

Age of Wars as Freedom of Navigation Ends

Ambassador Chas Freeman discusses the breakdown of the freedom of navigation around the world and the wars it may trigger. 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. We're joined today by Chas Freeman, a retired diplomat, ambassador, and former Assistant Secretary of Defense. Thank you, as always, for taking the time.

#Chas Freeman

Pleasure to be with you, even if I'm impersonating Santa Claus in a red shirt.

#Glenn

It's a good color. Well, in geoeconomics, it's often pointed out that it's predictable the decline of a hegemon can unravel an open international economic system and even unleash war, because a confident hegemon has an interest in maintaining trust in an open and peaceful trading system when it dominates. In contrast, a declining hegemon will likely weaponize its former dominant position to prevent the rise of rivals and may even use military force to hold on to its weakening position.

One of the areas where this can be observed is in freedom of navigation — those open maritime corridors where ships can sail for trade. They've been key to the open system of trade and peace for decades, but that system now seems to be shutting down. We have conflicts in the Caribbean, threats against the Panama Canal, and a blockade on Venezuela. We see attacks on civilian vessels in the Black Sea and efforts to make, I guess, the Black Sea a NATO lake. We're also seeing problems in the Arctic and East Asia. So again, there's no shortage of examples here. How are you reading this situation?

#Chas Freeman

Well, let me start by endorsing your comment on the loss of power by hegemons. We have an interesting coincidence. On the one hand, we have the United States retreating under pressure from Russia, its overcommitments abroad, and asserting rights of coercive power that it never did before. I'll come back to that in the context of the law of the sea. But on the other hand, we have a domestic collapse too. Hannah Arendt observed that when a powerful group loses its power and privilege, it turns to a strongman who then claims that the loss of power—by whoever the constituency is—was the product of an enemy, and singles out an enemy, in this case an internal one. That's the Carl Schmitt thesis in the United States.

So yesterday, or rather last night, we had what's been called the "Bah Humbug" speech by Donald Trump — a Christmas message in which he made all sorts of outlandish and unsubstantiated assertions, promising that everything would be wonderful in a few days or weeks. These were the same empty promises he's made before, and he was in denial about reality, both internally and externally. So we have this coincidence of domestic and international contraction — by the leader of the United States and by the United States as leader. In the case of the law of the sea and freedom of navigation, this has been problematic for quite a while.

The phrase "freedom of navigation" has been misapplied in the so-called freedom of navigation operations by the United States Navy—sometimes joined by the British and other European navies—against countries that assert rights to control adjacent seas that are regarded as improper or excessive. In the South China Sea, for example, the issue is described as one of freedom of navigation, when in fact the greatest stake in that freedom belongs to China, which is somehow accused of violating it. About two-thirds of the ship traffic in the South China Sea—roughly one-third of the world's total maritime trade—is actually Chinese. It's bound to or from China, whether in Chinese vessels or foreign ones.

But there's no country with a greater stake in freedom of navigation in the South China Sea than China. So what's at issue there is really a technical matter — that there are ancient claims, or in some cases more recent ones, among the various littoral states in the South China Sea. That is to say, China has ancient claims, restated in terms of Western legal traditions in the 1930s and again in 1948 by a Chinese survey under the Kuomintang government in Nanjing, which drew — I think it was an eleven-point line — enclosing claims to rocks, reefs, and other features in the South China Sea on behalf of China. That was later reduced to a nine-dash line when China yielded one island group to Vietnam in the Gulf of Tonkin.

But the issue is that the Chinese claims to the sandcastles they've built on top of rocks in the region are enclosed by straight baselines rather than baselines that follow the contiguous shoreline. So we consider that improper under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Ironically, of course, China is a signatory and did ratify the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. The United States, although it

played a major role in devising the treaty, has not ratified it, and yet we rely on it for various things. One of the more ludicrous examples, in the case of the South China Sea, was an attempt to use the arbitration panel provisions of the convention to rule Chinese claims to sovereignty out of order.

