US Naval Seizures In The Caribbean Are Only The Beginning

We are back with Ambassador Chas Freeman, a former US Assistant Secretary of Defense and as U. S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia who will give us an update in his take of what is currently going on in world affairs. Links: Neutrality Studies substack: https://pascallottaz.substack.com Goods Store: https://neutralitystudies-shop.fourthwall.com Timestamps: 00:00:00 US Seizure of Venezuelan Tanker & International Law 00:03:12 Warfare on the High Seas & Breakdown of Norms 00:12:40 US Strategy in Europe & The Decline of Diplomacy 00:24:50 India, Russia, and "Political Theater" in Peace Deals 00:30:25 Japan-China Tensions: The "Existential Threat" Comment 00:40:40 Historical Memory & War Guilt in Asia 00:47:23 US Involvement in Japan-China Disputes 00:49:35 A "Minimum Viable Peace" for Taiwan 01:00:00 Conclusion

#Pascal

Hello, everybody. We are back with Ambassador Chas Freeman, a former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense and U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, who will give us an update on his take on what is currently going on in world affairs. Ambassador Freeman, welcome back.

#Chas Freeman

Thank you, Pascal. Good to be with you.

#Pascal

Let's start with some very recent news — at least as we're speaking today, on my December 12th and your December 11th. The United States just seized an oil tanker off the coast of Venezuela. To me, this is quite an escalation from where we were before, both in terms of international relations and in what's going on with Venezuela. How do you interpret this act?

#Chas Freeman

Rather typically for our times, the American media are focused entirely on the pragmatic aspect of this — that it is an escalation of pressure against Nicolás Maduro and the government of Venezuela. But others, including myself, look at it with some dismay because it is essentially an act of piracy. It' s the seizure of a ship for no reason. There's a weak legal justification given for this — that the ship has allegedly been involved in transporting oil to Lebanon from Iran, with Hezbollah supposedly involved, and so forth — and that this therefore puts it under American sanctions. But American sanctions are unilateral; they have no standing under international law. They do not excuse the

seizure of the ship, and they certainly do not excuse the confiscation of the cargo, which President Trump has indicated is the likely result.

So this is an escalation against Venezuela. It is also an act that is utterly illegal under international law. And it's a reminder, if we needed one at this point in history, that the United Nations was founded on the assumption that the five permanent members and other members of the Security Council would enforce the Charter and international law — not exempt client states from the application of the law, and not ignore international law with respect to their own actions. Of course, I suppose the genius of this was mainly directed at preventing warfare among the permanent members of the Security Council and those they had defeated in World War II — Germany and Japan. But still, it's been proven in recent years that there's absolutely no attention whatsoever, by the United States in particular, to the particulars of international law, which we simply ignore and violate at will.

#Pascal

Can we maybe also talk about the larger context — that shipping in general is now obviously a target of warfare? I mean, this ship was first and foremost seized in international waters, which, even as a unilateral act, actually cannot be done, at least not under the current rules. There used to be a concept before the 19th century of prize courts and so on, where states would just seize each other's ships, but that was already considered an act of war. And now we're seeing that other oil tankers of the so-called shadow fleet — which isn't really a thing, it's just non-British-insured ships, tankers that transport oil from and to Russia — are being attacked by Ukrainian drones on the high seas. I mean, this is all highly problematic, since these are essentially international waters that must be open to anyone and everyone.

#Chas Freeman

Well, this is exactly why I mentioned the UN Charter and international law — because the UN Charter and international law have essentially been shredded in many respects. They're invoked when someone wants to put forward legal arguments in particular circumstances. For example, the United States, even though it hasn't ratified the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, repeatedly cites it in the context of the South China Sea. That's because it can find clauses that seem to support U.S. arguments against Chinese or other countries' behavior. Of course, we behave selectively.

Vietnam does exactly the same things China does, but we never mention that. We only criticize China. I might add that you're in Japan, and there's an island—or actually a bunch of rocks—called Okinotorishima, way out in the middle of nowhere. Japan cites that, because it's got a structure on it that's inhabited, as the basis for an exclusive economic zone over a huge area of the Pacific. And this is, of course, entirely inconsistent with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. But everybody cherry-picks the law to justify whatever it is they want to prove.

