

Venezuela, Iran, BRICS: The Empire Strikes Back | Dr. Pietro Shakarian

With the "mask fully off" regarding the intervention in Venezuela, I'm left wondering: has the international order officially dissolved into the law of the jungle? As the crosshairs shift toward Tehran, will Russia and China finally shatter the sanctions regime to prevent regime change? To understand if we are witnessing the Soviet-style collapse of the West, I've invited back Dr. Pietro Shakarian, a lecturer in history at the American University of Armenia in Yerevan, to offer his analysis from the strategic crossroads of the Caucasus. Links: Neutrality Studies substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> (Opt in for Academic Section from your profile settings: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com/s/academic>) Goods Store: <https://neutralitystudies-shop.fourthwall.com> Timestamps: 00:00:00 Intro 00:00:27 US Intervention in Venezuela 00:07:24 Russia-Iran Strategic Relations 00:16:31 Protests & Regime Change Efforts in Iran 00:20:39 Potential War Scenarios & Strait of Hormuz 00:25:40 The South Caucasus & "TRIP" Corridor 00:36:58 Turkey's Geopolitical Dilemma 00:41:27 The Irrelevance of the EU 00:51:11 2026 Geopolitical Outlook

#Pascal

Welcome back, everybody. Today we're joined again by Dr. Pietro Shakarian, a lecturer in history at the American University of Armenia in Yerevan. Pietro, welcome back.

#Pietro Shakarian

Pascal, it's a pleasure to be on your show once again. Thank you for having me. And Happy New Year, too. Happy New Year to you as well. Happy New Year, yeah.

#Pascal

Although I must say, it doesn't start very happily—but that's what we need to talk about. No, it does not start very happily, no. We're talking about Venezuela now, but I wanted to speak with you because you actually wrote a piece about Iran and its relationship with Russia. Still, I think what's happening in Venezuela is probably going to impact Iran quite a bit. Could you give us your thoughts on that?

#Pietro Shakarian

Oh, I think what happened in Venezuela is a crime—against humanity, a crime against international law. I mean, it's absolutely insane to me. Actually, we can even say that, well, the Iraq War, as terrible as that was, at least Bush attempted to go to the U.N. This is not even—Trump isn't even

doing that. Trump is just going out to take out the leader straight up. I mean, this is just atrocious. What can I say? I think—yeah, it's a disaster. And I think it's also a warning to Iran about the real agenda of the Trump administration. Despite the rhetoric we got when Trump was running for election—that "I'm the peace president," right, "America First," and "I'm going to have our kind of, I guess you could say, come-home moment," that we're not going to have forever wars.

Right. He even brought in Tulsi Gabbard into the administration. And by the way, Tulsi Gabbard had condemned these kinds of regime-change attempts in Venezuela earlier. Now what we have is a Trump that's really—it's kind of the imperialism. I mean, as he said, it's "imperialism locked and loaded." He uses this term with reference to Iran because there have recently been protests there that seem to be, again, drumming up—or you could say softening up—Iran for a new round of conflict with Israel. So that's what we're seeing right now. I think it's completely, I mean, completely atrocious and illegal. And what can you say about that? It's throwing out the whole international order post-World War II.

#Pascal

Although I must say, other people made the argument—Peter Labelle made the argument in another podcast yesterday—that, look, the liberals pretending this is the first time ever that the United States has done something against international law is laughable, right? I mean, this is a very old kind of tradition, especially in South America, for the U.S. to just go in and take a massive, you know, drag of law enforcement.

#Pietro Shakarian

Going back, going back decades, as we know—I mean, I could list you several examples of this. We have the Bay of Pigs invasion, we also have, you know, what happened with Allende, right? The insertion of Mr. Pinochet in Chile. So there's a long and bloody history. I mean, we also have the School of the Americas, right? So the American history in Latin America—or maybe you could say, to use a frankly right term, Usonian—the Usonian or American record in Latin America is not so bright, as it were. It's very dark.

And with Iran, the implications are very straightforward. If I were watching this in Tehran, I'd be taking notes, because it's not good. Also—what's interesting, and I want to mention this really quick, Pascal, sorry, excuse me—is how the so-called liberal leadership in the EU is praising Trump for this. They say, "Well, you know, this is justified because we never recognized Maduro as a legitimate president." Okay, well, that's fine for you. But the problem is, at the end of the day, it's completely illegal for one country. That's Venezuela's business, right?

If Maduro is illegitimate in the eyes of some Venezuelans, they can protest, they can, you know, have a new election, whatever. But it's not correct for another country—a superpower—to get involved directly in the affairs of another country. So the EU trying to go through Olympic

gymnastics to justify what's going on is really quite despicable, and it says a lot about the current state of the EU. To say nothing of what the British are saying—you're hearing statements coming out of the UK that, well, this is completely justified because it corresponds with the rules-based order. I don't know what rules-based order they're talking about.

#Pascal

You know, it must be very clear: "rules-based international order" is a term that was completely, utterly made up by the Americans. It more or less came into vogue under Mr. Biden. The rules-based international order is not a thing. International law is a thing. And international law—just so everybody's clear on this—does not require a government to be democratic in order for it to be a subject of international law, to be recognized as another state. International law doesn't care, doesn't really care, how a state is run. Absolutely. So they try to make you believe that this is the case. It's not. You can be a dictatorship and still be a subject of international law with the same rights as everybody else. This is not to say that we should have more dictatorships—we shouldn't—but it's just to point out that Trump and the Europeans at the moment make you believe this, and it's just not true.