But the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea explicitly excludes the resolution of sovereignty issues. So this is a complete legal farce intended to put China on the defensive. We don't take the same position with regard to the three dozen or more islands—or rocks—that Vietnam has similarly garrisoned and built fortifications on. The Philippine claim dates from 1975, I believe, and Malaysia's from a little later. Anyway, it's a mess. So the law of the sea starts out with the United States asserting that it follows the law of the sea, but it's not part of the convention. And the law of the sea has other provisions, as do the laws of war, that are being violated now in the Caribbean and the eastern Pacific.

It is an act of war to sink a boat—whether it's carrying civilians or military personnel—rather than intercepting it and inspecting it for contraband, which you're allowed to do, and arresting anyone guilty of transporting contraband, like drugs. You can't just kill them; there's no due process. And yet we've been doing that. Not only are we committing these boat murders, but we've also killed at least two survivors. In the first instance of a strike on a boat, two people survived for about 45 minutes. They obviously posed no threat to anyone—they were struggling for their lives, clinging to debris—and yet they were struck again and murdered, apparently at the direction of the Secretary of Defense, who calls himself the Secretary of War.

He claims he didn't see this. He doesn't claim he didn't order it, and that's significant because it makes him a war criminal. And that's that. Then the United States has similarly engaged in other acts. These are all acts of piracy as well as acts of war. Other acts of piracy include seizing an oil tanker allegedly bound for Cuba on the spurious grounds that it was sanctioned unilaterally by the United States for supposedly—rather incredibly—transporting oil to Hezbollah, which, the last time I looked, didn't run any gas stations in Lebanon. And the Iranian Revolutionary Guard.

I think the law of the sea has completely broken down, and it's respected nowhere. You mentioned quite a number of other infractions, but you didn't mention the Red Sea, where the Houthis carried out a successful land-based blockade of Israel. They had a legal right to do that under the Genocide Convention—they were enforcing it. The Convention requires signatories, of which they are one, to prevent genocide and to take military action if necessary to do so. And the United States, of course, spent a billion dollars trying to break that blockade and failed.

So this is part, I'm sorry to say, of a much broader collapse of international law—disrespect for the United Nations Charter, the post-World War II norms, the laws and conventions that were put together to reflect those norms. The results of the Nuremberg trials are daily violated by the Israelis. And we have, you know, other instances—Ukraine, for example. Russia may very well, in terms of its own national and security interests, have a good case for the necessity of doing what it has done in Ukraine, invading Ukraine, but that is illegal under international law. The fact that Russian national

interests are served, just as American national interests are allegedly served by trying to strangle Venezuela, does not make that action legal.

So I would say, Glenn, I'm sorry about the length of all this, but, you know, this is an incredibly complicated issue, and its implications are very broad. We are entering a world in which the rule of law—the rules-based order founded on the consensus of international participants—is disappearing, if it hasn't already disappeared. And we're back to the 18th or 17th century in terms of piracy on the high seas, actions undertaken with no legal justification, no reciprocity of rules, no enforcement of regulations, no norms that govern the actions of sovereign states or, for that matter, non-state actors.

#Glenn

How do you compare the roles of the United States, Russia, and China in shaping maritime control? What are their strategies in these regions? Because one gets the impression, of course, that for the Chinese, as you mentioned before, the South China Sea is obviously a priority. I guess they want to punch through this region—the dual island chains of the United States. The Russians, obviously, are very sensitive about NATO in the Black Sea, the Baltic Sea, and the Arctic—not just their presence, but their growing presence and their not-so-well-concealed demand for dominance. But what are the U.S. priorities here? Because the U.S. is also in a difficult spot. It has to readjust. On one level it wants to contain adversaries, but it also has to make priorities, as power is finite. So what do you see the competing priorities and interests being?