Actually, the only action against ships that I've seen recently that's consistent with international law is the Yemeni attacks on vessels bound for Israel. They carry them out under the authority of the Genocide Convention, which places a positive duty on all countries to do what they can to prevent genocide. But of course, the United States actually spent a billion dollars trying to bring Yemen to heel in order to protect Israel and prevent those attacks on shipping. It didn't work. And now, as you indicated, we're seeing attacks on shipping in more and more contexts, and the whole fabric of law that once protected this kind of interaction between states has been dispensed with.

#Pascal

Is this, in your view, also an indicator of the shift in power and escalation? You know, in a stable system, acts like these that heavily infringe upon norms—especially the law of the sea—are just less likely. We haven't seen those for the last 30 or so years. I mean, the example you gave with Japan and Takeshima and others is, in a sense, classic, because the Philippines has similar questions to China's—whether islands generate an exclusive economic zone, while rocks and features don't. So this is still within the bounds of what we're used to when countries argue their cases. But seizing ships and blowing them up on the high seas, for Ukraine and so on—that's new now, isn't it? Or at least new for the last 30 or 40 years.

#Chas Freeman

Yes. We're in a period of the breakdown of global norms. It's interesting you mentioned that—the various claims in the South China Sea and so forth. Of course, there was a UN Convention on the Law of the Sea arbitral tribunal, which considered the question—precisely, only the question—of whether islands that are barely inhabitable or only artificially inhabitable could generate an economic zone, as opposed to a territorial sea, which they can do. And, of course, the tribunal had no authority to rule on issues of sovereignty, but its finding has been distorted to suggest that China has no valid claim to sovereignty. Maybe it doesn't, but the arbitral tribunal didn't address that question.

And so we have, you know, as I mentioned, Okinotorishima is also an atoll—like the U.S. Johnson Atoll—which the United States claims generates an EEZ when it doesn't. I mean, there's nobody there. It's not inhabited; it's not inhabitable, except by entirely artificial means. So we have a breakdown here of law, where law is simply used as a tool of polemics and not heeded as guidance for action. I want to make a point that the epitome of this is really the latest U.S. National Security Strategy—which, of course, isn't a strategy. It's a collection of contradictory statements and praise of President Trump for his peacemaking efforts and other things.

But it basically asserts a right of the United States, under a Trump corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, to ignore the sovereignty of every country in the Western Hemisphere while demanding that every other country respect American sovereignty. And we're seeing this play out with the boat murders off Venezuela, where the United States Navy is killing people on the basis of very flimsy suspicions—

no evidence produced, no due process. In any event, the killing of people carrying drugs is not justified under international law. The normal procedure, in our own manuals as well as in international conventions, is that if you suspect contraband is being transported, you board the vessel and search it.

And if it is contraband, you can confiscate it, and you can bring legal charges against those transporting it. But you can't just kill them—especially not after you've already killed most of them. Two of them were hanging on to debris, having survived the first attack for 45 minutes. There's a positive duty under international law in those circumstances to aid the survivors, not to murder them. This was actually applied in a famous case where a U-boat captain failed to rescue survivors—in World War II, a German U-boat captain. So I think we're seeing a complete breakdown of the fabric of international order that we've been accustomed to.

#Pascal

Yeah, and I mean, I'm very glad you're pointing this out. Even if all the accusations the United States leveled against these civilians in the Caribbean were true—even if all of it was true—the murder of these people would still be illegal under international law, and actually even under U.S. domestic law. And especially then, killing the survivors—I mean, it's horrendous. It's surprising to me that the U.S. media still labels this as "suspected breaches of the law," like somebody shooting someone in the street in the head and then reporting a "suspected murder."

#Chas Freeman

No, I mean, I think the press is behaving in a thoroughly, disgustingly irresponsible fashion. They're just acting as scribes for the government rather than as independent reporters.

#Pascal

May I ask about these national security strategies? On the one hand, it's interesting because they also contain elements that are actually de-escalatory, especially with regard to Russia and China. On the other hand, at the very same time, we see that Congress is now working on a bill that would make it impossible for the U.S. to reduce its troop size in Europe and would, by law, require the U.S. president not to give up the lead—the military leadership of NATO. What's the name? SACEUR, the Supreme Allied Commander in NATO, right? While, of course, the U.S. demands 5%—I mean, 5% of GDP—that NATO members should come up with. So, overall, there's no real change in U.S. policy toward Europe, is there?

#Chas Freeman

What has happened is that the Trump administration, in this so-called strategy, has transformed European allies into auxiliaries in the struggle against China. That is to say, there's no need for the

United States to consider the interests of Europeans or consult with them about anything, but it is the duty of Europeans to back the United States against China—and also to follow our lead in normalizing relations with Russia, which I think is a positive thing. But Europeans don't seem inclined at all to follow that path. So there are additional features of this that are quite extraordinary.

