

Why the West Can't Make Peace | Prof. Richard Sakwa

The warmongering is not a bug. It's a feature of the system the Political West has build to dominate the world. How can we change that? At the East-West Forum in Istanbul, Professor Richard Sakwa joins Pascal to examine the political West, European sovereignty, and the persistence of Cold War thinking. Sakwa argues that Western triumphalism has weakened diplomacy and narrowed political imagination. They discuss competing visions of modernity, the risks of confrontation, and whether China offers an alternative to bloc politics. The conversation concludes with Sakwa's proposal for a Charter Order grounded in international law, pluralism, and the unfulfilled promise of the United Nations. Richard's Links: University of Kent profile: <https://www.kent.ac.uk/politics-international-relations/people/2273/sakwa-richard> East-West Forum: <https://east-west-forum.com/> Neutrality Studies Links: Neutrality Studies Substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> Support Neutrality Studies: <https://neutralitystudies.com/donate> Neutrality Studies shop: <https://neutralitystudies.com/shop> Time Stamps 00:00 At the East-West Forum in Istanbul 00:39 The political, imperial, and philosophical West 03:22 One West and Europe's lost sovereignty 07:10 Cold War victory and the lost peace 08:46 From the postwar era to a prewar world 12:28 Fukuyama and the ideological trap 15:38 China and an alternative to bloc politics 18:57 A Charter Order: the promise of 1945

#Pascal

Welcome back, everybody, to Neutral Studies. Today, outside a conference in Istanbul, where we just discussed the East-West Forum and what is happening now in terms of the new multipolarity arising. And with me is one of the speakers at the forum, my friend and colleague, Richard Sakwa. Richard, welcome.

#Richard Sakwa

Lovely to be with you again.

#Pascal

Well, thank you so much for taking the time. Richard, we just discussed multipolarity basically for an entire day. What are you making of the discussions that you've heard and of this hopeful connection between East and West, being also in Istanbul?

#Richard Sakwa

I think this is the inaugural conference of what I hope will become a series. And it really was a sort of meeting of East and West, both politically, in the sense that we're meeting in Istanbul, which is the junction, if you like, of Europe and Asia. At the same time, we talked more specifically about what is the West. My argument, as some people may know, I've been arguing that since 1945, what was often called the Transatlantic Alliance, Euro-Atlanticism, that we need to give it a very specific political content. Hence, I call it the political West. And this political West is only the latest form of the West, and not the best, because I would argue that there's other forms.

The one which has dominated for 500 years has been the imperial West, the colonial West, or you could maybe put it, as one of our speakers argued most, I think, fruitfully, the idea of it as the development of a type of modernity, European modernity, which now claims to be the universal model of how people should live. This universalism, a universal modernity, whereas, of course, many other civilizations, cultures—some of our speakers, in particular from China, would very specifically argue that China is a civilizational state, and therefore it has a different vision of modernity. The third West I've taken to calling the philosophical West. And why is that? Because it's not just simply the Greco-Roman, the Judeo-Christian tradition, but those ideas came and developed in interaction with the whole what we now call West Asia, Persia, later on Babylon, all the rest.

In fact, the idea of philosophy itself, of thinking about society, came from Persia, from ancient Persia. And in fact, there was plenty of evidence of the influence of Indic cultures and so on. So, in other words, this philosophical West—and they're not in succession—that today we have these three layers: this philosophical West, which includes the Enlightenment, which includes the Renaissance, and many other moments. We have this colonial imperial West, and we have this political West, which is a US-dominated one, NATO, European Union, and it's the most impoverished one in intellectual terms. And just finally, what we were discussing today, and it was very heartening, is that we were discussing perhaps the fourth instantiation of the West, and that is a better West.

#Pascal

I wonder how we build toward that. May I just run one of my ideas—not ideas, observations—by you? Because I have one more West that I kind of try to conceptualize, and I call that the One West. And what I mean by that is this phenomenon that it seems, at the moment, that the Europeans have completely given up these national priorities, and they subsumed them under the American priorities, and the Americans seem to subsume their priorities under the Israelis. And the Israelis seem to constantly—you know, there's this constant question, like, "Oh, how do the Israelis do what they do?" and so on. But at the same time, they also get all of the support from the Europeans. And with the One West, I just try to conceptualize this idea that it's maybe a mistake to think of them as separate countries.

