Richard Sakwa: The Deep Roots of the Ukraine War

Richard Sakwa is a professor of Russian and European Politics at the University of Kent, and is widely recognised as the leading Russia scholar in Europe. Sakwa discusses the deep roots and many layers of the Ukraine War. Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: https://glenndiesen.substack.com/ X/Twitter: https://x.com/Glenn_Diesen Patreon: https://www.patreon.com/glenndiesen Support the research by Prof. Glenn Diesen: PayPal: https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/glenndiesen Buy me a Coffee: buymeacoffee.com/gdieseng Go Fund Me: https://gofund.me/09ea012f Books by Prof. Glenn Diesen: https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B09FPQ4MDL

#Glenn

Welcome back. Today we're very privileged to be joined by Richard Sakwa, professor of politics at the University of Kent, a prolific author, and one of the best Russia scholars we have here in Europe. Thank you for coming back on.

#Richard Sakwa

It's my pleasure. Thank you for your kind words.

#Glenn

Well, the Ukraine war now appears to be coming to an end, and this forces the Europeans to change the narrative a bit. We even saw Chancellor Merz changing his rhetoric, which seems to lay the groundwork for restoring diplomatic ties. He made, for example, the point that Russia is a European country and that we have to engage with it. I think this is important because this war, as we know, has been fought both on the battlefield and through narratives. If you want to keep a war going and boycott diplomacy, then of course you have narratives like "an unprovoked invasion," which is useful because negotiations then become essentially appeasement that rewards aggression, and peace has to be achieved on the battlefield. But when you're losing the war and it's time to bring it to an end, then you need diplomacy—recognition of mutual security concerns.

So one would expect a shift away from these narratives of a fight between good and evil, where you can't negotiate. So… we may therefore have an opportunity to end this war through diplomatic means. And toward this end, it's a good opportunity to discuss the deeper roots of the Ukraine war if we're going to address the root causes, which the Russians keep demanding. And lucky for us, you just finished a talk with that exact title—"The Deep Roots of the Ukraine War." So I was wondering if you could flesh out your arguments, because to understand how we got here—and it's a complex

one—it's both about the division of Europe between NATO and Russia, but it also has an issue, of course, between Russia and Ukraine, and also within Ukraine. We have this third layer of deep dividing lines within Ukraine. So I was wondering if you can… yes, it's a very large topic, but if you can unpack your argument.

#Richard Sakwa

Yeah, sure. But before doing so, can I just say that, you know, hopefully we are coming to the end of the war—but I'm not entirely convinced about that. I think that, to quote Churchill, we're at the end of the beginning, but unfortunately I'm not entirely sure we're at the beginning of the end. We're suddenly into a new phase—a phase in which, I think, the European powers, in a very confused and contradictory manner, are beginning to let a few chinks of reality enter into their calculations.

#Glenn

Very quickly, I do think maybe I sound a bit more optimistic than I am. I still think this is going to be resolved on the battlefield. But this was the first ray of sunshine after still demanding that Russia pay reparations and all of that. As we're moving away from this, I think as the narrative shifts, it allows us—or enables us—to do many more things. If we're allowed to discuss their security concerns, at least diplomacy can progress. But maybe I overstated my optimism.

#Richard Sakwa

No, but you're absolutely right. We're in a new phase in which diplomacy is, astonishingly, back on the agenda for the European powers. If you remember, a couple of years ago—well, a year and a half ago—when there was a European Council meeting, Robert Fico from the Slovak Republic said he was astonished that throughout the whole discussion there was never any suggestion that the European Union and its leaders should engage with Russia. And when Viktor Orbán, who was chair of the European Council for the second half of 2025, I think, raised that point, he was severely ostracized. But yes, I think by the beginning of 2026, European leaders are beginning to understand.

However, if you remember, in the autumn we had the 28-point peace plan—the Kirill Dmitriev–Steve Witkoff proposal—which served as a good framework for discussion. Of course, the European powers and Zelensky immediately mobilized. And as you know, in the early days of 2026, they outlined and finally adopted a 20-point peace plan. This 20-point plan still contains so much that is simply unacceptable to Moscow. So where we are now is that Witkoff and Jared Kushner are planning to go to Moscow. I think there has been some resistance there, even to welcoming them, because clearly Lavrov and Putin always say they're open to diplomacy.