#Pietro Shakarian

And also, look at the way in which international law—or, I mean, the international order—is being run. We want that now, and increasingly, with multipolarity, we're having a more democratic kind of world order. And the rules-based order, or at least the interpretation of it—well, let's be charitable and say maybe the rules are supposed to be international law, yeah? But that's not the interpretation taken in the United States. The idea of a rules-based order there is that, well, we make the rules, we rule the roost, and we have to enforce our global hegemony over everybody else. Which is not very democratic at all.

#Pascal

We make the rules and order you to follow them, and we change the rules whenever we want—especially when it's about ourselves. That's what it means. That's what the Trump administration now asserts, and that's what they do. And that's just going to be a matter of fact, just as Israel is implementing a genocide as a matter of fact. Absolutely. Absolutely. Other states aren't dumb; they see this. They now understand, okay, the norms that we at least thought we had to pretend to adhere to, that we at least had to pay lip service to, are all gone. So how does that influence, do you think, let's say, the Iranian-Russian relationship—and Iran knowing that it's next on the chopping block and probably, again, chopping from the head, right? The Israelis have been doing this, the Americans have been doing this—they're going after the head, either by taking them out or by killing them, like with Nasrallah and others. So what do you think these regimes will be doing now?

#Pietro Shakarian

Well, I think that when we're talking about Iran, we're really—well, Pascal, we often talk about this idea of regime change. But when it comes to Iran specifically, we're really talking about regime removal. It's somewhat similar to what we saw in Venezuela, but in that case, it was really just the removal of one man, because at the end of the day, his government is still there. They're very angry, and you see people protesting on the streets now in Caracas. But in terms of Iran, the idea for Israel is maybe, you know, first and foremost to remove the Islamic Republic, but then also maybe to substitute it—maybe bring in the Shah's son, as we know—or to kind of turn Iran into a second Syria, where you have these breakaway republics.

I don't know—in Kurdistan, or Azerbaijan, or any number of places—Gilan, we can go on. But that would be, I think, kind of the idea. It's not necessarily regime removal, but the idea of making Iran so weak that it cannot pose a threat to Israel. Because Israel's agenda for the whole region is really that there should be no potential competitor to Israeli military supremacy in the region. That's really what we're seeing. And Iran, I think, already understood by the end of 2025 that there was going to be a new round—that Israel was making noise, that this was going to happen.

And so what I wrote in this most recent piece on Iran and Russia is that on December 17th, Mr. Araghchi and Mr. Lavrov met in Moscow, and they agreed on, I guess you could say, an insurance policy against these new attacks. It was really meant to help shore up—or, you know, solidify even more—the Russian support for Iran at this moment. Because, as we know, as I mentioned on earlier episodes of your show, Iran is crucial for BRICS, and specifically for Russia and China, because you have to think of it as this great, you know, node.

I mean, the Iranian plateau as this great node on—uh, as this great node on, kind of, I guess you could say, you know, the Silk Road, historically speaking—the idea of the One Belt, One Road project. If you look at its position in Eurasia, it connects the post-Soviet south—that is to say, the former Soviet republics in the Caucasus and Central Asia—with, you know, China. It connects Russia with China. It's in this very strategic position. So if Iran were to be completely destabilized, if it were to become fragmented, if the Shah's son were to come in and install, let's say, a pro-Western, pro-Israel, pro-NATO government in Iran, then that would be a huge blow to the security of Russia and China, a huge blow to BRICS, and a huge blow to the rise of multipolarity.

So that's why this is so important for both Moscow and Tehran. What they agreed on, on December 17th, was to intensify consultations between their foreign ministries and to really set the agenda for that over a three-year period. This was a big deal. And if you listen to some of the statements made at the press conference, first and foremost, there was the point about how international law is basically being tossed aside by the United States.

The idea is that Russia and Iran are saying, "We're not going to take this anymore. We're not going to allow the United States and the West to tear up the international order." And that includes, by the way, the EU, because the EU attempted to—or actually did—reimpose sanctions on Iran. Russia and

China were against this. So there's this kind of assertion that they're not going to let it happen again, and that the United States should not feel this sense of impunity. That's the term Aragchi used, by the way—they should not feel the sense of impunity to do whatever they want. And we can clearly see that this sense of impunity has carried on into 2026 with the Venezuelan situation.

#Pascal

Do you think that Russia and China are now going to ignore the sanctions regime? Because the difference between the sanctions on Iran and those on Russia is that the sanctions on Iran were actually UN sanctions, right? They were adopted at a time when Russia and China did not oppose them—kind of sanctioning Iran in case it tried to get nukes. But we all understand by now that the United States is using this tool, and the Europeans are using it too. The fact that they have such a Security Council resolution basically allows them to undo any attempts by the Iranians to reach some kind of understanding with the rest, right? So, do you think that Russia will now just start ignoring the UN sanctions?

#Pietro Shakarian

Oh, I think absolutely. And I wouldn't blame them—same with the Chinese. Because again, I mean, if Iran—because we're also seeing the way Israel is treating Iran. Iran came to the table, Pascal. It came to the table negotiating in good faith. They were willing to discuss the whole nuclear question. But you see who's really rogue in this case: it's the United States and Israel. I mean, look at...

#Pascal

They started bombing Iran while still pretending they were negotiating. It's outrageous.