#Chas Freeman

Well, I think in the case of the United States, as you indicated or implied, we had essentially, during the Cold War and post-World War II periods, effective control of the world's seas. Of course, the Russians and others made appearances, but basically the seas were dominated by the United States, which replaced the British Navy in that role. So we're trying to hold on to control, which is no longer possible. Ironically, the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, with one or two significant exceptions, affirmed the rules that the United States had sought to impose. The exceptions were that we had to accept a 12-mile rather than a 3-mile territorial sea limit. That was something President Reagan agreed to when he learned that there were Soviet submarines just beyond the three-mile limit, able to strike targets in the United States with only a couple of minutes of flight time from ship-borne missiles.

And so he went for 12 miles, which was advocated by others. Traditionally, the territorial sea was defined by the range of cannon, and cannon have become more accurate at longer distances. So that was one thing. The other was exclusive economic zones—that is, zones where the seabed and the resources above the seabed were to be exploited by the littoral state, which had exclusive rights to them. The United States actually pioneered that concept in a dispute with Canada over the very rich fishing grounds off Newfoundland and Nova Scotia. But we objected to it when Peru and others

in South America asserted a 200-mile limit, and finally we agreed to that. So the United States is in a position of trying to perpetuate rights, modified, as I indicated, that we had in the era of our global hegemony.

The Chinese and the Russians are in a difficult position. I'll leave the Russians aside for a moment, although I know they're of particular concern to Norway in the Arctic. But the Chinese have traditionally not been a maritime power. They've always been a great fishing power in their immediate near seas, but not in their far seas. Now they're globally active—the biggest fishing fleet in the world, captained by people who are interested in getting fish and not very concerned about the legality of what they do. So, a rather tough bunch, if you've never encountered them. But then, fishermen don't tend to be gentle souls, even in Norway, I expect. So I think, in the case of the Chinese, there are several strategic interests.

One reflects the fact that the invasion of China by the West—starting with the Portuguese and Spanish, the Dutch, the British, and then followed by others, including the Americans when we became independent—came from the south through the South China Sea. So China wishes to have a defensive perimeter away from its coast to protect itself from a repetition of such foreign attacks, the most famous of which was, of course, the British conduct of the Opium Wars, asserting a right to sell narcotics to the Chinese regardless of the views of the Chinese government. There's a certain irony in that, given the fentanyl issue with the United States at the moment. But anyway, that's the first issue.

The second is that, as you indicated earlier, Japan invented the idea of the two island chains as a defense of its holdings in Japan and on the mainland of China. The U.S. Navy adopted that in World War II, and we sought to breach the two island chains from the other side—from the eastern Pacific—going through Japanese defenses and reaching China. And we did so. Now we're back with the Chinese asserting a right to control the seas, or at least to exclude foreign vessels that are hostile from their immediate perimeter in these near seas. We aggressively patrol those waters. We conduct about four patrols—intrusions into Chinese-claimed security space—right along the 12-mile limit, sometimes crossing it, every day. So we are in the Chinese face, and they have reacted by building a huge naval capacity to deal with that.

So the Chinese are one thing. They also have an interest in the Arctic and are now, thanks to American policy—which has brought China and Russia together—in a reasonably cooperative Arctic relationship with Russia. It's not entirely cooperative, because the Russians assert special rights, given that much of the Arctic adjoins Russian territory or is Russian territory. The Russians, of course, have a strong interest in preventing the Black Sea from becoming a NATO lake. And there again, there's a lot of history. The British Navy once tried to make the Black Sea a British lake, which had something to do with the Crimean War in the 19th century. Sevastopol, the main Tsarist Russian naval base on the Black Sea, was the object of the British attack.

Now we have a war between Russia and Ukraine, with Ukraine backed by NATO forces, and a bit of a free-for-all in the Black Sea, with civilian vessels being attacked from various quarters in disregard of international law. The situation in the Baltic is also very complicated. Baltic NATO members have attempted to control Russian passage through the Baltic. There are disputed boundaries there, as there are in the Arctic. And, as in the Arctic—and here I'll end—there was a long tradition of mutual forbearance between Norway and Russia. Even during the Cold War, the Russians respected agreements with Norway about the Arctic borders. But now that NATO is more aggressive and no longer regarded by the Russians as a defensive alliance, it seems to me that that *modus vivendi* between Norway and Russia is in some jeopardy.

