

How We Lost the Peace After the Cold War

| Amb. Jack Matlock

Ambassador Jack Matlock reflects on the diplomacy that ended the Cold War and argues that Western leaders misunderstood its outcome. He discusses NATO expansion, Ukraine's neutrality, sanctions, and the dangers of treating international relations as a contest for dominance. Drawing on his work with Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, Matlock contrasts negotiated security with attempts to impose political systems abroad. He also warns about nuclear weapons and emerging technologies, and explains why cooperation remains essential to preventing further global conflict.

Jack's Links: Jack Matlock's website: <https://jackmatlock.com> Looking Back to Look Ahead (free book): <https://jackmatlock.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Lookng-Back.pdf> Neutrality Studies Links: Neutrality Studies Substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> Support Neutrality Studies: <https://neutralitystudies.com/donate> Neutrality Studies shop: <https://neutralitystudies.com/shop>

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#Pascal

Welcome back to Neutrality Studies today with a very special episode, because we have back again Ambassador Jack Matlock, the United States' last ambassador to the Soviet Union. I was not actually the last.

#Jack Matlock

I know people have said that, but no, I was succeeded by somebody else who was there for just a few months before the Soviet Union collapsed. That's right.

#Pascal

You went back to the U.S. in August 1989, right?

#Jack Matlock

That's right. I left in August, and Strauss was named, and he came in September. And, of course, then the Soviet Union broke up in December, and he became ambassador to Russia.

#Pascal

Okay, so in the future, if I introduce you as the last full ambassador, as in who served his entire term, that would be technically correct, would it? All right. We leave that one aside. Ambassador Matlock, I really wanted to get an update with you in order to hear also your assessment about where we are in the world in 2026 after four and a half years of war in Ukraine and in something which some people by now are describing as, you know, an in-between period between two orders. Do you see it like that, or how do you understand the current situation of the world?

#Jack Matlock

Well, I think that we got off course in our foreign policy starting in the 1990s. And we had ended the Cold War and actually had Europe united in 1992. And I think that the decision made later...

#Jack Matlock

By, at that time, the Clinton administration to begin expanding NATO and also to fail to reach a settlement between Israel and the Palestinians, something that there seemed to be hope for in the early '90s. And yet the inability of the Clinton administration then to insist that Israel continue on that course of negotiation. Those two things, I think, started us on the situation we are now. But on the expansion of NATO, NATO had been organized as a defensive alliance. But once the Soviet Union collapsed and the Cold War was over, when you started expanding it, it became an offensive alliance. And if you leave Russia out, something we should not have done, then you create a security threat to Russia.

So that has now resulted in the very destructive war in Ukraine. And, of course, things in the Middle East have gone from bad to worse with the current war against Iran, which is creating violence and things throughout that area. Meanwhile, we see in the Pacific a worry about the increasing power of China. But I would have to say that I don't think China has been threatening others militarily. There is the worry that they might invade Taiwan. But in terms of military action against others, you just don't see it. And so I think the problem now has been, instead of using the peace at the end of the Cold War to lead the world into peaceful settlement of disputes, I think, you know, the United States has really started, you might say, these problems.

They have arisen out of local circumstances. But trying to go in and support one side or the other militarily, I think, has involved us and has not brought about the sort of peaceful world. And this is happening within the context now of the ability of humankind, I say, to commit suicide, in effect. We have known that that was possible once nuclear weapons reached the quantity that they are. If they were ever used, all of them or even partially, it could literally make the planet uninhabitable. And so this was something that preoccupied us when we were ending the Cold War, and we thought we had those things under control.

But beginning in this 21st century, the United States walked out of most of these arms control treaties. And now, with the violence in Ukraine, one in which the Europeans and the United States

are directly involved in supplying arms and munitions there against a nuclear power, I think really raises questions. But beyond that, as we see the development of artificial intelligence, there are real dangers there. And not necessarily that the artificial intelligence is going to turn against mankind. But the thing is, it is going to empower us, including, I would say, even small groups of people, not just nation states, to develop highly destructive weapons.

I mean, you could have small groups or even individuals developing diseases for which we have no vaccination or cure, or in many other ways. You will find that this, for example, allows adversaries to attack the infrastructure of other countries, and often without the ability to make sure who is doing what. It can bring real chaos to the world, and this is developing very fast. And at a time, we seem to be fighting each other over all sorts of things and attempting to punish countries that do things we don't like with economic sanctions. And I think that this is not working and is creating a more and more dangerous world.