On the one hand, the United States, by reasserting the Monroe Doctrine, claims an exemption from any intervention by Europeans in the Western Hemisphere or any influence on American politics. But at the same time, it asserts the right to interfere in European politics to promote the interests of right-wing populist forces like the Alternative für Deutschland. I don't have anything against the Alternative für Deutschland. I don't agree with its xenophobic, anti-immigration stance, but it actually has some sensible positions on German relations with Russia and the Ukraine war, which, you know, are not warmongering. You know, it's interesting to me that Germans are so afraid of their historical shadow that they're apparently unable to reason. They have to go along with the crowd in Europe.

And the crowd, even though Britain has left the EU, appears to be mainly led from London, with Paris occasionally trying to insert itself into the dialogue—and not really succeeding. But, you know, anyway, I mean, I think Europe is frankly a mess, with very weak leadership and policies that are counterproductive, debilitating rather than reinvigorating. And I know, as you know, I think we've discussed before, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute—an institute that tracks 64 areas of science and technology to determine which countries are in the lead—now says China is ahead in 57 categories, South Korea in two, and the United States in five. And the momentum is with China. Europe is not on that list.

You know, that is really extraordinary, given that Francis Bacon and others were the founders of the modern scientific method, and that Germany, particularly before the 1930s, was the undisputed leader in science and technology worldwide. Your own country, Switzerland, has a distinguished record of innovation, and yet Europe is not doing what's required to remain competitive—quite the opposite. It's cutting itself off from Russian resources, which are essential to its competitiveness. It didn't blow up Nord Stream 2; I think the Americans did. But nonetheless, there wasn't any protest from Europe about that, not even from Germany. I mean, the chancellor went to Washington and stood silent while Biden extolled the virtues of losing Russian gas for Germany.

#Pascal

And, you know, I thought that was the height of humiliation—when a German chancellor stands next to an American president and is basically told, "We'll blow up that infrastructure at will." But then came the Europeans, all of them rushing to Washington to sit in front of the U.S. president's desk and have themselves photographed. I think only Meloni realized she was being humiliated. The others seemed happy to sit at the boss's desk. It's like Europe, at this point, deserves humiliation because it invites it. So I just wonder how long it'll take before they realize it.

#Chas Freeman

Europe puts forward no ideas. It just asks for more of the same. It's in favor of continuing the war in Ukraine, not addressing the question of how to help Ukrainians survive and rebuild in a way that serves their national interests. It doesn't propose any dialogue. In fact, it carries out no dialogue with Russia at all. It leaves that to the cronies—the business cronies and the son-in-law of Donald Trump. I noticed, interestingly, that Vladimir Putin, after the last five-hour session with Witkoff and Kushner, said, "You know, I want to keep this channel going because I want a channel to Donald Trump. But this issue of peace in Ukraine is only going to be solved by Sergei Lavrov and professional diplomats." That was, you know, sort of a statement—like, "I enjoy talking to Witkoff and Kushner, but in the end, that's not going to produce anything."

#Pascal

I mean, Vladimir Putin also stated that he would actually prefer to solve this on the battlefield, but if it can be solved at the negotiating table, then he would certainly do so. But the process, obviously, is not one that leads toward what the Russians would expect—which is, you know, a serious, working-group-by-working-group kind of process. I mean, you as a diplomat, can you maybe tell us what it would take? How many people would be involved, and how many issues would these groups have to go through? I mean, it would be huge, wouldn't it, if you actually tried to do it seriously?

#Chas Freeman

Well, it would be extremely complicated because there are multiple interests that have to be brought into accord with whatever solution you're proposing. You have to deal with the issue of Ukraine as a buffer and a bridge between the Russian part of Europe and the rest of Europe. You have to address Russian security concerns as well as Western European security concerns. You also have to deal with the issue of minority rights in Ukraine, which is what caused the start of the civil strife and eventually led to the invasion—I mean, after the 2014 coup, the actions by the Rada to make the use of Russian illegal for official purposes, to burn Russian books, and so forth. The whole Banderite agenda in Ukraine produced a rebellion in eastern Ukraine, and that gradually drew the Russians in and eventually led to the confrontation at the end of 2021 and the Russian ultimatum: negotiate with us, or we'll have to use force.