#Glenn

Well, it just seems that for Russia, access to waterways has been a key part of its history. Ever since Kievan Rus collapsed in the 13th century, Russia has needed access to maritime corridors for trade—it's always been very important. They've always had these three oceans on their western borders. Now, the Black Sea, of course, is important, but, yeah, as you said, not only the Crimean War in the mid-19th century, but indeed that was one of the big triggers of the war. The coup in Ukraine was seen as a way of pushing Russia's Black Sea fleet out of Crimea. Thus, annexing Crimea became a target.

But now, of course, we see these attacks on Russian civilian vessels in the Black Sea. And now the Russians seem to be growing more determined to set their priorities around Odessa, to make sure this won't happen again in the future. You also mentioned the Baltic Sea. It's not just that NATO is aspiring to make it a "NATO lake." Even a former NATO Secretary General argued that, you know, we could put a blockade on St. Petersburg now that the Finns and the Swedes are in NATO—or even a blockade on Kaliningrad. I mean, the fact that we're openly talking about this is about as close as we can get, it seems, to a declaration of war.

And the third sea, of course, as you said—the Arctic—is also quite important, especially now that the Russians are working on this Northern Sea Route. It'll be a very fast and cheap corridor connecting Asia and Europe, and it'll be almost completely outside U.S. control. The Russians see the U.S.—or, sorry, Trump's talk about taking Greenland—as being linked to the Arctic, of course. And in this part of the world, Scandinavia, which was a region of peace during the Cold War, is now setting itself up more as a front line. That's Sweden and Finland, of course, joining NATO instead of staying neutral. And, as you said, the Norwegians used to have a kind of "NATO-light" version for themselves.

They didn't want too much American activity in the north. They didn't want foreign bases. But now all of Scandinavia is being filled up with American bases, and it looks like we'll be the Ukraine of the north—making ourselves a front line against Russia. Yeah. But do you think that permanent peace between the West and Russia requires some kind of naval component? Because this is, I mean, about control over the seas. I forgot who wrote it again—about a century ago—the American scholar

who coined the term “Rimlands.” He was making the point that ever since Peter the Great defeated the Swedes in 1721, the efforts by the UK and then the US have been to contain Russia, and to do so means limiting its access to the sea. But it seems we’re often fighting the symptoms. How can we address these issues to actually solve our problems?

#Chas Freeman

Well, in the end, this takes us back to the fact that it’s an absolute requirement for global stability, predictability, and the absence of war—if not peace—because the absence of war is not peace. But to have rules, and agreed rules—not rules imposed by one party, but rules agreed between many. And Russia is clearly a significant actor. Historically, I’d say the foundation of Russia had a great deal to do with the Norse, or Viking, use of the Volga to get down to the Mediterranean. And Kiev—actually Kievan Rus—began as a settlement connected to Scandinavia. So the Russians, from the beginning, had an interest in reaching the Mediterranean through the Volga.

The Black Sea and the Dardanelles. They’ve also had an interest in the Baltic, for the obvious reason that St. Petersburg is there, of course, and the German Hanseatic League expanded into the Baltic. The Russians are very sensitive about that. But now, of course, because of global warming, there’s a Northwest Passage through the Arctic, which the Chinese are beginning to use to ship to Europe—and which the Russians are interested in both facilitating and controlling at the same time. There’s another ocean, of course, and that’s the Pacific. Russia annexed the Pacific coast and the northern part of Sakhalin in order to have a position of control in the Pacific.