#Pascal

Hey, just a very quick note. The best way to support this channel is by signing up for my free Substack. You can also help with a paid subscription there, or you can get some of our new merch on neutralitystudies.com. Links below. See you there. You know, the way I completely agree with what you said, and the way that I see how countries can impact other countries, is that you have military power that can work on what other countries can do to you, what adversaries can do to you. And we have diplomacy, which usually works on what other countries want to do to you. And the big question in my mind is, why is it that at the end of the Cold War, the way you also described it and the way you directly worked on ending the Cold War, which was a deliberate decision, as you said before, that changed the want.

There was no more want to oppose each other. The aspiration was to work together. How did we go from there to a moment where it seems that both sides, and especially the Europeans, have such a visceral hate for Russia and want to destroy Russia and want to have an adversarial relationship? And on top of that, how would we rekindle it back into a cooperative situation where the idea of coexistence becomes a thing again? Because right now this is gone. The idea of coexisting with Russia, at least for the Europeans, is completely, utterly gone. And the question to you as a great diplomat is, like, how do we recreate that kind of environment?

#Jack Matlock

I think that, number one, there was a widespread misunderstanding of how we ended the Cold War. We began to talk about it as if it was a defeat for the Soviet Union and a defeat for Russia. And first of all, let me say that the Soviet Union was not Russia of today. Too many people that today talk about Russia: does this, has this, has that. And, broadly speaking, the Russian Federation was part of the Soviet Union, which was a communist empire, much more than a Russian empire, and one which Gorbachev tried to change. He was a, I would say, a genuine—he became by stages a

genuine democrat, in the sense that he was trying to create a more democratic system. And as a leader of the Communist Party, he was able to take it out of complete control of the country. But then things got out of hand. But anyway, we ended the Cold War by negotiation, and it was to the advantage of everybody.

There was nobody to defeat it. And we were able to do it because Gorbachev changed the basic philosophy of the Soviet system. Its foreign policy had been based upon the Marxist idea of class struggle, and that it was the duty of the Soviet Union to support revolutions in other countries, to bring about what they called socialism, which would develop into communism. You know, Marx, I think, did a very accurate estimate of the operation of capitalism at the time he was writing. Where he was off base totally was the predictions that he was making. And this, frankly, is true of most predictions, I think, of some utopian future if something happens. So, in effect, we seem to have taken over an aspect of that and saying that, as some said then, well, no, not that the system of capitalism and what we call democracy is the future of the world. And so it became.

#Jack Matlock

Fashionable to say that, well, the United States and its democratic allies should do their best to extend democracy in the world and to defend it. Well, that was very similar to what the Soviet Union, up to Gorbachev, had been trying to do—that is, spread what they called socialism in the world, which was supposed to become communism. I would say, by the way, it was not the socialism that Marx had predicted at all. I think it was more likely to be characterized as state monopoly capitalism. But that's another question. The problem was that, again, you had the prediction of some sort of utopia, which said that it was sort of the duty of what we call democratic countries to spread democracy and to do so by whatever means necessary.

Now, when you think about it, that's a ridiculous idea. If democracy means control of the people and by the people in the countries where they are, how can an outsider create it for somebody else? They can't. And when you start trying to support certain factions in another country, you're probably going to do them harm because nobody wants outsiders interfering in what you consider your domestic affairs. But that's one thing. And then I would say also the United States did come out of, first of all, the Second World War and then the Cold War as the economically most powerful country in the world.

And we had established a financial system that was very favorable to the United States. We were able to run increasingly, you might say, budgetary deficits and yet borrow money. And since we, in effect, control the movements of—not control, but supervise—the movements of capital and payments, this gave us, I'd say, tremendous power. We could run deficits when others couldn't, for example. But we started using that also as a political weapon. If a country is doing something you don't like, you start putting sanctions on them. And this, I think, has not helped things at all. It's made things worse. Right now, I think we are running dangerously high deficits. The United States now is over \$40 trillion in debt.

And that's the government. And domestically also, debt is extremely high. And that is going to, I think, erode the value. And we, at the same time, are sanctioning countries, so that those who are being sanctioned, like Russia particularly, or Iran and China and others, are developing, I think, ways to deal with that. And so I think that these mistaken policies have overcommitted the United States. And an attempt, rather than to, I would say, maintain a balance and stay out of local fights and help the parties to bring about peace, which I think we had the possibility of doing in the early 90s, we began to take sides with one or the other and even to get involved militarily. And I think that was a huge mistake.