The way that it makes little sense to think of a body as separate organs, right? They all interact. And asking, is Israel guiding the United States, or the U.S. Israel, is asking, is the brain controlling the

heart or the heart the brain? It's like they're part and parcel of the same organism. And because they conceive of themselves as one unit, as, you know, defending civilization, defending being democratic—democracy, the only democracy in the Middle East—and everybody stands up and claps, also in the EU Parliament and in the Senate and so on. What do you think about that? This idea that it is one system, and the idea that it's nation-states is actually just, like, kind of a camouflage on top of what is actually happening. And that's Western civilization pushing against all the others, as it has done for the last five, six hundred years.

#Richard Sakwa

Yeah, I like the idea. But I think I'm arguing a similar thing, just by calling it something else. But it is, first of all, this political West is homogenizing. As you say, it's one of the key features of the political West since 1945 has been the de-sovereignization of the Western European states. The only state which has kept its sovereignty relatively has been the United States, which was the leader in shaping this West. It also has, of course, the wider West, covering West Asia, Israel you mentioned earlier. And, of course, the political West would include South Korea, Japan, and the Anglosphere.

But your point is an absolutely correct one, that it's homogenizing, de-sovereignizing, and that these states, apart from the United States, cannot understand and define their own national interest. Israel can, in the way it does, in its very strange sort of perverse manner. But the rest of the states—we're talking about the legacy European states, Germany, France, United Kingdom, the E3 as they're called now—the inability to define, you know, what is the, first of all, the general national interest of the community itself and of the individuals making it up.

And they've lost this ability of having strategic thinking. But I don't... It is homogenizing, but at the same time, there's always been the tensions between... What's paradoxical is that it became more homogeneous when it, at least at the end of the Cold War, actually became more radicalized by a whole set of philosophical, political, geopolitical challenges. Because, as one of the speakers said, there is nothing worse than victory for destroying a state—the sense of impunity that always permitted this shamelessness of actions—which has reached an absolute peak at the present time.

#Pascal

That's what is so weird about it, right? I mean, the people who believe that they won the Cold War even—and a lot of people will argue against that, including, of course, Jack Matlock and many others—it's like there was no winning of the Cold War. It was wound down, and then you had a proper moment in the 1990s, which I still remember, that was, like, super optimistic about the future, right? Everything will be better, everything will be good, and now peace will spread, right? Peace will break out. And then it didn't. And then the warmongering continued. And we now have data and research on all of the wars and all of the violent interventions that were done by the United States after '89 that are even more than between '45 and '89. And so, is this the outcome of constantly winning? If you win, then you get addicted to your own stuff.

#Richard Sakwa

Your self-importance and impunity, and you're standing above the law and so on. Yeah, Brown University in Massachusetts has estimated that, at the minimum, direct deaths from the victory, if you like, since the end of the Cold War, is nearly a million. It's 800,000. Of course, in recent months, it's gone up massively as well. One way of looking at it: direct consequences of the various conflicts and wars which have started and been fought since the end of the Cold War. And that excludes the ones dying from sanctions and lack of medicine and so on.

#Pascal

Because that's half a million a year. Yes.

#Richard Sakwa

So the tally is quite a big one.

#Pascal

Yes, a huge one.

#Richard Sakwa

Can I say the way that I'm now beginning to try to conceptualize why, after the end of the first Cold War, we continued and perpetuated the logic of the Cold War, including the institutions of the Cold War, NATO above all, but even, in its own way, the European Union, and the thinking of cold warfare and enemy distinction—that we're the only universal model of civilization, of modernity, and so on—that false universalism. Again, one of the speakers talked about that. The way I see it is that I go back now to Fernand Braudel, and he divided visions and understanding of historical time in three different ways. The first one is the *longue durée*, and the *longue durée*, of course, for us, would be, if you like, democratic or industrial capitalism.

Right. That's the historical epoch in which we live: capitalism, where the market and various types of capitalism—we've had social democratic inflection, we've had neoliberalism for the last 40 years, we had a different type of corporate capitalism in the late 19th century and in the 20th century, and so on. But that's the *longue durée*. Then he would say, we have cycles, the next thing within that. And I'm now seeing that we had a cycle—many cycles—but the latest one, 1914 to 1945, the cycle of European civil wars, which sucked in colonial troops from many outsiders, and the United States, of course. But that cycle then came to an end.