#Pietro Shakarian

It's absolutely outrageous. So I think that both Iran and—well, in terms of Iran and Russia—they're already preparing. They already were, at least back in December. They were already thinking this way. Now, from what I understand from the reports I'm getting, this cooperation has actually intensified even more in light of recent developments in Vietnam, which we'll get to in a moment. But the idea is that I think Russia and China will absolutely not go along with these sanctions. They're illegal sanctions.

#Pascal

By now, I mean, the jury is that they are actually legal because they come from the Security Council. But de facto, they've become a very nasty tool—just a pressure box. One of the issues we've had,

and that's kind of difficult for a lot of us to wrap our heads around, is that it was the Iranians who, until now, resisted forming a full military alliance with Russia. They were the ones who said, "We're happy to cooperate and collaborate, but no full alliance, no mutual security guarantees."

#Pietro Shakarian

I think they're rethinking that. They're rethinking that. And not only that—also, I mean, it even took a while for the Iranian parliament to actually ratify the strategic partnership agreement. And it was in the midst of the war that it really became solidified, during the so-called 12-day war. But now the situation is changing. There have been large military cargo planes flying from Russia to Iran, ready to beef up Iran's support in advance of what looks like an imminent Israeli strike. I mean, this isn't even about potential anymore—we're talking about something that could happen very soon.

#Pascal

But we've seen these protests now in Iran, right? And Donald Trump even said, if you kill protesters, then we're going to attack you just for that. But at this point, it doesn't even matter.

#Pietro Shakarian

Let me just put the shoe on the other foot. Imagine if President Pezeshkian were to issue a statement on Twitter saying, you know, "Look at those protests in, let's say, New York, against the genocide in Gaza—the pro-Palestine protests, right? If President Trump dares shoot at any protester there, we will get involved, locked and loaded militarily in American affairs." I mean, can you imagine? What would the reaction be in the American media if President Pezeshkian had said something like that?

#Pascal

I know, but that's part of the game now, right? The bully can threaten the bullied, and everybody just accepts that. But then what does that do? I mean, what do these protests actually mean? I can't wrap my head around anything anymore—whether it actually means something, whether there's a real popular uprising, or if this is just another CIA-sponsored kind of street protest that you can incite at any point in time.

#Pietro Shakarian

Well, part of it is legitimate because there was, as we know, this massive inflation. And people in the Grand Bazaar in Tehran went out to protest, and you can understand why they feel the way they do. So it's completely legitimate on one level. Also, we should consider the fact that Iran, because of the

sanctions, has had to become very agriculturally self-sufficient, and this has put a strain on the water supply in Iran. So there's also discontent there in terms of the water shortage. But that being said, genuine discontent is being taken advantage of by not-so-innocent actors externally.

And it's not just me saying that. It's not just speculation. The fact is, Mossad even went so far as to publicly remark that they were encouraging these protests in Iran. And that's actually one of the most interesting things—why would they be so public about it? Right? And not only them—Pompeo also made a big deal about this. You know, the great neocon thinker in the United States and Trump ally. So the question becomes, why would Mossad be so overt about that? And I think part of it, Pascal, is psychological warfare. In advance of this strike on Iran, in order to soften up Iran, the idea would be to kind of psych them out.

And one of the ways you psych out Iran is by saying, "Look, you know what? We're so good, we're so great, we're so sophisticated—our intelligence services—that we can get involved in your country at any time. We can stir up the masses against your government whenever we want. And what can you do about it, right?" It's an intimidation tactic. It's psychological warfare. So that's what we have to understand about this. It's not just that they're bragging about it; there's also an element of trying to intimidate Iran.

So that's how I see it. Absolutely. And you also have to think about what this is—what this has the potential to do. I mean, it has the potential to destabilize the country and all that. But I think overall, Pascal, the vast majority of people in Iran are not interested in overthrowing the government. They're not interested in bringing back the Shah's son. Right? There were reports of a few, maybe Iranian students, who were being encouraged by Mossad to bring back the Shah's son. I can assure you that is not in the cards. That's not going to happen. He doesn't even have that much support, even in the Iranian diaspora.

#Pascal

No, but you don't need that. You don't need a lot of support. We've seen it with how the U.S. managed to get rid of Mr. Yanukovych in Ukraine and replace him with Mr. Poroshenko, who didn't have that much support. I mean, in the end, okay, there was a vote and whatnot, but later he was replaced by Zelensky, who was elected on a peace mandate—let's not forget that. We see how they got rid of Mr. Maduro, whether you have popular support or not. I mean, what you need is to pay off a couple of people in the military and in the administration, apparently, plus a shock-and-awe intervention, and now they can say, "Great, great success." So this is the other intimidation: "And you—we're going to kill you, by the way. We're not going to take you out; we're going to kill you." So how do you think the Iranians are now going to try to approach this?

#Pietro Shakarian

Well, one possibility is that they could do a preemptive strike—on Israel. That wouldn't be on the U.S. But the other question is, even if this... well, we'll wait and see what happens. I'm not sure they would actually do that. They're very cautious, right? I'm not sure they'd go for that option. But if the war begins, then, you know, all bets are off. Also, it's important to highlight something else: if a new round begins—and it most likely will—the main target isn't going to be the nuclear program. The main target will be Iran's ballistic missile program, which has wreaked so much havoc on Israel.

