The International Order Is Dead | Amb. Sándor Kusai

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#Pascal

Welcome back, everybody. Today I'm joined again by Ambassador Sándor Kusai, who, among other positions, served as Hungary's top diplomat in China between 2008 and 2014. Sándor, welcome back.

#Sándor Kusai

Very nice to meet you again.

#Pascal

Glad to have you, uh, because I need to ask a diplomat—aren't we just witnessing the insane collapse of the diplomatic system and international law right in front of our eyes? I mean, what's happening with Venezuela? And you just broke another, uh, a horrible message to me that I wasn't even aware of. Can you tell us what it is?

#Sándor Kusai

The news today—well, by our timing it's today, but I think in the U.S. it happened yesterday—is that Donald Trump, as president of the United States, decided and issued an executive order for the U.S. to leave 35 international organizations, plus 31 that are part of the United Nations system. So practically, the U.S. is leaving a total of 66 international organizations, a big chunk of which are various agencies, funds, and structures within the UN, including, for example, the United Nations Economic and Social Council.

So even large and important parts of the UN system will be left alone by the United States, including stopping any U.S. funding for these organizations around the world. I think it's very symptomatic. It shows clearly that the global diplomatic, institutionalized structure is collapsing—and collapsing very fast. Furthermore, with the United States' intrusion into Venezuela, it became very clear that

international law as such, the international legal system, is also collapsing very fast. So what we see now is really the end of the international system as we know it. And instead of that, we have the Wild West in international relations.

#Pascal

This very pessimistic approach is like what I read in most of the media—and I actually agree. I mean, this is not the first time the United States has invaded another country and even kidnapped its president. It has happened before. But the big difference is that before, they tried to put on the velvet glove of humanitarianism. They tried to cushion the words, to create a framing, to build a legal rationale and whatnot. And this time—nothing. It's just all out. And now there's the attack on the institutions that the United States itself built to manage international structures. I mean, in your opinion, in your lifetime and professional time as a diplomat, have we ever seen a moment this blatantly attacking the very structure of how diplomacy works—or did we?

#Sándor Kusai

Yes, I fully agree with that. I have never seen such a thing, such a process, during my more than 40 years of dealing with international relations. On one hand, it's really very sad and makes me worry about the future of the whole international system. On the other hand, I have a little feeling of satisfaction, because for the last few years, not only I but many analysts of international relations have been talking about the imminent change of the world order, of the international system. It was the result of technical or scientific analysis of the processes, and many people criticized us, saying we were seeing dark things that weren't really there.

Everything was okay, especially in the European countries. The school of thought in the European Union, and among the politicians there, always said that our analysis was somehow wrong or exaggerated. But here are the proofs. This process of the international law and the international system collapsing has reached, I think, a turning point. This turning point consists of a few important events. The first one was the attack guided by the CIA against some Russian installation near Vladimir Putin's residence in Valdai. That's a new level. The U.S. confirmed that it was not the residence of the Russian president—but you know, if something is five kilometers away, then it's practically the residence.

You may sugarcoat it as you want, but it's the residence. Then came the aggression against Venezuela and the kidnapping of President Maduro. Then, just yesterday or the day before, the boarding of a Russian-flagged ship on the high seas. And now we have the formal American decision to leave a big bunch of international organizations and defund them. So this is the new phase. It's a turning point altogether. Altogether, these events show a turning point, which says that we are getting back to the late 19th century of power politics—nothing else but brutal, sheer power. And that means the end of the international UN system as we've known it since 1945.

#Pascal

The UN system itself seems to be under attack now. Do you think the UN will still be around next year, with its headquarters in New York?

#Sándor Kusai

For another year, most probably. These processes are not very fast. But I think the UN is heading very quickly in the same direction as the League of Nations ended up. It's terrible what is happening. I don't know how long it will take. And I want to add one element: it is not only the responsibility of the great powers—first and foremost, the United States—but also the responsibility of the mechanism of the United Nations, especially its Secretary-General, Mr. Guterres. It is his responsibility as well, because during his management the United Nations became totally paralyzed, unable to solve any issue, and it serves less and less as a platform for debate. So it is not only about great power politics; it's also, I would say, about the aging and paralysis of the international system, including the UN itself.