We're now living in the tail end of the next cycle, which is the 1945 post-war cycle of Cold War, of the dominance of the political West, of Euro-Atlanticism, transatlanticism, a vision of European unity

which is disintegrating in front of our eyes. So this is the cycle we're living in. We're living at the end of that cycle. The last one ended in a massive world war. This one, we're living in these post-war years, we're now—it's gradually turning, if you like, into a pre-war situation where everybody's preparing for war, warning of war, talking about arming for war, preparing populations for war, who don't seem to be enthusiastic for it, by the way.

#Pascal

They shall just never, ever call it again sleepwalking. I don't think it was sleepwalking in the First World War. They were doing it consciously. Sleepwalking now.

#Richard Sakwa

Yes. Hermann Broch did a marvellous novel called *The Sleepwalkers*, and it's got the three stages. Christopher Clark used that title for a marvellous book. It shows the spirit of the time, that militarism, that sort of inner decay of a society, and so Germany in that case. But if I look at that, I would actually argue that in 1912, '13, '14, there was war euphoria. Yes.

#Pascal

Especially in '14, in August, once it broke out, everybody was like, finally. Absolutely.

#Richard Sakwa

I would say we don't have that now.

#Pascal

We luckily have war anxiety, I would say.

#Richard Sakwa

Yes, rather than a fever.

#Pascal

Yes. Yeah, rather than euphoria. It's not like, ah, when is it going to start? It's more like, oh no, it will start.

#Richard Sakwa

And all the ideology at that time of the cleansing power of war, the cleansing power of nations. People can't do that now because we've got nuclear weapons. And people know. That's why this pre-

war is why I use the word Cold War. Because a Cold War, by definition, can only happen in a nuclear age. Otherwise, they turn into hot wars. So this is an intensified Second Cold War. Can I just say that from Fernand Braudel, he talks about *longue durée*, he talks about the cycles, and different people can interpret them in their own way. But then the final one for him was the event.

Now, what is interesting, and this was reflected in some of the discussions we had at the East-West Conference today, is that when Fukuyama talked about the end of history, he of course said there will always be events, and specifically events. So today we have meaningless events, lots of events, but precisely that end of history was that historical time in the Fernand Braudel sense of *longue durée* and the cycles allegedly had ended. So all we are in, for Fukuyama, are sub-Nietzschean endless events and events. In other words, the whole idea was time was frozen in that moment of alleged Western victory, that it was the only vision of modernity.

Of course, he said later, events will happen, but only events. And therefore, he ignored the larger issues associated with a larger historical cycle, and indeed the bigger issues about the nature of capitalism, equality, justice, the vision of what a human should be in modern civilization. So, paradoxically, that Kojévian version of Hegelianism is actually—was more accurate. We all dismiss the end of history as nonsense, which of course it was. But in a profound philosophical sense, he put his finger on something. And that's why 30 years later, we're still talking about Fukuyama. But we've misinterpreted him.

#Pascal

Yeah. I mean, to be fair to him, why he said events is because he said, of course, things aren't over, but the ideological struggle is done. We will not have ideological struggle anymore. And in a very weird way, what we're seeing now is that this school of thought, this liberalism, has itself transformed into such an ideological beast that it's really hard to see how this is not kind of now going to be another ideological struggle with those who are pragmatic. I mean, I perceive the Russians and the Chinese and the Global South in general as just pragmatic, saying, like, no, I mean, we want to do what's good for us, and we will put a foot down when that needs to happen. And, you know, in the Global South, even less militaristic. But the West conceives of itself as this one thing united under this liberal ideology.

#Richard Sakwa

That's right. There's a whole package of issues associated with that idea. One of them is that the West has become hermetic, closed. By that I mean that it only talks to itself, and it cannot engage with anyone else.

#Pascal

It even negotiates with itself to end the war in Ukraine, right?

#Richard Sakwa

There's a magnificent peace conference in Switzerland, of all places, which was a talk without the combatants involved.

#Pascal

Peace negotiations without one of the main combatants.

#Richard Sakwa

Yes, so absolutely. So it's both sort of hermetic.

#Pascal

It becomes hermetic.