And they were told, no, there would be no negotiation. So they did use force. And, you know, that may be, again, illegal. But it's yet another example of the failure of both diplomacy and legality in that instance, since the West had nothing to offer. And still, you know, I would say a very sad thing has happened in the United States, and that is the essential destruction of our foreign diplomatic service and its competence. So this is all the more reason for Europeans to take their own future into their own hands. And yet I don't see any leader in Europe. I don't see any competent diplomacy

coming from Europe on a question that should be of vital interest to everyone—not just the Russians, who continue to demand negotiations and to say, as you said, if there are no negotiations, we'll just settle this on the battlefield. Which they will.

#Pascal

And, you know, Europe too. I mean, the diplomats are all gone. The chief diplomat of the European Union—the political head of that section—is Kaja Kallas, and that's a very sad thing. And the United States too. I have nothing but the greatest respect for the diplomats of the State Department, who produced great diplomats like yourself, like Ambassador Jack Matlock, and so many others. I mean, Ambassador Grew in Japan before the Second World War—these were brilliant thinkers in international relations who deeply understood what they were dealing with. So where did that go? In the United States, you just said the service has been taken apart. What happened to the State Department?

#Chas Freeman

Well, we're in an age in which—and the so-called national security strategy really reflects this—political theater has replaced strategic reasoning. So we have a constant stream of peace agreements that aren't really peace agreements, signed with great flourishes. You know, Donald Trump claims he's made peace between India and Pakistan—which I can't say I've seen much evidence of—between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, between Thailand and Cambodia, which are back to bombing each other, between Armenia and Azerbaijan, between Israel and the Palestinians. Where's the peace? There are ceasefires that paper over the causes of wars but don't deal with them, and they're neither acceptable nor durable to the parties. So what is all this? It's political theater. It's not a serious diplomatic effort. There is no Bismarck out there at the moment.

#Pascal

I mean, it's even worse. I talked the day before yesterday with Anuradha Chenoy from Jawaharlal Nehru University, and she said, look, it's an insult to India when the United States says it brokered peace, because India's line is that the dispute with Pakistan is bilateral and they will deal with it bilaterally. They do not want a third party in there. So the U.S. president claiming that is actually both an insult and an injury. So it's highly competitive.

#Chas Freeman

I think the injury to Indian egos is all the greater because Pakistan has successfully flattered and appeased Donald Trump and rebuilt a relationship with the United States, which had been very bad, into something close. Meanwhile, of course, the crackpot economic theories of the White House have resulted in tariffs on India that are crippling trade. And now we're trying to cut off Russian oil

exports everywhere, including to India. We've just seen Vladimir Putin in Delhi, embracing or being embraced by Narendra Modi, which is the answer to this. I mean, I'd say India, in addition to being humiliated by the spurious claim that Donald Trump created peace between them and the Pakistanis, is also watching Islamabad outdo them in its courtship of Washington.

It also has another problem, and that was very much in the background during Putin's visit to Delhi. U.S. policy has pushed China and Russia together. Now, in the past, during the Soviet era, India could count on Soviet support in balancing against China. Can it do so now? You know, Russia has a big stake in not offending the Chinese. And I think India's position as a swing state, geopolitically, has been compromised. When you see Modi and Putin embracing each other, it's a case of their protesting too much about the affection they have for each other and the strength of the relationship between the two countries. And I know that the trade relationship between India and Russia is significant.

Greatly unbalanced. There's no Russian investment going into India, which is what you'd normally expect when a huge trade surplus in your favor is happening. It's how the United States has dealt with China, or India, or in an earlier era Japan, or Taiwan, or any of the ASEAN countries. When you have a trade surplus, you take the money and invest it in the other party, and you balance the trade. Well, there's almost $100 billion in Russian exports to India, as I recall, and maybe $5 billion in Indian exports to Russia. And yet nothing is happening, despite all the brave talk. Anyway, I think India's swing position has been compromised by geopolitical developments, and it's not fully reflected in Indian policy.

#Pascal

That's true. Although one of the interesting things Anuradha shared with me is that trade between Russia and India is about 95% in local currency. The Russians now hold a lot of rupees, and these rupees can be used to buy goods or government bonds. So apparently, they're trying to figure out a way to make this bilateral trade somewhat more useful.