They expanded to Alaska, and then eventually sold it for \$15 million to the United States. So far, I think they haven’t emulated Donald Trump by claiming it back. But yes, there has been, as you said, an obsession in Russian history with access to the sea. That hasn’t gone away and has to be acknowledged. There’s a treaty that regulates passage through the Dardanelles, which, of course, goes through Turkish territory, and there’s a question about how durable that is now. So I think, yes, the time is coming when we’ll have to have some grand conference on the regulation of the sea. There are two other issues I’d like to mention. One is that there’s no effective regulation of fishing, and we’re overfishing terribly. The sea is beginning to be farmed.

You do that in Norway with salmon. The Chinese are now doing it even with tuna and other fish that are much higher on the food chain than salmon. And there’s no regulation of this at all—no agreed regulation of the pollution it causes, the obstructions to navigation it produces, and so forth. We need to do something about that. In the absence of an agreed arrangement in the South China Sea, fishing rights have become a major point of contention. There should be something like the Arctic Council established for the South China Sea, in my view. But the Arctic Council, of course, has now declined to include Russia in its deliberations, so it’s no longer effective as a rule-making body. The other issue is seabed mining. Nodules on the ocean floor are rich in manganese, iron, and other important minerals.

The problem is, you can mine these, but they appear to be very important ecologically. Many of the nodules are the sites of corals, sponges, and other growths. They seem to have a role in regulating or emitting oxygen in the oceans, which is fairly important, since about half of the oxygen in the world comes from the oceans. So this is not being regulated. There was an international agreement, but the United States is not respecting it. The Trump administration is proceeding unilaterally. The Chinese are engaged in a very active program of mining—within the confines of the existing agreement, I think—but that too is breaking down. So the rule of law, or the facsimile of it that has regulated international transactions and behavior, is disappearing in every sphere.

#Glenn

Yeah, well, it doesn't seem like there's an appetite for getting any rules back, though. Especially here in Europe, whenever they talk about how to govern the seas, there's always this talk about the need for a powerful deterrent—the possibility of a blockade, a powerful military—to make sure NATO is dominant in the Black Sea or the Baltic Sea as well. And in the Arctic, there's always talk now about the need to hunt for Russian submarines, to be able to track them and follow them wherever they are at all times. This is a hegemonic peace, though—that's what they're talking about. It's not about recognizing mutual rights and mutual security concerns, but about peace through dominance.

But it seems to me that we're looking for a new legal framework to accommodate this hegemony. In Europe, we now use the term "Russian shadow fleet," and they're starting to talk about the right to board these ships, stop them, or confiscate them. But that doesn't really make much sense. The Russians could put unilateral sanctions on our ships, but that wouldn't give them the right to commit piracy. It's the same now with the U.S. in the Caribbean—the whole idea that, well, they're "narco-terrorists." That's the new phrase, and it's now being used to justify seizing entire oil tankers and imposing blockades. I mean, all of these are acts of war. So are we moving in this direction—trying to legalize acts of war?

#Chas Freeman

Apparently, a blockade is an act of war under international law. This blockade of Venezuelan-bound or departing vessels—oil tankers—apparently, at the moment, applies only to those that have been specifically and unilaterally sanctioned by the United States. So that would include the so-called Russian shadow fleet, but not those tankers operating without sanctions, in reference to Russia or other designated adversaries of the United States—Iran, for example. But this is obviously an interim step, and it's completely illegal, because under the United Nations Charter, unilateral sanctions of this kind are illegal. Nevertheless, they're a principal feature of today's world, which shows how far we've come from the ideals we were taught to respect as a result of World War II. So the post-World War II order is completely breaking down.

I don't know what the legal justification for these things is, because there's never any argument provided. It's just a simple assertion: it's legal. Well, there's no explanation for why it's legal—what

law it rests on, what great international convention it rests on. And, you know, just to illustrate the point that this isn't limited to the issue of freedom of navigation in the high seas, or innocent passage through territorial seas, or the transit by warships through exclusive economic zones with peaceful intent—think about the Geneva Conventions. Suddenly, in Afghanistan, the United States invented a category called “enemy combatant,” who was not entitled to the protections of the Geneva Conventions.