#Richard Sakwa

And it can't do diplomacy. It can't do diplomacy. I go back, of course, one of the other things is classic Schmittianism, this friend-foe distinction. Very powerful dynamic, which, you know, many people would say. And what was fascinating, because let me just say that we're still talking about the West, I would have liked to have heard more today about the East and the vision of the East. We had a little bit about the BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, with some excellent Chinese scholars' participation, Indian participation—fascinating. But there was no real substance of a vision. If we're talking of a political West, we can talk about a political East. But a political East is not simply the opposite of a political West. It is exactly countering the logic which underpins it. So it isn't simply counter-hegemonic, doing the same thing from the other end. It is anti-hegemonic, anti-bloc politics, and it's for pluralism, like ASEAN, for example.

#Pascal

But that's the question, because people, brilliant minds like John Mearsheimer, might argue with you about this one, because the assumption is that if the Chinese become top dog, they will, out of the logic of great power and superpower competition, start acting exactly like the United States and like Great Britain. So that's a question: can it be anti-hegemonic?

#Richard Sakwa

Yes. Yes, it can. And in fact, one can say, well, certainly the Chinese would argue that. But I actually do think it's not just the Chinese. Many people are arguing China should be more active in international politics. It's refusing to do so. Yes, it's supporting international law. It's supporting the

United Nations in form and committed to international law. But simply, why aren't Russia and China, for example, establishing an anti-NATO? And as he said, China and Russia are moving in parallel. In other words, they will never meet, never vote. And, you know, I can give many different examples that they repudiate bloc politics. They repudiate this logic of friend-enemy.

You know, we all laugh, you know, win-win situations. But, you know, I actually quite like it. What's not to like about it? So there's a different... We had this discussion with one of the participants. That is a different, not just epistemology, how you study it, and that's a question for Mearsheimer as well, that methodology. But it's also, I would argue, sorry to use a fancy word, the ontology, the substance, the very thing itself, is different. And the ontology of the political West is built on this 500 years of dominance, its arrogance, its civilizational setting the standards, and its false universalism, whereas the ontology is so very different.

It hasn't emerged overnight. Of course, it's got long roots in Confucianism and so on, but it's now a conscious decision of this leadership in China, with Singapore, with the Philippines, in a different sort of way. And I'm thinking of ASEAN, the spirit of ASEAN. Yes, there's conflict there. It's not ideal. But the logic of politics at Fort Demure is what they're trying to do. So it's not just anti-West. It's post-West or simply non-West. Let's not even refer to the West. It's actually something totally different.

#Pascal

The non-West. This is maybe the last question because I couldn't actually ask it in the forum. You know, this idea of the liberal international order, and the politicians all over Europe and North America are saying, "Oh, China and Russia are challenging the liberal international order," or, "They're rejecting the liberal international order." What they imply with that is, of course, that China and Russia stand for illiberal internationalism, or illiberal disorder, or illiberal anarchy, or whatever it is. I mean, you automatically assume they stand for the opposite. Of course, that's not what they do. But if we have to give a word to that, like, what order is the order that will emerge once we're done with the BS that we are currently going through? I mean, it's not going to be the liberal international order anymore. But what order will it be? What word would you give it?

#Richard Sakwa

Well, first of all, I don't think the liberal international order ever existed. That's why I call it the political West. The political West had two faces to it: a benign face, a Commonwealth face, delivering public goods, which was in conformity with the United Nations and international law. That's the best side of the political West, and it delivered genuine things: free trade to some degree, but of course it was overlaid by neoliberal things. And the other side was the imperial side of the political West. So what you're saying is that this alternative model of world order—and it is an alternative model—what will it deliver? It will deliver the premise of 1945: comity, both of great powers working together and of the nations of the world working together.

#Pascal

What will we call it? What will be the name?

#Richard Sakwa

Well, let's call it the fulfillment of the promise of 1945. We'll call it the Charter international system, based on the UN Charter finally beginning to work. The Charter Order. The Charter Order.

#Pascal

Ladies and gentlemen, it's getting dark over here, and we actually have to run for dinner at 7 o'clock. We are now heading towards the Charter Order, and this was Professor Richard Sakwa. Links will be in the description box below.

#Richard Sakwa

Richard, thank you so much. Thank you. Take care. Bye-bye.