And so the idea is to really, again, make sure there's no strategic competitor to Israel in the region—to knock out Iran's defenses. That's what I think the main target is going to be. Plus, again, regime removal, really weakening the government. That would be the objective. Now, what would Iran's response be at that point? I mean, especially if the U.S. is involved. They could hit a number of targets in the Persian Gulf, right? Because we know the U.S. has a lot of military infrastructure there. And also, if the situation gets bad enough, Pascal, they could even close the Strait of Hormuz. Yeah, but that would negatively impact China, which is something that— Yeah, absolutely.

And so they have to watch. Or no—what they could do is a selective closure of the Strait of Hormuz. They could allow, you know, some ships through—maybe make an exception for the Chinese—but not make an exception, let's say, for the West and for the U.S. So there are ways they could do this, but we'll wait and see what happens next. And again, like I said, large cargo planes are coming in from Russia to Iran. We also have Putin—well, he said in the past, in that December 17th meeting, that over the previous 18 months he had met with Putin five times. And he said that's not an insignificant number.

So he's even underscoring that, because the other thing our viewers have to understand is that there have been very deliberate efforts in the Western press to make it look as if Russia and Iran have had some huge falling out—that their relations aren't jiving or whatever. Right? And especially in the British media, you see these kinds of op-eds. What this succession of Putin meetings underscores, and what Araghchi is really emphasizing, is: don't doubt the depth of this relationship. This is a serious relationship. We have the support of Russia, we have the support of China—don't try anything. Right? So that's at least how I'm reading it.

#Pascal

Yeah, but I mean, don't try anything. I don't think it really works. We've seen what happened to Bashar al-Assad. Obviously, Israel is dreaming of pulling a huge "Syria" on Iran, right? And there was nothing Russia could do. Russia tried to support Assad, tried to shoot at the approaching hordes of al-Jolani, but it didn't help. It didn't help. I mean, what's the...

#Pietro Shakarian

It didn't help, but I think Iran, though, is a different beast completely. Because when we're talking about Iran, we're talking about a country that is much more—well, I mean, for Russia, of course, Syria is very important strategically. And as the Russians would say, in terms of the jihadists in Syria, it's better to fight them there than fight them here, because there's been a history of Islamist terrorism in Russia, in the Russian Federation. But I think the concern, especially for Russia, is that Iran—its security and its stability—have much more direct implications for Russian security and stability.

So if Iran became a Syria, it would be on Russia's doorstep. And the security implications of that would be huge, especially because it borders the former Soviet republics, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. There are common issues there, which they reiterated, by the way, in this press conference. They talked about their shared opposition to external actors coming into the region. Right. It's not such a big deal—I mean, there are, of course, efforts to infiltrate Central Asia—but the more immediate threat for Russia and Iran now is the Caucasus region.

Specifically, when we had this so-called trip agreement—this Trump corridor idea, the Zangezur corridor idea, as it was previously known—that would link Turkey with Azerbaijan through Armenia. And Pashinyan, as we know, in Armenia is, you know, more than okay with us. He's not exactly, you know, the most—how do I put this—the most loyal Armenian. Right. And his popularity in Armenia, by the way, I can tell you this based on my observations here, is sinking like a rock. I don't exclude that he's going to try to rig the next election, which is coming up in June.

#Pascal

I mean, he's jailing people in Armenia, right? He's jailing opposition figures and making sure that anyone who could be politically dangerous to him is taken out of the picture. That's still going on right now, right?

#Pietro Shakarian

Yes, including the church. He's going after the church very hard. In fact, he's now declaring an effort to reform it. But the deeper he goes into this issue, he really thinks he can achieve what he wants if he pushes hard enough. In fact, though, it's creating the opposite effect. People are really beginning to push back against him for the first time in a significant way on this. I mean, before, people were pushing back, but it wasn't really decisive—not a mass of people, I guess you could say. But now it's really generating a lot of resentment, what he's doing with the church.

#Pascal

Can you update me a little bit about that trip? I mean, the Trump—what is it—the regional, international project?

#Pietro Shakarian

No, the Trump route for international peace and prosperity.

#Pascal

This thing is supposed to link, in the end, Azerbaijan with Turkey, right? On the other end of this corridor. They signed it in Washington, but for it to become an actual treaty, it needs to be ratified by the Armenian parliament as well. So is that moving anywhere? Is it going to become a proper treaty? No. At this moment, it's only a letter of intent, right?

#Pietro Shakarian

It's only a letter of intent, and there are no specifics in it. What we do know is that Pashinyan is all for the idea of leasing this corridor in the southern Armenian province of Syunik—for 99 years—to a private American company. That's the whole idea.

#Pascal

It would be so dumb, but yeah.

#Pietro Shakarian

It would be extremely dumb, but this is what he's, you know, all in for. But he can't do it alone—he needs Parliament to ratify it, right?

#Pascal

Do you know?

#Pietro Shakarian

It hasn't even gotten to that discussion yet, Pascal. So we don't even know the details. We don't even know the specifics of this private American company that would be governing something like this. It's still very vague, even this late in the game. I don't foresee it coming to fruition anytime soon. But still, that doesn't make it any less threatening to the interests of Russia and Iran. Russia, in the past month—December—has become very vocal in its opposition to it. They've said that if there's going to be any corridor there, they have to be the ones running it. Their troops have to be in charge. And they've insisted that it shouldn't be an extraterritorial corridor outside Armenian administration—that it should remain under Armenian law, with Russian troops stationed there.