#Pascal

However, like Russia, China, and, you know, even the Europeans—at least the Europeans pay lip service to the UN Charter. You know, the Charter is still a holy cow. The Europeans, of course, don't live up to it—not at all. I mean, they do the opposite of it. But at least in words, they still refer to it, which the Trump administration stopped doing, while all the others still do. They're kind of saying, "No, we want an international law–based world," especially Russia, China, the Global South. Do you think what we're seeing is the United States now actively fighting against this? Or are we seeing them leaving, and everybody else just takes what's left and continues with it? I mean, you don't need to have that thing in New York. You could go back to Geneva, you could put it in Malaysia—you could put it anywhere, right?—and continue with the procedural rules. What's your thought on that?

#Sándor Kusai

I don't think it's possible. I think, by the way, that for the policy of the Trump administration—which means, for the United States as such—the death of the UN or the international system is collateral damage. Not a goal, but collateral damage. Yeah, yeah, yeah. The Trump administration tries to get rid of every factor, every institution, everything that seems to limit the freedom of action of the U.S. as a power—an international power, economic power, ideological power, political power, and military power. They try to get rid of everything that limits their freedom of action. The international system and the United Nations are only part of this, but the major aim and major policy are to inflict—or rather, to reinsert, if you want—the hegemony of the United States by all means available. But why now?

#Pascal

Why now? I mean, why not do that in 1999? It would've been so much easier, right? Why did these institutions survive thirty years of a unipolar moment, and now they're dying—or now the United States is going on the frontal attack? Is it because other powers have come up and now actually have structural weight in this system, and the U.S. has to get rid of the system if it can't use it to project power?

#Sándor Kusai

Yes, I fully agree with you. That's the problem. In 1991, when the unipolar moment came, these structures—the international law—were transformed by the U.S. into a rule-based system. The rules are different from the law. The rules were established by the U.S. and, to a lesser extent, by its allies. They are less and less allies, more and more vassals. But that transformation has happened. What we have now is much more about rules than international law. But for at least four or five years, maybe more, with the emergence of other powers—even those considered secondary by U.S. thinking, like India—because the U.S. has always counted China, and for the last few decades China and Russia, as major powers.

Subordinate, but major. But they never counted India as a serious power—that's what we know. Yet even they gained stronger power, greater influence in this international system of diplomacy, policymaking, and international law. Even a secondary power from the U.S. point of view, like South Africa, could begin a very, very difficult legal process in the International Court of Justice about Gaza and the role of Israel, and so on. So it's shown very clearly over the last few years that this system may work as a limitation on American power. So the time has come now to get rid of it.

Because without playing within the framework of the rules established by the U.S.—which has some connection to international law, at least on a principled level—it's very clear that this form of play does not serve the strategic goals of the U.S. I think nobody took it very seriously when, a month ago, the Trump administration published the new National Security Strategy. We read it, I also analyzed it, but we couldn't really understand that it meant a total turnaround in American policy. In that nice diplomatic language—which in places is very brutal, the sentences they use—but still, in that nice diplomatic language, it wasn't so clear that the attack was going on against the whole system.

And now it's very clear with the recent developments—the new Monroe principle began with Venezuela. Please, Colombia, Brazil, Mexico, prepare yourselves, because you are next, on the level of the Monroe principle. But if you look further, you can see how the preparation is going for a new attack against Iran. You can also see how our poor European colleagues, some of whom have a colonial past—we Hungarians did not, but they did—are reacting. So, Greenland. It's the clearest example that nothing is stable anymore. Nothing is fixed. And it has two very important consequences. I'm afraid that the United Nations and the whole international system are heading for a total overhaul, not necessarily a rescuable one. The next year, or year and a half, will decide it.

