even their ideas. Their ideology is idiosyncratic and really quite vacuous, and they don't argue that it applies to anyone else. They seem to be convinced that, as their great philosopher Mencius argued, the way to exercise influence abroad is to set a good example so that people want to come and learn from you, see how you did what you did, and see if they can do the same thing.

So we're not talking about a messianic vision like the ones the United States and the Soviet Union both pursued. I mean, the Soviet Union wanted to make the world safe for communism and export it everywhere it could—Marxism-Leninism in its own version. The United States had a vision of liberal democracy, which, actually, we've now pretty much abandoned, but that was our calling card. And, you know, one of the more remarkable things about what's going on today is that the United States is treating Venezuela exactly as Russia treated Ukraine, and doesn't seem to see the parallel. At least the Russians weren't killing civilians on the grounds that they were drug traffickers, with airstrikes on the plains of central Ukraine.

And basically, I think what we've seen is Israel pioneer the abandonment of the post–World War II rules—the United Nations Charter and the international law, the Geneva Conventions that underpinned it—and also show no respect for the sovereignty of its neighbors. So it's also violating the Westphalian order. And for a long time, it got away with it. People didn't endorse it, but they put up with it. But now we're endorsing it. We're actually following their example. Quite remarkable. It is a return to the law of the jungle that I certainly wouldn't have predicted. I thought I had the typical transatlantic vision of continuous progress and didn't understand that there could be regression as well, which there is now.

#Glenn

It's interesting, the possibility that China might go down the same road, because if you compare it, as you suggested, with the United States, the U.S. also had this position that it would be an example to be emulated—its form of government and its freedoms. I'm not sure if you'd put it that Woodrow Wilson was the one who shifted things, as he wanted to make the world safe for democracy, moving the U.S. from being a passive role model to taking on this active, even missionary, role of remaking the world. But given that China is not leading an anti-American bloc, but rather an anti-hegemonic bloc—which is very different—this also suggests there would be different approaches to dealing with it.

If the United States is concerned about the concentration of power in China within the international system, then it seems like the best strategy the U.S. could pursue is essentially to do nothing and let an equilibrium assert itself. Because, for example, when you tell India it shouldn't trade with Iran, well, now Iran will depend excessively on China. When you sanction India and tell them they can't trade with the Russians, now India has to turn to China. It's the same thing we did with the Europeans—cut them off from the Russians, and Russia leans heavily into China. It doesn't seem to make much sense. You were the ambassador to Saudi Arabia. When you hear the Saudis talk, their

diplomats don’t want to join a Chinese alliance. They’re a middle-sized or small country, and they’d like to diversify their ties so they have greater autonomy.

#Chas Freeman

This gets to, again, the multinodal nature of the world that’s emerging. People will align with China economically, but not entirely. They won’t necessarily follow economic alignment with political alignment. And China doesn’t offer the military protection services that the United States did. Of course, now many countries aren’t concerned about whether the Americans will protect them—they’re concerned about the United States as a predatory power that might seize their resources. Ask the Danes about Greenland. But I don’t think... I think we’re entering a world in which economic alignment doesn’t necessarily coincide with political alignment or membership in a bloc.

What everybody is united about are two things—the Chinese and everybody else. Let’s try to restore the world of the Pax Americana, but without the Americans. We liked the World Trade Organization. We liked international law as a predictable regulator of international behavior. We liked the UN Charter. You know, the postwar order that the Americans sponsored and helped to create was one in which we prospered. I mean, they’re all aware that their prosperity rested on their embrace of capitalism as pioneered by the United States and other powerful capitalist countries. They’re not challenging that. They want the new world order they hope will come into being to be very much like the old world order, but without the American hegemon.

And so you see efforts to restore the WTO. Where they can’t restore it, they try to invent regional versions of it. They want a rule-bound order, but one founded on consensus rather than on the dictation of the United States or the G7. And in this context, I go back to Europe’s difficulty adjusting to the new world. One of the things Europe can’t seem to adjust to is that the West is no longer leading the world. People don’t look to the West for leadership for multiple reasons, including its handling of the Ukraine crisis and its behavior toward Iran, toward Israel and Palestine, toward Syria. You know, Middle Eastern or West Asian issues have acted to discredit the West as an international leader.