#Chas Freeman

Because the Russians have many more rupees than they know what to do with, and they don't want them. So now they're looking for some way to deploy those rupees—and that would be in India. Well, you know, the obvious way to do it would be to invest in India. But as I said, Russian companies don't seem to be at all interested in that. And I know from my own experience as the chair of an international business development company that it's not easy to do business in India. India has a very high level of protectionism in its policy, and it has a very bureaucratic system internally. It's also sometimes very politicized in its approach to foreign investors, who get into trouble for one reason or another. So, you know, if you want to have foreign investment, you've got to make yourself attractive—and India has not really succeeded to the extent it should.

#Pascal

Yeah, so it's definitely not smooth sailing. And I mean, the comparison between India and China just shows—they have comparable population sizes, but they're on completely different planes when it comes to the development of their local economies, right? Maybe let's use this to swing over to another theater that I'd really like to get your opinion on, because over the last month there's been this, in my view, very unfortunate spat—or conflict—between Japan and China.

It was kickstarted by Prime Minister Sanae Takeuchi, who made, in my view, a really, really dumb comment in the Japanese Diet—the Japanese Parliament—saying that if mainland China used its navy against Taiwan, she would consider that an existential threat to Japan. Thank you. And that would allow her to deploy the Self-Defense Forces. Now, this enraged China hugely. How do you interpret that, and what followed? Because China reacted much more strongly than I thought it would.

#Chas Freeman

Well, I think, first of all, Madam Takahichi made a mistake that a seasoned politician like her should not make—and that was responding to a hypothetical question. She shouldn't have done that. But in doing so, she revealed her real attitude, which is pretty much on the record. She's been very close to Taiwan and to the Taiwan independence forces. And of course, as I'm sure your listeners know, one of Japan's first acts in building its empire after the Meiji Restoration was the conquest of Taiwan.

From 1895 to 1945, Taiwan was part of Japan. After about 20 or 25 years of dealing with insurrections and rebellions, the Japanese Navy managed to carry out a very effective policy of assimilating the Taiwanese into Japan. Educated Taiwanese conducted their debates in Japanese, not in the local dialect or in Mandarin. So what was the justification for Japan's reach for Taiwan? Well, in part, it was an adjunct to the invasion of Korea—the displacement of Chinese suzerainty there. But that didn't take full effect until 1905, ten years after Japan took Taiwan. Basically, Japan had earlier been invaded by the Dutch from Taiwan; the treaty ports that the Dutch imposed on Japan for a while were imposed from there.

And Japan, when it took Taiwan, saw it, in its own words, as an unsinkable aircraft carrier. That phrase was Japanese originally, not American. And it used Taiwan for that purpose. When it conducted its invasions of the Philippines, Hong Kong, and Indochina, it launched them from Taiwan. So the Japanese strategic view of Taiwan—which Douglas MacArthur, when he was the effective viceroy in the Japanese army barracks in Tokyo after World War II, accepted—was that Taiwan is strategically very important to Japan. It can be used by Japan against others, but it can also be used by others against Japan. And so all of this is deep in Japanese strategic reasoning, and the Chinese are well aware of it.

And of course, Taiwan is still separated from the rest of China, and that is a humiliation to Chinese nationalism. Both revolutions—the 1911 revolution and the 1949 revolution—aimed to eliminate foreign military presence, foreign spheres of influence, and warlords, meaning independent forces who did not accept central government authority from Chinese territory. But in Taiwan, there is still not only a foreign sphere of influence, but American troops, now in violation of our agreements with China. So this is a matter of great sensitivity, particularly as China comes, in my view, toward a decision to resolve the Taiwan issue and make Taiwan an offer that it cannot refuse.

That is what all the military demonstrations are about. I don't think the Chinese want a war over Taiwan, although they may be prepared to have one if necessary. But they want to be able to overawe Taiwan and, as Sun Tzu prescribed, win without fighting. So in this context—and this is also reflected in internal legislation and in the diplomatic record in Tokyo—along comes Takahuchi and basically says Taiwan is part of Japan's defensive perimeter. An attack on Taiwan would justify the deployment of Japanese forces because it would affect Japan's survival.

That wording is used in earlier Japanese policy, and the reinterpretation of Article 9—meaning the pacifist element of the Japanese constitution—rests on the gradual expansion of what is considered acceptable in terms of collective defense. And collective defense for Japan means joining the United States. That, in turn, means joining the United States in an intervention to save Taiwan from reincorporation into the rest of China. So all this is very alarming to the Chinese. It's strategically significant, and the timing could hardly be worse, because the net effect of Prime Minister Takahuchi' s remarks is to embolden people in Taiwan to avoid negotiations with the mainland and to count on the backing of Tokyo as well as Washington if the Chinese decide they have to use force.