We will see whether the UN is rescuable or not. That's one element. And the second element is that this new policy, this new development, opens up a lot of possibilities for the other great powers. Whether they use it in a real political way or they miss it will decide the longer-term processes. Whether the situation is used by Russia to finish the Ukraine war on their terms as soon as possible, or by China to solve the issues of the South China Sea, Taiwan, and others very fast—or if they play according to the old rules—within one, two, or three years, the United States will be strong enough again to force its will everywhere. So there is a window of opportunity for the other great powers. The consequence may be that it will be the final nail in the coffin of the international system if they use it. If they miss it, they will lose their great power position. So they face a very difficult choice.

#Pascal

As we know, the international system as it is now will eventually change—there will be a new system, a new way of interacting. But the process of getting there tends to be extremely messy and often involves a lot of violence. International law is, of course, a way of structuring even violence, right? So, in your view, is there any part of international law that you think, for whatever reason, might still be useful?

I mean, after the Second World War, we actually renamed the law of war—we called it international humanitarian law. We just changed the label. But it would make sense to change it back again and say, no, no, we have a law of war, and once there's war, here are the rules of engagement. And these rules are just as good for the United States because they help you—they help you get your soldiers back, they help ensure your soldiers aren't hurt as much. On the other hand, the United States today doesn't fight like that anymore. I mean, are we really witnessing a departure from the way the great powers interacted, even in the 19th century, with each other?

#Sándor Kusai

I'm a very optimistic person—please. Which means I'm a very, very well-informed pessimist. Practically, that means the optimistic part is that I'm convinced the specialists in international law and the diplomats are clever and creative enough to construct a new structure for international law, and they'll find nice new names for their creations. Like before: it was the League of Nations, it failed, then we decided on the United Nations. It's much nicer than the League of Nations.

But the substance is that we go back, in content, to the end of the 19th century—a structure of open power grabs by great powers. With one big difference: it will be on a much, much higher level. At that time, it was only the European great powers, plus the U.S. and Japan, who competed for influence. All the rest of the world were not subjects of this action, but objects of their colonization. Today, under the present circumstances, with the current development of technology—war technology and everything—we have many more players. We have some major players from the Global South, from India to some extent, and Brazil and Indonesia, which is always forgotten in Europe, but it's a serious country.

And so on. So most probably we'll have a much more complex power game. And as a result, we'll have a much more complex international system, and a system of international law in the future. But it will take years to create. It's not so simple. We're now in the very difficult years of this process, with many wars. If you look at it—yesterday or the day before—the European Coalition of the Willing decided to establish military bases in Ukraine after the ceasefire. So everybody is building up their country, their position, for military confrontation. This time it's in Europe, and in other parts of the world.

#Pascal

But we're now in a situation where the only outspoken, clearly declared threat to EU territory comes from the ally in the West, not from the adversary in the East, right? Russia has not once said, "I want a piece of the European Union." Donald Trump has now made it clear: "You either give it, or we're going to go and take it." What do you want to do? How long do you think it will take for Europeans to, you know—they've been hit in the face so many times, but they're still saying, "Please, more, don't leave." How long do you think this will go on? Endlessly? Are they that deep in it?

#Sándor Kusai

Yeah, endlessly. I'm convinced that the European political elites—the decision-makers, both in the major countries—because, sorry, nobody takes Denmark seriously with its population of five million. Nobody. The issue about Greenland is the French president's statement that he would send the French Navy to defend it, which is, by the way, a joke, of course. We understand that. But the European great powers' political elite, and the European integration's political elite—Madame Ursula von der Leyen and her team—they are simply incapable of adjusting to this new process. They don't have a real picture of the facts. They don't have any understanding of what is going on. So they continue to behave in the same pattern as 10 or 15 years ago. It's totally out of context. And I don't think they are capable of learning. They're like the Bourbons in France—you know, they never learned. That's what's happening.