And so, we’re not adjusting to this. People still imagine—rather like the famous King Canute commanding the tide—you know, sycophants or tired politicians are telling the West, “You can still command the international tides.” But we can’t. So we’re going to have to rediscover diplomacy, which means hard work—trying to persuade other people to do things your way because it’s in their interest. But we’re not there. And the most egregious example of this is, in fact, the refusal of the Europeans to even have a dialogue with the Russians. But they need one. You can’t solve problems that are political in nature—because ultimately they are—without talking to people.

#Glenn

This is a weird thing in Europe, though. It's as if the leadership here believes that if they do enough moral posturing, the world will recognize that they deserve hegemony or something like that. You even had the prime minister of Finland making this point to, I think, diplomats from China or Japan. I can't—well, anyway, he was saying, "We don't want a multipolar world. It's too much competition and struggle. We should just have the hegemon." It's like I say, hoping to control the tides. It just doesn't work.

#Chas Freeman

This is magical thinking.

#Glenn

Yeah, but that is Europe now. If they just make enough references to values and declarations, then they hope—well, I think there's an obsession with speech acts, the idea that if you just say something, you can socially construct the notion that our dominance will be legitimate and the world will somehow abide by it. There's a lot of self-delusion built into that, though.

#Chas Freeman

I hate to say it, but this is very reminiscent of the Arab world, which was justly accused of substituting rhetoric for action—and still does. It's a mark of a civilization that is, if not in decline, at least not invigorating itself. So, well, this is all far too depressing, Glenn.

#Glenn

Well, I was going to have a last question, but that might not be any less depressing. I just have one more comment on creating this rules-based order without a hegemon. It's concerning to me, though, because I'm very optimistic about having this multipolar, multinodal world. But at the same time, I recognize that the only times we developed very open international economic systems were under the British hegemon in the 19th century and the American one in the 20th. So it's going to be uncharted waters. This hasn't been done before. I'm not necessarily pessimistic, but I do recognize that some of the incentive systems that existed under a hegemon don't necessarily exist now.

But my last question was about what you think happens within America as a result of this power shift. I've always made the point that American nationalism was unique in some ways because it was more optimistic—it only went from strength to strength. In Europe, the nastier forms of nationalism tend to look back and ask, "When was our greatness, and who took it away from us?" And that creates, or can create, this bitter, vengeful desire to bring back the good old days. So how do you see it now, with the U.S. seemingly, for the first time, taking a significant step down? How does this affect strategy, ideology, structural governance, democracy?

#Chas Freeman

That's a very long question, but, uh, it's a very complex one indeed. There's an argument that the United States is moving toward disunity—that is, there are multiple subcultures in the country. I'm speaking to you from Rhode Island, which is in New England, and values in New England are very different from those in the Deep South, where there's a history of authoritarian government on racial grounds. Segregation was an authoritarian system—not as extreme as apartheid, but clearly non-democratic. And values in the Deep South are quite different from those in the mountain states or in the north-central states.

What our current government is doing is dividing people terribly. There's real concern that we might have another move to disunite the United States, as we did over the issue of slavery in 1860. I don't know what happens domestically. I do think there's growing reason to believe that President Trump may not complete this term in good health. He appears to be suffering from various ailments, including some measure of dementia. So we have to consider the possibility that J.D. Vance will become president—and many people would find that quite a frightening thought.

But, you know, perhaps others would welcome it. Anyway, I think the United States is in the middle of multiple transitions. And finally, on foreign policy—to go back to what you were saying earlier—perhaps we are pulling back to the Western Hemisphere as a response to the complexities of Eurasia, both in its western extreme and its eastern extreme. As I said at Busan, President Trump behaved as though he recognized that we couldn't out-compete China and we couldn't win a war with it. He seems to believe that Europeans should take care of their own affairs and that we shouldn't be asked to do so.

And he has an affinity with the Russians, which is quite mysterious in its origins, because I don't think he knows very much about them. And there's still no Trump Tower in Moscow, as far as I know. So maybe we are, in fact—in addition to cutting off our nose to spite our face in many instances—perhaps we are withdrawing from the hegemonic role and thereby challenging Europeans and Asians to manage their own affairs, with a much diminished American role in effect. So I think perhaps our incapacitation domestically is leading to our incapacitation abroad. Cheery thought, I suppose.

#Glenn

We have a tendency to end on the most optimistic note. Also, our 30-minute talk almost turned into an hour, so I've already stolen a little time.

#Chas Freeman

I apologize, but it's very stimulating to have these conversations with you.

#Glenn

Likewise. And yeah, as always, thank you so much for taking the time.

#Chas Freeman

Very much my pleasure. Have a pleasant evening.