Well, this was a wholly made-up, fictional category, and it basically expressed “might makes right.” And now we have a fictitious category called “narco-terrorists,” who are allegedly engaged in an armed attack on the United States—something imperceptible to anyone other than people in the White House. So there's no respect for truth. Truth is the first casualty in war, we're told. We must be at war with everyone. You could say it's a form of domination—or one might also say it's a tyranny—since those who are affected have no recognized rights, and it's “might makes right.” We're back to the Melian Dialogue of the Athenians: the strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must. So all the progress we made, beginning with Grotius and others in formulating international law, is being destroyed.

#Glenn

Yeah, that was all about the “enemy combatant.” This was introduced by Bush, wasn't it? Yeah, I remember that created quite a stir at the time, because it was a good example of another effort to legalize the illegal, if you will. Either you're a combatant—that is, you're wearing the uniform, you're representing the adversary's army—but then if you're arrested, of course, you're a prisoner of war, and once the war is over, you're released. You're not... but...

#Chas Freeman

Well, you also, as a prisoner of war under the Geneva Conventions, have certain rights. Yeah, rights—to be free from torture, to be supplied with an adequate diet, to have the Red Cross inspect your condition, and so forth. And you're subject to prisoner exchanges, as the Russians and Ukrainians are continuing to do. Right. But, you know, there was an earlier deviation from a basic principle of international law established after World War II, and that was when Israel, followed by the United States, invented and justified “preemptive defense.” That is, you can attack someone if you imagine they might attack you, even though they've given no evidence of any intention to do so. So you can preemptively attack potential adversaries—you don't have to wait for them to take an aggressive or offensive position. You can just do whatever you want to them. And we see Israel doing this now, and we see the United States doing it with Venezuela.

#Glenn

Well, with the enemy combatant, that was clear, I guess, because you only have two core categories: either you're a combatant or a civilian. But if one falls under the Geneva Convention, the

other should have a trial in a court of law because you're a civilian. Having this third category didn't fit anywhere, so that was more interesting. The preemptive strike, though—linked to Iraq—was a deviation, because at least there was some argument that international law permitted a preemptive strike to some extent, but then it had to be proven that an attack was coming, that it was immediate, an urgent danger—someone, you know, the missiles are preparing to launch against you. Preemptive—it's not the same as... I'm sorry, preventive. It's not the same as preemptive. Preventive is what Iraq was: somewhere down the line, Iraq might attack us with weapons of mass destruction, so for this reason we'll invade now. I mean, that's not what the preemptive doctrine was supposed to permit.

#Chas Freeman

Well, that's right. And you see this—you're quite correct—"preventive" is the key word. You see it with the Israeli violations of the so-called ceasefire in Gaza and the so-called ceasefire in Lebanon, with the murder of enemy leaders under this doctrine of preventive attack, preventive defense. So this is a mockery of what the Nuremberg trials produced. And we also have the issue—well, I was corrected, I believe, by someone—that in World War I there was a German U-boat captain condemned to death for the crime of machine-gunning civilian survivors of a vessel he had sunk. I think there were Canadian nuns aboard that vessel. He murdered them with a machine gun. So, you know, these norms go back quite a way, and they're all being suspended.

#Glenn

When asked about attacking the survivors—the second strike or attack, the second half, whatever it's called—in the Caribbean, the question was how this could be defended, like executing people who were just floating around on the debris. The response from the White House was "self-defense," which is ridiculous. It is ridiculous. Let me just ask you one last question, though. How do you see the growing threat of a clash over these maritime corridors impacting, I guess, the great power rivalry? Because on one hand, they could just clash over the existing corridors. Or alternatively, you could see an intensification of efforts to diversify away from these corridors. Obviously, the Belt and Road Initiative sets up new routes not vulnerable to these choke points—from Malacca or anywhere else. You know, the International South Transportation Corridor, even the Arctic Route. Do you see these new corridors growing over the next few years as a result of reduced trust in the freedom of navigation?