And I think we're now seeing the results of that. But so I would also say, the whole idea that we heard at the time, that where there had been two superpowers that ran the world, and now once the Soviet Union collapsed—and I would say it collapsed not because of pressure from the West, but internally, the pressures internally—and at the time, the United States did not want it to collapse. And we did want the three Baltic countries to regain their independence. We had never recognized they were legally part of the Soviet Union, but we really wanted the other 12 republics to adhere to Gorbachev's attempt to create a voluntary federation. So the idea that somehow by the Cold War we broke up the Soviet Union gets it entirely wrong.

So we saw developments that instead of continuing the sort of diplomacy that we had gone about to bring the Cold War to an end, we started doing the opposite. I would say that, you know, at the height of the Cold War, although President Reagan criticized communism very severely, he never once publicly insulted a Soviet leader. In fact, I remember when he first met Gromyko, the foreign minister, as they shook hands, he said, "We hold the peace of the world in our hands. We must cooperate." And he treated the Soviet leaders with, I would say—he would treat the foreign ministers almost as if they were chiefs of state, with, you know, formal dinners in the Lincoln Dining Room.

And he also understood that you don't help human rights by publicly campaigning on another country. In fact, just before he met Gorbachev for the first time, he sort of dictated what he thought about Gorbachev and what he was going to try to achieve. And this was handed to me as we got on the plane to go to Geneva for the meeting. And what he said there was very interesting. On human rights, he said, "We're too upfront on human rights, and we can hammer at them publicly, but it's not going to help the victims. In fact, it could hurt them. We've got to start dealing with this privately."

And when he finished it, one of the last sentences was, "Whatever we achieve, we must not call it victory, because that would make further progress impossible." So I would say that he was a president who was not a great intellectual or historian, but he knew how to deal with people. And maybe because he was a professional actor, he was able to put himself in the other person's shoes.

And what he wanted from us, most of all, was to explain where Gorbachev was coming from and how they could find common cause. Now, you compare this with what's happened since then, when we're hammering at them on human rights. At the same time, we have got problems here.

And even sanctioning them at times is... And then you have the sort of public demonization of the president of Russia. Well, I certainly don't like a lot of things he's done, but we have to recognize that he took that country out of near chaos, because the '90s for Russians were not democratization, as we thought it was; it was almost anarchy. And after he became president, he took a bankrupt country and, in three or four years, paid off all the foreign debts. And right now, I mean, even with all of the sanctions and the freezing of Russian assets abroad, Russia has a favorable balance of payments and has been able to survive the sanctions. So that I think that so much has happened that the opposite of what we...

#Pascal

All right, we just had a very brief interruption due to internet connectivity issues, but we are back online with Ambassador Matlock. Ambassador Matlock, you were just talking about, you know, the failings of the '90s, right, of how Russia was treated at the time. Maybe you want to continue there?

#Jack Matlock

Yes. The thing is that instead of, at the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, bringing Russia into a European security structure, which was expected by those of us who negotiated the end of the Cold War, we left Russia out and began expanding NATO and using it offensively. And it was obvious that Russia was going to consider this a threat, particularly when we began to put military bases in Eastern Europe, in countries that once had been sort of allied with Russia. And I think this was very mistaken because Russia could only consider that a threat. And then when there was an attempt to bring countries like Georgia and Ukraine into NATO, this could only have been considered an offensive act by Russia, because traditionally these had been areas that for centuries had been part of the same country as Russia.

And although Russia had recognized their independence at the time the Soviet Union broke up, they recognized the independence of countries that were neutral and were not the allies of anyone. As a matter of fact, the original Ukrainian constitution stated that it would be a neutral country. It also gave full language rights to Russians and other linguistic minorities. And when Ukraine got independence, 44% of the people actually preferred to speak Russian. And this was particularly true in the eastern part of the country. So when there were attempts by NATO to bring more and more countries in, I think that the Russian president made it very clear that that was unacceptable. In fact, he first made that clear in a speech in Munich.