So this undercuts the entire Chinese strategy for a peaceful settlement, and that's why you're getting the reaction you're seeing. On the other hand, I'd say the Chinese demand that Prime Minister Takahuchi repudiate her own words is politically impossible for her to do. So what we're basically seeing from China is a demand to Japan that they get rid of Prime Minister Takahuchi—that she be displaced as prime minister—which would allow a fresh start. And that's very, very difficult, but not impossible, given the fragility of her coalition in the Diet.

#Pascal

She has an extremely weak position, even though she's currently popular with the public, partly because she's the first female prime minister. But for Japan, it's even worse, because, you know, before her comment there was no clear decision—no "we would" or "we wouldn't." Prime Minister Abe handled that very strategically, and now you'll never be able to go back to that.

#Chas Freeman

No, that's true. Well, this is, of course, similar in a way—parallel to the four comments by Joe Biden that were in violation of the Taiwan Relations Act, which makes no commitment to defend Taiwan but does make a commitment to help Taiwan defend itself, pending reunification if that's the result of negotiations across the strait. This is strategic ambiguity. Prime Minister Takahuchi just destroyed the strategic ambiguity with which Japan had finessed this issue, and she put it right back in the center. This is, of course, far more consequential than the Ishihara annexation of the Senkaku by the city of Tokyo—the nationalization of the Senkaku Islands—which had been handled, you know, as "let's not deal with this."

Both sides had agreed, and then suddenly, under the Hashimoto administration, we got away from finessing it. Now each side is obliged to demonstrate that it has a valid claim to this worthless set of rocks—five rocks in the middle of nowhere—with a French name that got translated into Japanese, "the pinnacles," I guess. Anyway, you know, Japan has a problem with China, with Korea, and to some extent with others in Pacific Asia, because it has offered apologies without convincing remorse.

#Pascal

Yeah. You know, what I regret the most here is that Japan, on the one hand, did a very good thing. It said, "Never ever again war," right? And it wrote that into the Constitution. There's a good paper showing this wasn't just an American addition, but that the Japanese had a hand in it as well.

#Chas Freeman

Let us remember, however, that the constitution was drafted by Americans, and that the same people—the same families—who ran Japan in the era of militarism are now running Japan.

#Pascal

True, true. I'll send you an interesting article that shows how Japanese left-wing pacifists were involved in drafting Article 9. But, beside the point, I wanted to say that this idea of "never again war" is actually very, very strong among the population. But it also means that everything that happened in the Second World War—all the suffering—is projected onto the war itself. Even left-wing Japanese today, well-meaning ones, don't really understand why the Chinese are still so bitter about it. Because war is war, right? Everybody dies. People died in Hiroshima, people died in Nanking. War is war. And that's...

#Chas Freeman

That's something that... that's the point I'm making, for a variety of reasons that are very complex, but which I think, in part, have their roots in the Confucian tradition of Japan. You cannot condemn your ancestors as war criminals. You just can't do that. And so we've had a whole series of textbook

issues and debates—how do you characterize what happened? A great deal of what has been written is exoneratory, not accepting of culpability. And this is read by Koreans and Chinese, who deeply resent it. I can remember a textbook controversy when I was chargé in Beijing, and I had a very good friend in the Foreign Ministry who invited me to a dinner at the Tingli Guan, which is the Pavilion for Listening to Orioles out at the Summer Palace. And I was saying to him, I was arguing, I said, you know, really, you've got to find a way to patch this up.

I mean, Japan is far too important a country for you to be emotionally hostile toward it, the way those demonstrations were going on and so forth. And he was a very calm person—I never saw him lose his temper, except this time. He turned purple in the face and said, "Five million dead, and you want me to forget that? My relatives died. You want me to forget that?" And I realized, you know, we don't have the kind of obsessive memory among Chinese or Koreans, for that matter, that one finds among European Jews over the Holocaust. But the feelings, the trauma, are just as great. And Japan has been unable to deal with this. I have many Japanese friends—I understand their difficulties—but I think Japanese politics has been unable to come to grips with the legacy of empire building.

#Pascal

And it's also a consequence of, you know, the necessity of transforming the former arch-enemy, the United States, into the main ally. I mean, somehow you have to rationalize that, right? And the way to do it is to say, like, war itself is the problem. But that exonerates you from what happened, from what you did before. And this is a huge issue. And I...