You know, but of course, that trip would technically exclude the Russians. So now you can already see that Russia is becoming quite vocal about it. And as we know, Iran does not like this at all,

because what would happen then if you have this—how would they feel about an American private company having influence right there on Iran's northern border, where also Israel could be involved in a lot of very questionable activities? Already, when we talk about Karabakh—as I mentioned in one of the articles I wrote in the past—those areas of Karabakh that adjoined Iran, that were along the Iranian border and were taken back by Azerbaijan, what happened? Azerbaijan basically handed them over to Israel. They allowed Israeli intelligence to operate in those districts now.

#Pascal

So are you afraid that Pashinyan and the United States might, at some point, just create facts on the ground? Because I think what we're seeing right now is that they do whatever they can. I mean, I wouldn't be surprised if one day Pashinyan showed up in Washington again, signed a piece of paper, and the next day you had, like, 200 contractors—then a day later 400, and another day later 600—including U.S. military personnel who just show up and say, "You want to get rid of us? You'd have to bomb us out of here." And then they just start building that corridor without actually going through the formal processes and all that. Is that something that worries you?

#Pietro Shakarian

It somewhat does, but it's not really a main issue, because I can tell you, based on what I'm observing here in Yerevan, that there's some distance growing between Pashinyan and his Western backers. For example, if you look at Azatutyun, which is the Armenian branch of Radio Free Europe /Radio Liberty, all of a sudden their coverage of Pashinyan is very negative. Oh, really? Which is quite interesting. Yeah, yeah. And I'm also getting other very reliable reports that the United States is increasingly dissatisfied with Pashinyan. Plus, you have to consider something else—some objective effects—because Pashinyan recently got this boost, as I mentioned in my most recent article about Russia and Iran, by the way.

He got some support from the EU. I mean, Kaja Kallas made these remarks that, you know, "We will support you financially in your reelection bid to combat disinformation," and so on and so forth—kind of trying to replicate the Moldovan scenario in Armenia. But there are very serious differences between Moldova and Armenia. Sure, there are a lot of similarities in terms of size—it's an ex-Soviet republic, as we know, and all that. But first of all, Moldova is much closer physically to the EU. The former president of Romania, Băsescu, actually pushed forward—he kind of advanced this effort to make Moldovans Romanian citizens.

And so what we end up having now is a large Moldovan diaspora in Europe that has been kind of enabling Sandu to become president and all that. But there isn't that dynamic in the case of Armenia. There is a large Armenian diaspora, as we know—a very famous, large Armenian diaspora—but even within it, there's a lot of opposition to Pashinyan. And not every Armenian in the diaspora is an Armenian citizen who can vote in the elections. So that's one thing. The other thing is the fact that the Armenian economy is so dependent on the Russian economy. It's so integrated with it that

it would be very hard to pull Armenia out of this Eurasian sphere. It would be extremely difficult to do that.

So between that—because even if Pashinyan said overnight, “Let’s get rid of the Russians and let’s, I don’t know, integrate with Turkey and Azerbaijan and the West and all that”—in the interim there would be extraordinary economic disruptions, which would almost certainly spell his end immediately if he were to pursue such a policy. So I think there’s a realization in Washington that this is almost a bridge too far, that we can only push so much here, and that maybe we should concentrate our resources somewhere else or something like that. I don’t know, we’ll see how it all develops. But that’s kind of my sense—and also, you have to think, this corresponds with rising, very sharp opposition to Pashinyan in Armenian society. Throughout Armenian society, people are really, really increasingly fed up with him. So we see that as well.

#Pascal

So in a sense, in the southern Caucasus at the moment, it looks like there’s going to be a bit more calm—at least not the storm that seems to be brewing elsewhere. It doesn’t seem to be coming from there right now. So it’s probably going to be—whatever’s coming—is going to come directly at Iran from Israel, for sure, right? Not some further encircling of Iran that you might expect.

#Pietro Shakarian

I definitely think that’s the case. But also, of course, there are proxies of Israel. I mean, look at Azerbaijan—in the last war, in the so-called 12-day war—Azerbaijan was kind of used as a launching pad for Israel into Iran. But, you know, President Aliyev needs to be careful because he’s been very boastful after his conquest of Nagorno-Karabakh, and he’s been quite brazen in his attitudes toward Moscow and Tehran. I think, though, he can only go so far. He’s leading a country that’s hemmed in between two much larger powers.

And, you know, he’ll push his luck. But at some point, he’s got to realize there’s only so far you can go. I mean, he might say, “I’m a great middle power, maybe even a great power in the Caucasus, a superpower in the Caucasus,” he might even go so far as to say. But the reality is that he’s leading a small country, hemmed in between a large regional power to the south, which is Iran, and a superpower to the north, which is Russia. And in that scenario, Israel and the United States can only help so much. Turkey can only help so much.

And so, you know, he can only—well, I think that if he were smart, which I question—I don’t think it would be wise. I’ll put it that way. I don’t think it would be wise to push these much larger countries and see what you can get away with, right? To push and see how far you can go—that’s been his game. But we’ll see how this all turns out. I think Israel is going to try different ways to needle Iran; it’s not just going to be one direct hit from Israel to Iran.

#Pascal

What do you think the role of Turkey is going to be in the next round between Israel, the United States, and Iran? I mean, Turkey at this point has been playing a very duplicitous role in the region over the last 20 years—almost a mysterious one. But as far as I can tell, Turkey has no interest, would have zero interest, in Israel actually defeating Iran.