And I think it was around 2007, 2008. And I must say, when I was teaching international relations, I had my students look at that speech and say, were these criticisms valid? In other words, were

these things that the United States and NATO should have been doing? And I think every student that studied it came out and said, well, no, we didn't need to do those things, and it didn't make much sense. But we went ahead and did it. At first, Russia and President Putin accepted the initial expansion of NATO to the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary, and then even to the three Baltic countries. He was making a speech in New York when that was an issue, and I asked him directly, I said, what do you think about that?

And he said, "Well, I think it is not necessary, but as long as there are no bases, we're not going to oppose it." But then it continued. And when the expansion was into countries like Romania and Bulgaria, the Obama administration began to put bases there. At first, it was things like anti-ballistic missiles. And the trouble with those anti-ballistic missiles was they could easily be converted into offensive missiles. They were designed to be used either way. Now, there's no way that that wasn't going to be considered a serious threat by any Russian president, I would say. But this process continued. And so I think that at the same time, the Ukrainians were revising their constitution.

They took the neutrality out of it, proclaimed they wanted to be a part of the EU and NATO. And so it was pretty clear the reasons that any Russian president would worry about that. At the same time, NATO was increasingly being used in an offensive way. Now, when the United States invaded Afghanistan, that was legalized by the Security Council, and Russia actually cooperated in that. But then suddenly we invaded Iraq, and Iraq had done nothing to us. We claimed that they might have nuclear weapons or chemical weapons, and it turned out they didn't. But we invaded, occupied them, and then later we used NATO to attack Libya and actually have assassinated the leader, so that it was clear that NATO was being used in an offensive way and outside Europe, although it was supposed to apply only to Europe.

I think that when NATO then began to involve itself in Ukraine, there was a rebellion in eastern Ukraine after a coup d'état. This was in 2014, so that the elected government was removed in a coup d'état, which Russia had every reason to believe that the United States and the EU were involved in that. And I would say, you know, if there had been a coup d'état in a country that we thought was being taken over by the communists, we would not have recognized it. You know, there were decades we didn't recognize Communist China because it came, you know, through a revolution. But the thing is that it was very obvious why Russia would consider NATO a threat. And yet then, of course, you had in 2014 Russia taking Crimea.

#Jack Matlock

Now, the thing there, they did that peacefully and held a referendum, which was overwhelmingly in favor of Russia. And there's no reason to think that the great majority of people in Crimea preferred Russia to Ukraine. They were Russian-speaking, and the Ukrainians had tried, in effect, to disenfranchise them because they were Russian if they didn't suddenly take on Ukrainian names and

speak only Ukrainian. And I would say that NATO earlier had set a precedent for this by making a war against Serbia when Serbia had not attacked any NATO country. And then they recognized the independence of Kosovo against Serbia's opposition.

But an agreement we made when we were trying to end the Cold War was that there should be no territorial changes in Europe without mutual consent. So NATO actually set a precedent for what Russia did in Ukraine, but they did it even without a referendum. So in a sense, if what Russia did in Ukraine was illegal, what NATO did to Serbia over Kosovo was doubly illegal. We seem not to recognize that the United States and NATO had set precedents that later, when Russia acted in the same way, oh, that's illegal and we have to sanction them. But nobody sanctioned the United States when it attacked and occupied Iraq or later Libya.

#Jack Matlock

So I think that the way this has been looked at by the Europeans, who are now giving major military support to Ukraine with weapons and intelligence support that allows them to attack Russia, this is turning out to be suicidal for Ukraine. And I really have trouble understanding how the Europeans keep pushing these things.

#Pascal

Can I add a question? Because your description is exactly how I view how this whole spiral of escalation happened. And a lot of this has to do with the inability of Western leaders to accept a neutral status for Ukraine as a way to create a buffer, to create a mutually acceptable security structure, which you actually worked on. I mean, you and Reagan and so on, you actively worked on having a balance that then would allow to end the Cold War, that would allow for stability on the European continent.

And now we're 30 years later, and people actively work on destabilizing the European, this mutual security structure. The only ones talking about mutual security are the Russians, who understand you cannot do security against somebody, only with them. Why did the conception of the West change so dramatically from people like you and Reagan and so on to this new leadership that is in power now, that uses NATO offensively in order to ram and drive over perceived opponents rather than trying to create coexistence? And how would we turn that back? How do we get back to people of your caliber to create a constructive peace?