#Chas Freeman

I wonder what can be done to patch things up between China and Japan, because it's... Well, I think one thing, Pascal, that's missing is what we had in the past. I'm talking about the era when I was in Beijing as chargé, and before that, in the '70s and '80s. There were Japanese elders and Chinese elders who weren't officials, but former officials—perhaps prominent individuals—who conducted off-camera dialogues and had mutual confidence. I mean, they understood each other and were able to work out solutions to problems.

I mean, of course, they didn't solve the problem. They patched it. They put Band-Aids on the problem rather than staunching the wounds. But they kept the relationship from going off the tracks—which it basically has now. I mean, at the moment, there's no obvious off-ramp except the resignation of Prime Minister Takeuchi. You know, the Prime Minister—so, Takeuchi, yeah, Takeuchi. So I think this is a very bad situation because, among other things, if indeed that's the only solution, the Japanese will be humiliated by it. And humiliating the Japanese is not a good idea.

#Pascal

No, um, but some people are saying that the Americans might have had a hand in this—like Donald Trump—since she met Donald Trump only, like, two weeks before. What? Before what? She said— I don't believe so. I believe this was her slip of the tongue, basically. But do you think the U.S. is in any way, shape, or form involved in this dispute?

#Chas Freeman

No, I think the U.S. has been holding back and basically counseling both sides, as I tried to do in the incident at the Tingli Guan that I mentioned—you know, to tone things down and find a solution. And this is particularly the case because part of the Trump administration's dismantling of the world order, in the National Security Strategy document we were discussing earlier, involves normalizing relations with Russia in the European theater and, in the Asian theater, treating China as an economic competitor rather than in military terms. So the U.S. was quite ambivalent on the Taiwan issue under the Trump administration.

And I note that President Trump, whose vanity is immense, wants to be feted in Beijing in April, and that means nothing's going to happen to offend China that he has any control over. Of course, he doesn't have full control over his own administration, but nothing's going to happen prior to April to produce a confrontation between the United States and China. So, in this context, I think many Japanese are uncomfortable with the lack of strong backing from the United States. But I think you can understand why that is the case.

#Pascal

Yes, yes, of course. Japan is in a very bad situation now, of its own making. But maybe we can use the last five minutes to go back to the issue of Taiwan. I wrote a paper some months—well, about a year ago—about, you know, that in order for Taiwan and China, or for the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China, to have a common future that doesn't end in war, what you need is not necessarily a solution, but a minimum that both parties wouldn't be able to say no to. What do you think is the minimum requirement for the People's Republic of China—for the mainland—to continue with a policy of non-lethal force against the island?

#Chas Freeman

Yeah, well, actually, we had such a formula on both sides. Both agreed that there was only one China, although they had different interpretations of what that meant. But that was destroyed by the Minxinjiang—the Democratic Progressive Party in Taiwan, the DPP. And Lai Ching-te, who's the current leader in Taiwan, doesn't appear to have any sense of the importance of that for maintaining peace. The basic point of that was that it gave the mainland a reason to… to kick the can down the road. In other words, if you think reunification is the right thing and it's inevitable, and both sides agree that there's only one China, but they disagree about some details, then you can make all kinds of compromises.

So in the Ma Ying-jeou era, when he was the leader in Taiwan, he actually met in Singapore with Xi Jinping. But there were other things being discussed that didn't come to fruition. For example, they were talking offline about things like, well, Taipei, you represent China, because nobody recognizes Taiwan as a country. They recognize Taipei as the government of China, if they recognize it at all. So you have representation in Guatemala, for example. Why don't we do a deal where you have representation and provide consular services to all Chinese people in Taiwan and on the mainland, and we'll do the same for you in Brazil, where we have relations.

You know, they were talking about this kind of thing. It was very pragmatic. Unfortunately, the independence movements in Taiwan—which represent identity politics, a very familiar thing in the modern age—overwhelmed those talks and those understandings. So now we have a tradition started by Lee Teng-hui, who's gone now but was very much in favor of independence. And by the way, he thought he was Japanese until he was 20. Japanese people who spoke with him told me he spoke like a Japanese from the 1930s—very elegant, formal Japanese of a sort that isn't used today. His Mandarin was lousy.