#Pascal

But, you know, in terms of alliance dynamics, this isn't even new, right? I mean, alliances aren't just aimed at the outside. Your country, Hungary, in 1956, was invaded by its own alliance—the Warsaw Pact, right? Alliances are also there so the top dog can, you know, order its minions around. Yeah. The question is, how long will it take the minions to realize this isn't a very beneficial way for them to operate? But then again, if you pay off the top elite—which is what the transatlantic system is doing—they'll go along for a long time, right? So the Europeans will probably, I mean, this will probably continue for the next couple of years.

#Sándor Kusai

It will continue until European societies wake up and change their leadership. But it's a very difficult and long process, especially in our current democratic system. You have to build up a majority—not only among the population, but also, according to different election rules, you have to turn it into a political majority, which is not so easy. We've seen in quite a few countries that either a large part or even the majority of the population wants a change in policy, but the political mechanisms work in such a way that they can't impose their will at the political level. So it will take a long time.

Maybe it even needs some real conflict. So, to be a little bit cynical, I very much hope that the Trump administration takes action—whatever action they want to implement in Greenland—as soon as possible. It would be a final kick for the current European attitude toward its main ally, because that would wake up the minds of Europeans. They still believe in illusions about their alliance with the US. So we need some radical action to make it clear. I know it sounds cynical, but I hope this will happen. The sooner it happens, the better for Europe's long-term perspective.

#Pascal

I have to say, I'm absolutely certain that once the United States invades Greenland and puts its soldiers there, Mark Rutte will explain to us that this is just an administrative change in stationing policy. In the alliance. In the alliance. Everything is fine. We're fine. It's just a disagreement on the margins about how the management should happen. It's a technicality. But what I really don't understand—I wonder if you can explain to us—is how it happens that within the European Union, even though we have these 27 member states, which on paper should all have more or less an equal say in what's happening, and a unique consensus and whatnot, majority decisions, of course, still carry forward.

But now we have a situation where the sanctions mechanisms, which were meant as a foreign policy tool, are being turned inward to suppress dissent inside the European Union. How is it possible that even countries like Hungary and Slovakia, which have been extremely critical and have said several times they're not on board with this, still end up part of a 27-member state decision to go along with it? How does the political process work to coerce everyone into agreeing to these things?

#Sándor Kusai

I think, as far as I know, it's a very sophisticated system of partial deals and coercion across many, many fields of activity—some coercion on investment rules, some on legal procedures, others in technical areas or environmental protection. It's a very complex integration, and every part of it can be used as a tool to pressure one or a few countries to give up their position, or at least retreat from it, on other issues. So it's a very complex structure, which is practically, I would say, unmanageable from the point of view of implementing national interests, because there are so many interactions.

It's a web. And if you're a fly and fall into the web of your enemy, you can't get free of it. That's the same situation we have now. And I want to add one more thing. I think this structure will be kept intact as long as they're capable. Not only Mr. Rutte will say that it's just a technicality—the same we'll hear from Kaja Kallas: it's a technicality, nothing changed. But the problem, the big issue, is that it's inherent in the structure of the European Union. It's a bad structure, and all the structural dysfunctions are coming to the surface now, and we can't manage them.

#Pascal

I mean, I like your metaphor of the web to explain how the different knots are caught in there. But the strange thing is that, although it's a spider's web, there are spiders that can move very freely on it and actually impose themselves very strongly—Spider Ursula, Spider Kaja Kallas. There are a couple of kingpins, really, who are able to use this web very skillfully. How is that possible? Because in theory, they should also be part of the dependency structures, but it seems that some are more equal than others.

#Sándor Kusai

It shows very clearly that the equality of sovereign states is a lie. There are "more equals," if you like, and the system works for the benefit of those more equals. For a time, with an organization, with some rules—like the requirement of unanimity or veto power, if you want to put it that way—you can temporarily create the appearance that it's really a union of equals, but it's not. That's the reality. So, at least after a few decades, it's becoming very clear now. And furthermore, I think it's very important to understand that not only the general global international structure is in a very big crisis now, but something similar is happening in the European Union itself.