#Pietro Shakarian

And we also have to think, I mean, as much as we talk about an Israeli assault on Iran and the destabilization of Iran, right? From the point of view of some Turkish nationalists, if there were an independent Iranian Azerbaijan, they might like that or whatever. But at the end of the day, I also think it could lead to an independent Kurdistan, which would create new problems for Turkey as well. A scenario like that—regional destabilization—would have very negative security implications for Turkey. Turkey would not want this. Plus, there's the opposition in Turkey, as you know, as I know, as everybody knows, within Turkish society, to what Israel is doing in Gaza.

#Pascal

And let's—I mean, I suppose a lot of people have noticed by now that Israel always finds a new enemy, right? If it's not Iraq, it's Iran. The nature of the Israeli project—the settler-colonial project—is about expanding its territory all the time, right? Going into the next sliver, going into Syria, the Golan Heights, moving into the buffer zone, then making the buffer zone part of its territory, and then creating another buffer zone. You'll hit a wall eventually. If they eliminate Iran, they'll have the next problem. The next one they're going to seriously clash with is Turkey. There's no other one. And they'll do that—they'll go and blame what Turkey currently occupies in Syria.

#Pietro Shakarian

It's not only that in terms of, let's say... It's not only that in terms of the Greater Israel, you know, kind of geopolitical idea. It's also, Pascal, this notion of Israel not wanting any country in the region to possess some kind of military superiority. The idea is that Israel has to be the preeminent military power in the region, and they couldn't stand for anybody to get in the way of that. So if Iran is taken out, then the next logical step would be, as you say, Turkey. And also, I mean, it depends on what happens with Egypt domestically. Right now, with Sisi, Israel has no problem because, you know, Sisi is basically a puppet at the end of the day. But the idea is that nobody should even think of raising their hand against us. That would be the idea completely.

#Pascal

No, not just raising their hands, but even just not serving Israel, right? The only kind of partnership it accepts is subservience, right? Where you deliver cheap labor for the white European apartheid

state that then governs the region—just like the United States doesn't accept anyone in South America who's not subservient to them, right? That's what they're making clear right now. It's a clear hierarchy: you serve, you live; you stop serving, you die.

#Pietro Shakarian

So the Turks can't like this very much, seeing how—well, there are some questions there at the end of the day. And also, as we know, Syria—they kind of, you know, split that up like a pie, and that was that. But I think you're right that Turkey better watch out, because if Iran is taken out, then who's next in line?

#Pascal

And there's no NATO that could protect you. There's no NATO that could protect you against Israel. I mean, there's nothing under the sun that the United States wouldn't kill to prop up the Israeli project. But maybe, as a last kind of complex—the Europeans—what's your take on their role in this region now, under these new premises of the 2026 "we're back to the 19th-century world"? Because on the one hand, they have very big mouths; on the other hand, they have nothing to deliver.

#Pietro Shakarian

Well, they have a very loud bark, but no bite at all. It's not even that the bark is worse than the bite, because there's really no bite. And at the end of the day, the other problem with the EU is that all the statements coming out of Brussels basically echo what comes out of Washington. There's no independent agency there, Pascal. And there's a growing gulf when it comes to crises—an increasing gap between the European elites and the populations of Europe. I don't know when that's going to come to a head, but it's not going to last forever.

If there's one thing we know about—well, you can speak to this as a European yourself—it's that if there's one constant in the history of Europe, it's change, right? There have always been rises and falls; we've seen the rise of empires, the fall of empires, all throughout history. We talk about Rome, we talk about the upheavals of World War I, and we could go on through the whole story. So I think this is cyclical. I don't think these bureaucratic elites are going to be there forever. But I do see a future where the EU breaks up. So they're talking about the breakup of Iran.

They really want the breakup of Iran. But I think, in the end, what's more likely to happen—because I think it's going to happen—is that Israel will attempt a strike. There's going to be a new round, but I don't think it's going to end the way they imagine, with Iran being fragmented or broken up, or becoming like a new Syria or something like that. What's more likely, I think, is that we'll see the EU itself break up. Same thing, by the way, with Russia. Kaja Kallas made that statement—she wanted to break up Russia into different republics, right? That was her objective. And I think, more likely, we're going to see the EU break up.

#Pascal

At the end of the day, I think, you know, this is coming from somebody who's basically a figurehead of a glorified economic union made up of 27 member countries—not member republics, member countries. It just shows how these people haven't understood that they're the ones sitting in the glass house. Absolutely.

#Pietro Shakarian

What I like is how you always liken things to the USSR. You make these kinds of parallels. Specifically, I think it's a lot like the late USSR, right? In Russian, there's this term, **Zastoy**, meaning stagnation. When we talk about Brezhnev, the period of Brezhnev and Chernenko and those kinds of guys—that's what we're really in right now in the EU, right? We're in a **Zastoy**, we're in a stagnation. And soon, what follows after that? If we follow the pattern of Soviet history, there was an attempt at reform under Gorbachev, and then there was, you know, eventually dissolution. I think the EU probably isn't even going to go for the attempt at reform. I think they're just going to dissolve the way they're going.

#Pascal

The dumb thing about the Europeans right now is that they think the Russians aren't Europeans. Therefore, any kind of Russian experience can be discarded, as if it would never come back to us. It's like, come on—we've had a union on this continent, and it broke apart for the same reasons you're now in the process of breaking apart.

#Pietro Shakarian

You know, Kaja Kallas should know that better than anybody else, because Estonia was part of that union—her own father, you know.