#Jack Matlock

Well, I think what happened is people simply misinterpreted the end of the Cold War. They looked at it as a Western victory over what they said, Russia, although the fact was that we ended the Cold War peacefully, and the Soviet Union broke up because of internal pressures and not because the country was defeated. But then there was the idea that, well, what we call democracy is the future

of the world, and we have to promote it using whatever military and economic force we can. And I think also there was the feeling that human rights should be protected, if necessary, by using force or sanctions. Although, when you start using force, you end up making a situation worse than it would have been otherwise.

So I think that the fact that we looked at the end of the Cold War not as a negotiated settlement, which created a world in which the major powers could cooperate, and instead tried to dominate each other, cooperate by trying to keep the development of technology, particularly technology for killing, under some sort of control. Because when you start using force against each other or the sort of economic sanctions that cause great distress to the population, not necessarily to the leaders, I think you're creating a world which is poorly suited for keeping these new weapons of destruction under control. And the idea that one country like the United States, or earlier that two countries, the U.S. and the Soviet Union, could run everything or change the world in the ways we wanted to, I think was simply a wrong perception, a tragically wrong one. And it has really gotten us into the situation today.

#Pascal

Can I just add one more thing, which I seriously wonder about? When you were in Moscow in '86, '87, '88,

#Pascal

Do you think that there was a common understanding of the current situation, that the United States and Russia, you and Gorbachev, you both understood the situation of the Cold War, the Cold War dynamic? Was it understood in the same way? Or were there two narratives, you know, a U.S. narrative of what's happening and a Soviet narrative? Because right now, it seems to me that we have two narratives. We have the Western narrative of what this conflagration is about, and we have the Russian narrative. In your time, was it two narratives, or was it one kind of shared understanding of the problem?

#Jack Matlock

I think that certainly Reagan and Gorbachev understood they were two people who really wanted to abolish nuclear weapons. Now, maybe that wasn't even technically possible at that time, given all the problems, but these were two people who genuinely thought they could bring an end to nuclear weapons. But this was not the view of their successors. So that's one of the problems. But as I said, the feeling that the U.S. and the West are capitalism and democracy—and I must say, we use these terms, I think, in a misleading way. I think it's proper to talk about a democratic process, in the sense that a country ultimately relies upon the consent of its citizens. But to say that one country is democratic and another is not, when, for example, in the United States, we have a republic, and we have a republic which is controlled essentially by an oligarchy.

And after all, when we look at things like the Senate, where every state has just two representatives, so that Wyoming, you know, has the same as California or Texas. And this is not democratic. And you can think of many other aspects that are not. But to say that one country is democratic and the other is not, I think is wrong. Now, there's no question that we have more democratic processes, but when we were sanctioning Russia for various things, I think you had a president of Russia who had greater approval than any American president at that time. So to say, "Oh, they're not a democracy and we are, and it's our mission to spread democracy in the world," you're taking on, I think—first of all, it's wrong to think that one country can spread democracy to another. But second, you are simply, I would say, mixing up concepts in a way that is basically very dangerous.

#Pascal

Yes, it is. Yes, it is. And it leads us down a very, very dangerous path, as we are seeing right now. Ambassador Matlock, I occupied a lot of your time, and I really thank you for that. Is there any place where people can go to follow your writing or your publications?

#Jack Matlock

Yes. I have a website, jackmatlock.com, and you can find my latest book; it can be downloaded free from that. And I've written three other books on this. Some are out of print, but they're generally available, you know, from booksellers. One is called *Autopsy on an Empire*, and it's a description of how the Soviet Union broke up. Another, I had *Reagan and Gorbachev: How the Cold War Ended*, where I describe their diplomacy. And then in 2010, I published one called *Superpower Illusions*, where I described how we were getting off track in that and made some of the criticisms that I voiced today.

But these are generally available. But I would say the most recent one, which was a collection of articles I wrote over a period of time concerning the negotiations that ended the Cold War, concerning the Ukraine situation and how that developed, and some of the other questions today. But I called it *Looking Back to Look Ahead*. And so I was thinking over my own experiences and the lessons I might have for today. But that can be downloaded from my webpage.

#Pascal

And I will put links to your webpage, jackmatlock.com, in the description box of this video below. I recommend everybody who's interested in this to actually download the books, get them, and study them, because they are case studies of how to do real diplomacy and peace, for which I thank you so much, Ambassador Matlock. And see you next time again.

#Jack Matlock

Thank you for having me. It's always great to see you.