Because it is a union, it's an integration of a group of countries—27 of them—which have very clearly different national interests. Excuse me, what is the common interest of Portugal and Finland? Think about it. So we created a mechanism that seemingly can coordinate the national interests of all the countries. And the bigger the crisis, the higher the tension. These differences in national interests become clearer and clearer. Just one example to understand it: if you look at Spain's stance on the Venezuelan issue and compare it to, let's say, Hungary's or Estonia's, you'll see that there are fundamental differences in their approaches to Latin America.

Spain has a historical colonial past but also a very active present-day relationship with Latin America. Its position on Venezuela is completely different. They signed the same statement as Brazil, Colombia, and other countries. The only country from the European Union that signed that statement was Spain. So the construct is flawed. Nobody can help it, but it's very clear it's flawed because it serves the interests of large European companies—the transnational corporations of Europe, the banks, and some big firms that use the European Union as a mechanism to advance their interests.

#Pascal

That's it. I was about to ask that. So whose union is it? Maybe not whose country, but who's using it? Because the European Union by now is a toolbox with a lot of tools—but who's using the tools? It' s international capital. That's it. What will they say?

#Sándor Kusai

Oh, simple.

#Pascal

What does this do? What does this do to the global structure? Because, you know, the others—Brazil, Mexico, Ecuador, but also all of Southeast Asia, the African nations—they all see this, and they see it much more clearly than, for instance, the Europeans do. What does this do now? Every reaction creates a counterreaction. And I wonder, I mean, if you need to use violence on that scale against Venezuela, that's not a sign of strength. It's actually a sign of weakness once you have to go there. So where are we?

#Sándor Kusai

We are, I think, in the middle of a process where every serious country is waking up, and their political leaders are beginning to redefine their national interests and their capacities. As a second step, they'll redefine their alliances, economic cooperation, and so on. It will come, and it will come very fast. If you are, let's say, the prime minister of Malaysia, you'll think very seriously—because Malaysia is not a very big country. In European terms, it would be a big country, but in Southeast Asian terms, the population is not very large. And you may serve as a simple example to show the world that the U.S. can control Southeast Asia as well. So the policymaking, the choice of alliances, the strategy for building up and strengthening ASEAN—going further than simple diplomacy, building up much more—it will come. It will come very fast, I'm convinced.

#Pascal

The problem we're in now is that, in my own studies, neutrals are always secondary targets of attack because they're also not on board, right? Primary targets are the enemy states, but secondary targets are the neutrals, because they're also not on board. And we see how the United States is currently cracking down on anyone or anything that tries to remain, you know, in between, or tries to have connections with everybody, right? This is going to happen now—this coalescing around the poles—although the Russians and the Chinese very much resist that. They don't do this pole-building. But the pressure on the neutrals is going to be huge going forward. How do you think they'

ll deal with that? And by "neutrals," I mean places like Malaysia, Indonesia—well, Mongolia is a little bit outside of that—but those states that are actively trying to have a multi-vector relationship with everybody.

#Sándor Kusai

They will try to continue this multi-vector policy for the time being, but they'll be forced to choose sides. They'll resist that as much as possible. They'll try to avoid it, but the logic of events will force them to choose sides. Those countries that recognize this earlier and start building their own system or web of international connections in a breaking-up world will be more successful. Those that do it later will be more the objects of events.

#Pascal

So do you think BRICS is actually a way for certain states to try to pull themselves into a web of—well, not a web like the EU, but an interconnection that isn't European-based? Because I've also interpreted the attack on Venezuela as an attack on BRICS as well. And the preparation for attacking Iran is an attempt to break the belief that an alternative structure is possible.