#Pascal

I keep repeating that time and again. She, Kaja Kallas, is the Soviet-born daughter of a communist apparatchik. And that's the person who now runs the place.

#Pietro Shakarian

It's like, you know, the Europe thing. It's like everything's going back full circle, Pascal. You know, that's what we're dealing with here. You couldn't make it up. You couldn't make it up. No, you couldn't. It's impossible. Yeah.

#Pascal

And I also must say, I've been saying that for ten years in my classes. Usually, the question in Europe, as you pointed out, is not *if* borders change. The question is whether they change with or without violence. That's the only question. They change naturally. Unfortunately, we're currently in a period where the peaceful change of borders—the velvet divorce of Czechoslovakia, or Brexit, actually—seems to be over. So we're back to the violent version, which doesn't bode very well for Europe, because...

#Pietro Shakarian

And it's being facilitated, by the way, by the European elites, because the European elites are watching in real time—whether it's, I mean, the UK, which, as we know, is not in the EU anymore, but the UK—and, you know, I don't know, von der Leyen or Kaja Kallas basically endorsing what Trump is doing with Venezuela. I mean, when you're endorsing the law of the jungle, right? When you're endorsing the dismantling of international law, what do you expect is going to happen? That's eventually going to come back and hit you. You might think you're immune to that, but you know what? Europeans are just as human as anybody else. And it's going to come back.

#Pascal

Can I tell you what he saw this morning on German Twitter? Actually, it wasn't just German Twitter—that was also on the German evening news last night. The main, I think, the first big German channel. They interviewed this—ah, I forgot his name—he's a complete, utter idiot. I try not to remember his name, but they interviewed that guy about what the intervention in Venezuela means. And then the anchor, she actually asked, "Well, if Trump now went into Venezuela to take that guy out, could it be that he'll follow through on his threat of taking Greenland, which he already mentioned? Might he do that?" And then this utter idiot said something like, "Oh, you know, he kind of did a good thing by taking that guy out because he was a bad man." And then he added, "The Monroe Doctrine only refers to the Western Hemisphere, and Greenland is part of Europe. Therefore, it doesn't pertain to that."

#Pietro Shakarian

What? A complete idiot. That's not even basic news in Germany. I can't—but I just—I did tell you, that really actually shows the decline of the American—I mean, excuse me, the European elites. And I made kind of a Freudian slip there, because I was also thinking that, you know, one of the big problems in the U.S. for many years—and all you have to do is watch, I don't know, Jimmy Kimmel or one of those late-night shows—has been that Americans have become increasingly geographically challenged, right? They don't know where Greenland is versus Ukraine versus, I don't know, Iran. And so now I guess that's extending to Europe, because, as we can see, they don't even know that Greenland is part of the Western Hemisphere. I guess they assume it's...

#Pascal

I suppose he meant that it's part of the EU, therefore it's safe. I have no idea. But you know, that's the kind of people they interview on the evening news. No wonder the Europeans are completely out of their depth. The propaganda is now eating itself—it's eating its own people.

#Pietro Shakarian

Well, I also think the European elite have taught themselves a fairy tale that they now believe, like you're saying. I mean, when Mr. Borrell said, "Oh yes, the whole world is a jungle and Europe's a garden," right? As if nothing can affect us here in Europe. That racist thing, yeah. Yeah, that racist thing. But you know what? At the end of the day, Europe is just as susceptible to Trump's violations of international law as anybody else.

So, you know, like I always say, Denmark might not want to part with Greenland, but if Trump wants Greenland, what can they do? And it's a big issue. What we're seeing is the decline of the so-called European dream—whatever that was. But I think Europe will somehow come back from this, Pascal. I think the people are wiser than the elites. The problem is that the elites are extraordinarily undemocratic. For all their rhetoric about democracy, human rights, and European values—whatever those are—they're really not democratic at all. I mean, who elected von der Leyen? That's the question I asked you.

#Pascal

That's the only point where I'd push back a little bit, because, you know, who elected Merz? Who elected—well, I mean, in a parliamentary democracy, that's just how it works. So I'd leave that one aside a little bit. It's like, you know, the parliamentary election process did work; it's just that the whole system is a scam in the way it produces leaders. But the legitimacy is there—at least on paper. And also, look at Macron in France. I mean, there's another one who's just completely out of his depth. Yeah, that one was elected, unfortunately.

#Pietro Shakarian

I know. Yeah, straight to your point.

#Pascal

But then again, you know, you go to a prisoner on death row and ask him, "Do you want to hang or do you want to be shot?" And then, oh, you selected it, right? I mean, why do you complain? So it's more that kind of problem. I agree with that—it's the selection you're being given.

#Pietro Shakarian

Yeah, absolutely, Pascal. Unfortunately, you're completely right. Yeah.

#Pascal

Maybe one last thing—what are you looking out for now, at the very beginning of 2026, that you think people should keep an eye on?

#Pietro Shakarian

Oh, definitely keep an eye on Iran, because that's going to be the next big conflict, the next big attempt, I guess you could say, at regime change—regime removal, whatever. And, you know, if Israel and the United States are successful in doing this, it's going to have massive strategic implications for BRICS and for Eurasia, I think, at the end of the day. But also, I would not discount the impact of this Venezuela issue—this very flagrant violation of international law by the United States. And it's almost an understatement to say "flagrant," because it really was quite terrible. This is going to make more countries, you know, approach America in a much more cautious way.