I met with him many times, and, you know, he—he, uh, anyway—he was a Hakka. He spoke very good Hakka and very good Hokkien, the Taiwan dialect. Anyway, you know, he started this when he picked a moment in July of 1999 to go on Deutsche Welle. He chose that instrument very carefully to say there are two states, but that doesn't preclude their coming together in the future—something that Germans would understand because of East and West Germany reuniting. But this was seen, correctly, by people in Beijing as a declaration of independence: now there are two states.

So this is the root of the DPP thesis that eventually led them to repudiate the One China Doctrine, which had been the legal fiction, if you will, that facilitated political intercourse across the strait and gave Beijing a reason not to prepare to take Taiwan by force. So it's interesting—up until 1999, when Lee Teng-hui announced this two-state doctrine, China didn't build a single landing craft. They made no effort. Rhetorically, they were all about liberating Taiwan from the Kuomintang, but in fact, they did nothing. After that, they began the course of military modernization directed at Taiwan, which has now produced an overwhelming Chinese military advantage in the Taiwan Strait.

You know, if the U.S. and Japan go to war with China over Taiwan, we're going to be very badly damaged. So will the Chinese, but they have a capacity to rebuild that we don't. So, your question is a good one, but I don't know how we get back to this. I think the Chinese would be satisfied with an arrangement that made reunification the logical result of delay. But if the logical result of delay is increased commitments by Japan and the United States to maintain the separation of Taiwan from the mainland—which is what Takeuchi's statement appeared to mean—then I don't think we have a basis for continued peace.

#Pascal

What's the minimum viable product or project that wouldn't lead to force? I do hope they find it, because in a sense, that legal fiction you talked about is brilliant, isn't it? It's like both parties accept it for different reasons, and it maintains the peace even though it doesn't solve the problem. It's like in IT—when you have a bug, you either fix the bug or you do a workaround. You create a workaround that patches up the issue. It's like...

#Chas Freeman

Well, this is very Chinese. And I've often said, thinking of the Senkaku or Diaoyutai issue, that if the Japanese were Chinese, they'd figure out something to defuse the situation. If you remember, Jinmen and Mazu—Kinmen and Mazu—which are part of Fujian Province, the Chinese on either side of the Civil War fired at each other on alternate days. So Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, the Chinese Communists fired at the Kuomintang, and Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, the Kuomintang fired back. Everybody kept the fiction of a war alive, but nobody was killing anybody, you know. So, you know, the Chinese are very capable of coming up with creative solutions.

Here's the major obstacle, and this is why, again, Takeichi's comment is so damaging. The Chinese see Americans—and now the Japanese—fostering a reluctance to discuss any kind of arrangement across the strait. We like the status quo, which is that Taiwan is independent, anti-communist, and aligned with us. In the case of Taiwanese relations with Japan, many Taiwanese have very fond feelings for Japan, and vice versa. This is quite a distinction. And again, it goes back to the fact that the Japanese Navy, not the Kwantung Army, was running Taiwan. The Kwantung Army in Korea managed to create undying enmity, apparently, but in the case of Taiwan, the reaction was affectionate.

#Pascal

And it's also historical memory that just works in different ways. I mean, the Japanese also caused quite a lot of harm in Singapore, for instance, but Singaporean–Japanese relations are excellent.

#Chas Freeman

No, I mean, people do—you know, as someone said in the context of the war in Gaza—stuff happens. But, you know, that doesn't excuse it. I'd like to send you something I actually wrote on a long flight from Washington to Taipei, called *Same Strait, Different Dreams*, about the attitudes of people from the mainland, people on Taiwan, Japanese, and Americans—about what this situation is and how it came about. You might find it interesting. I'll see if I can dig out a copy of it. It was published, but I don't have a copy of the published version handy.

#Pascal

If you can send it to me, I'll also try to make it available for others who'd like to read it. I always ask people where they should go to find you. I mean, you, Ambassador Freeman—you have your own homepage where you collect all your writings as well. So I'll direct everyone there. Is there another place people should go to find your work?

#Chas Freeman

No, but I think on the issue of U.S.–China relations, the talk I gave at Brown University about a week ago is worth watching. There's a video of it—or you can read it. We haven't really talked about U.S.–China relations, but the effort to reduce tensions and deal with economic issues alone is a very perilous enterprise. It may not work. There are underlying security issues that are very serious, some of which we've been talking about. So I discussed these pretty bluntly, and I assume you've seen that.

#Pascal

Yes, I did, and also the text that you wrote. I'll direct people to it, and I'll also send out copies via Substack. Ambassador Chas Freeman, thank you so much for your time today.

#Chas Freeman

Have a great day, Pascal. You too.