#Sándor Kusai

Yes, I think in the wider context, that's why I told you the U.S. policy right now is about pushing American supremacy—first in the Western Hemisphere, and then, if the other great powers don't take action in their own regions of influence, later there as well. The other element is breaking the BRICS one by one. And if the BRICS countries don't recognize this and don't increase their cooperation—both qualitatively and quantitatively—then they'll lose. That's for sure. The main purpose is breaking the BRICS one by one.

And that's why I told you that the United Nations, the international system, is just collateral damage, which makes it very suitable for the U.S. to break. If it's damaged—if the international system, international law, is dying—it creates even more opportunities for the U.S. to break the BRICS. And by the way, in the process of breaking the BRICS and that structure, they also break their own allies. They really turn them into full vassals. This process has already begun. After all, Finland is no longer a neutral state. Sweden is not a neutral state. I don't know how long Austria can remain neutral.

Switzerland has slightly better chances, but they're not very good anymore. Yeah, we remember the history of the Napoleonic Wars—Switzerland was not neutral at that time. It was taken, it was occupied. That's it. So that's what we're talking about. I agree with you that the U.S. tries to be—or that's the logic, that they try to be—the neutral states. But the neutral states, especially if they're not embedded like Switzerland within NATO and the EU, but are in other parts of the world, have the possibility for some countermeasures and counterplays. But if they miss that window of opportunity, they'll suffer as well.

#Pascal

Yeah, but it's an even more difficult game, because the moment these countries start building military alliances, you actually lose structurally—you just go into confrontation, right? You go into polarization. So the only chance BRICS has to get out of this without falling into the war logic is by refusing to polarize while still building up the network and saying, "We'll build it up until we can invite everybody to join us," right? But without becoming an adversary. That's an incredibly difficult feat to pull off.

#Sándor Kusai

Look, in diplomacy, in international relations, I'm convinced that the most difficult thing is always to go through a very narrow path. That requires the most talent—the genius of a good diplomat—to bring your country or your structure through that narrow path between very difficult and bad choices. That's what many countries in the world have to practice. Talented leaders may manage it; less talented ones will fail. That's the system we're in.

And of course, some great powers like the Chinese, the Russians, the Indians, and the Brazilians always talk about preserving the UN, the Charter, as you mentioned, and so on. It may be useful as a tactical tool, this position, for a certain time. But if the international structure is fundamentally broken, this narrative becomes counterproductive. And that's where we are now, I think. Soon, either the other powers change their narrative—their concept for rebuilding international relations instead of just safeguarding the system—or, if they don't change it, they will lose. That's the strategic logic.

#Pascal

Who would have thought that on the second day of 2026 we'd have to say goodbye to the international structure as we knew it?

#Sándor Kusai

You know, from my point of view, it's an emotional goodbye. I don't like this process, but that's how reality works. Whatever is born must die—that's a certainty. And that's what we have with the present international system. The UN may be renamed or replaced by some other structure, but as it was established in 1945, it's dying now. It's lived its life—eighty years. Sorry, guys. That's it. Yeah.

#Pascal

It wasn't all bad in those eighty years. It kind of served a purpose. Okay, so Noor, in that case, that means everything's up for grabs. Who has the best idea for the next system? We'll certainly talk again. Is there anything we haven't mentioned yet that you think is really important?

#Sándor Kusai

No, I think we've talked about all the nice and less nice things that are going on. And I hope that all your viewers and other guests will develop these ideas, because it's very difficult to analyze and draw conclusions at the present level. We must, as Deng Xiaoping said, free up our thinking and come up with new ideas. That's how we should act. And we will make mistakes—yes, yes—in our analysis as well. Because this is a time when nothing is clear, nothing is final. So I would suggest to everybody, to all your viewers, to free up their thinking, try new concepts, think in new ways, because the old ways are over.

#Pascal

And the funny thing is, in 2055, historians will say that, you know, it was clear that 2035 would look like this because in 2026 X happened. They'll tell you it's absolutely clear. We just—poor fools—we can't see it yet. Sándor Kusai, thank you very much for your time today.

#Sándor Kusai

Thank you very much for your invitation and for your attention.