What I'm trying to say is that this was a watershed moment, by which American soft power—if it had already been declining in recent years—has now really reached its bottom point. People are no longer going to buy into this rhetoric of democracy and liberty or whatever coming from the United States, because they'll say, "Well, this is just being used to justify these imperialistic adventures abroad and all that." And this is not serious; this is not real liberty or real democracy or anything like that.

So it's a watershed moment in the way the world perceives things, because you can say right now, in Venezuela, OK, what is Russia's reaction? What's China's reaction? What's the BRICS reaction to this? What are they going to do? They're limited in what they can do, and so on and so forth. But look at the reaction on the streets all throughout the world. Look at the reaction coming from Mexico, from Colombia, from Cuba, from all these different countries in Latin America toward the United States. And Trump, again, true to his fashion, has even threatened to invade Mexico.

And Colombia. And Colombia, yeah. So, I think this is a watershed moment in terms of how the U.S. is perceived in the world. It's also going to make the world more alert to issues like Iran and Palestine. That's a big one because, you know, the fact that the United States is co-signing a genocide—and actually participating in a genocide—in Gaza deals a huge blow to its international credibility. So between that and Venezuela, and also Iran, going into a second round with Iran, all of this is going to hurt the United States and its international reputation.

#Pascal

Yeah, no, you're absolutely right. The moment you have to use hard power is the moment you admit that soft power has failed. So that layer is already peeled away and probably gone for good. People

would probably start burning blue jeans if they weren't all made in China or Bangladesh by now. But that one's gone for good. And the mask is kind of off for good now. I mean, Biden still tried to keep the mask on, but that's being completely removed. So there's a little more clarity—though that doesn't help much against the violence—but it's more clarity.

#Pietro Shakarian

It is. And I think also, you know, a lot of people were saying that when we look back at when Trump was first elected, in his first term in 2016, there were people saying, well, really the main difference between Trump and, let's say, Obama is that the mask is off. Right? Well, we can say now, after Biden, the mask is truly off. I mean, if you can't see it now, you're blind. Right? You know, I mean, that's really what we're dealing with here. Yeah.

#Pascal

That's how my next Substack article is going to be—like "Blind Man Europe"—because they're the ones who still pretend everything's fine, just because they can touch the mask while the guy stands over there. But good. Pietro, thank you very much. That was a fairly wide-ranging talk. For people who want to follow you, where should they go?

#Pietro Shakarian

Well, I'm writing regularly for the American Committee for East-West Accord, but I also do articles for **The Realist Review**, which is edited by James Carden. So if they go to Substack and type in **The Realist Review**, they'll find that publication there. Also, as you know, I've written a book on Anastas Mikoyan and his reforms during the Khrushchev period. It's called **Anastas Mikoyan: An Armenian Reformer in Khrushchev's Kremlin**, published by Indiana University Press. So I'd definitely advise you to check that out. And yeah, we'll see what happens. Hopefully, Pascal, maybe beginning in 2016, we'll see the start of some sense coming back to the Europeans.

That's really my hope. Um, but it remains to be seen, you know what I mean? Because how can you have, again, these elites—the European elites—oppose the American invasion of Iraq? That actually is a huge, that's a good contrast. When you had Chirac and Schröder, together with Putin, opposing the war in Iraq, something changed between then and now, when you have Kaja Kallas and von der Leyen and all these people saying, "Oh yes, you know, Trump going into Venezuela, that was a good thing, or for democracy," you know, or something like that. So somewhere along the way, they became kind of, I guess you could say, neoconservatized.

#Pascal

No, they just—the Americans ramped up their transatlantic network project. I mean, they just let their heads in, right? And this transatlantic network is deep, it's old, and it's relatively large. The

talent pool is also still available, so I don't see that changing soon. And, funny enough, you had a little slip there because you said 2016. If it were 2016, I'd actually agree—I'd say there's still hope for Europe recovering. But by 2026, I have to say, I don't know. I mean, they still don't see it.

#Pietro Shakarian

No, they don't see it. And also, something else—I just want to add this, because it's really quite interesting. If you look at think tank papers coming out of the United States, out of Washington, during the years of the Iraq War, there was already discussion when they saw Chirac and Schröder.

#Pascal

Your audio just cut off. Yeah, your audio's gone.

#Pascal

It's just gone—no more audio.

#Pascal

Pietro, I don't hear you. But you know what? Maybe we take this as a sign from God and do the fade-out—it's been about an hour. Can you hear me now? Ah, yes, I hear you. I hear you again.

#Pietro Shakarian

Okay, no, I just wanted to say one thing—that if you look at these think tank papers coming out of the United States during the Iraq War, there were discussions. They felt that Chirac and Schröder were acting too independently. And they felt that, you know, the problem is that if Europe becomes too independent like this, it can become a strategic competitor to the United States, and we can't allow that. So there was this idea that Europe had to be subordinated—or maybe re-subordinated—to the United States, to emphasize that, you know, we are the dominant player here. So I think the Iraq War, and that's why I mentioned it, was an important moment when many people in the American elite thought, "We need to rein in Europe." And we see the culmination of that today, unfortunately.

#Pascal

Everybody, the works of Pietro Shakarian should be in the description box below. Pietro, thank you very much for your time today.

#Pietro Shakarian

Thank you very much, Pascal. Love having you here. Thank you, and Happy New Year.

#Pascal

Happy New Year.