#Chas Freeman

Well, we've already had the war with Yemen over the blockade in the Red Sea—the obstruction of freedom of navigation there—arguably, as I suggested, justified legally under the Genocide Convention, though others would dispute that. In any event, we had an active bombardment of Yemen by a U.S. naval fleet, which continued for quite a long time before we recognized it wasn't working and stopped it. So we've already had that conflict over the obstruction of freedom of

navigation. Fortunately, to date, there's been no such conflict in the South China Sea, the Baltic, or, for that matter, the Arctic. But it seems to me only a matter of time before that occurs.

And in the South China Sea, the Baltic, and the Arctic, we're talking about great nuclear powers like China and Russia, not the Yemenis. So this is something pretty important, and it illustrates the rationale—the urgency—of trying to restore some sort of order, some sort of consensus about what is permissible and what is not in these new or existing transport corridors. The Red Sea is an ancient transport corridor connected to the Suez Canal and the Bab el-Mandeb. And the Baltic, of course, is a historic channel of great importance in world trade. The Arctic is new. But I don't see anybody taking the initiative. And here we come, perhaps, to the final and most damaging point—and that is, you know, the United States no longer leads.

It's engaged in criminal activity, not an effort to build a rule of law. China, which everybody looks to, apparently to pick up the lead, doesn't seem to want to do that. The Chinese are very focused on their own domestic interests—their own economic reconstruction and rejuvenation—and don't want to be responsible for anyone else's security or behavior. In fact, they clearly regard alliances as liabilities rather than assets and don't have any. I mean, they have a protected state in North Korea as a buffer against U.S. forces in South Korea, and they protect Pakistan to some extent in order to dilute Indian hegemony in South Asia. But other than that, they eschew all entangling relationships or commitments. And they don't step forward.

They're not leading. They're doing useful things on combating climate change, but they're not leading the formulation of rules, proposals, or programs. They're not doing that with regard to nonproliferation, even though they favor restrictions on nuclear proliferation. They're not doing it in the WTO, which the United States has sabotaged. I mean, they are building rules into bilateral or plurilateral trade agreements for dispute resolution and so forth, and they are lowering tariffs—both unilaterally and as a result of those agreements—while the United States is doing the opposite. But they're not taking charge. They're not leading negotiations. Europe is clearly unable to lead on anything, as the fracas in Brussels today over the seizure of Russian reserves as collateral for spending money to keep Ukraine fighting Russia is being argued among EU members, with quite a bit of division between them.

And the United States is apparently opposing this particular seizure, but not very forcefully. So who is going to lead? India doesn't have any desire to lead. I mean, they played a role in dismantling the WTO by asserting rights in agricultural trade that helped to paralyze the institution in terms of further trade liberalization. So, are the BRICS going to lead? They show no sign of it. They met in Rio de Janeiro—some people thought they might take the initiative, but they didn't—to propose new rules. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization operates in a limited sphere and is security-focused rather than focused on rulemaking. So who's going to lead? And when are they going to start doing it? I don't know.

#Glenn

When I think about this challenge of who should lead, it reminds me of a similar problem with peacekeeping. I used to teach a course on peacekeeping at university, and a key theme that always came up was: why would countries spend blood and money on keeping the peace somewhere? They would only do so when there was a national interest involved. And once there's a national interest involved, you can't expect them to behave without bias. In other words, the rules won't come first—their interests will. So you always have this problem. I guess that's the same as upholding the rules of the sea. But when I see all these attacks on civilian vessels in the Black Sea, or the blockade over Venezuela, or any of the other examples, I don't think politicians appreciate what kind of forces they're unleashing, because it seems like the consequences of this will be quite immense.

#Chas Freeman

People have forgotten the Golden Rule, which, in the Confucian and Jewish formulations, is stated negatively: do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you. That's a sound principle, and we seem to have forgotten it.

#Glenn

Sadly so. Thank you so much for taking the time.

#Chas Freeman

Well, thank you for what you do.