But they're saying, look, we're going around in circles. What's the point? We reach something, you come over, we talk, we outline our core issues, then you go back and it's completely blocked when it comes to the European powers. And Trump is very volatile, as we know—he's literally a loose

cannon, swinging from one side to the other. So that's where we are. Unfortunately, I think the battlefield is where the main action will be for the next few months, until finally we may get to some serious diplomacy—not just among the Western powers, but engaging with Moscow more substantively. Anyway, that's just to set where we are now. But, as you say, everything about where we are now has deep roots.

I've been arguing that there are at least four, possibly five, layers to this conflict. I'd say the first one, obviously, is the internal Ukrainian one. Now, we can formulate it in a number of different ways. I've been suggesting that there were two models, two visions of Ukrainian statehood after 1991. There was what I would call the monist vision. This is the idea that there's been some sort of primordial—very interesting word—primordial vision of Ukrainian nationality and even statehood since the beginning of time. All you have to do is cast off the accretions of Russian colonialism, and earlier on, Polish colonialism, Polish-Lithuanian dominance. But it's like Michelangelo's David.

You just have the marble, and inside there's this fantastic, marvellous statue—you just have to cut away the excess. That's a completely false vision of how states develop, and it also misapplies the idea of post-colonialism. As I understand it, post-colonialism is all about hybridity—how states develop through complex relationships. You can call them imperial, colonial, or whatever, but they're nevertheless changed by that interaction. The primordial vision, by contrast, suggests you can simply get rid of all that. The alternative—and this is the one to which I've dedicated my book, *The Russo-Ukrainian War: Faultlines of Empire*—is what I call "the other Ukraine." It's a vision of Ukraine that is pluralistic, tolerant, multilingual, multi-confessional, and generous.

A lot of the monist people—those who believe in deep Ukrainian nationalism—were also tolerant and pluralistic, so one shouldn't make the contrast too stark. But in ideal terms, we do have this vision. And that, in Russian demands, is now represented—or given the terminology—as the "denazification" of Ukraine. I think that's a very poorly chosen term because it oversimplifies the elements, though it does touch on the issue of intolerance and the lack of pluralism in society. So that is clearly one of the key demands: that linguistic and other rights should be respected. That's the first level. The second level is precisely the Russo-Ukrainian relationship—very specifically an interstate but also an intercultural relationship.

Now, one way we could look at that is through all sorts of theories. But the way I want to go—if only I had more time—is to focus on it through the prism of mimetic theory, René Girard's theory. He says that basically two states or two people—he gives the example of a lord and a serf—are drawn into conflict through imitation. A serf would usually be in conflict with another serf, because the distance between that serf and the lord is just so huge, and the lords would then be quarreling among themselves. In other words, the closer you are, the more likely you are to have these conflicts emerging. And of course, Russia and Ukraine occupy a very similar—I'm not saying the same—civilizational and cultural space: Eastern Slavic, Orthodox, and with a shared history across most of the country.

And hence this mimetic rivalry is so intense. This helps to explain, in part, why Ukrainian nationalists believe, as an article of faith, that they have to distance themselves from Russia. This led to a very prickly relationship right from the beginning, after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. And of course, it goes back to the 19th century. So that's the second level. We could talk a lot about that. This mimetic vision, I think, is important, and it helps to explain why, until 2022, the depth of hostility between the two countries was so strong—a kind of "narcissism of small differences." Not to negate the substantive issues, but nevertheless, that was part of it. The third level is this inter-European one.

Here we've completely messed up. And here we have to say—you talked about the deep roots—we need to go back not just to 1989–91, the end of the Cold War, though that's important. We have to go all the way back to 1945. In many ways, this war, the Ukrainian war, is putting elements back on the agenda that were not solved or resolved in the early postwar years. For example, there's been a lot of discussion recently about Germany, and that after 1945 and Potsdam, the implicit idea was—and the Soviet Union returned to it many times afterward—that Germany should be a demilitarized, neutral state in the center of Europe.

If that had happened, there wouldn't have been a Cold War. There wouldn't have been that division of Germany. The whole politics would have changed. And then you'd say, well, why did we have the original Cold War, which was then reproduced in new forms after 1989–91—the collapse of communism, the end of the first Cold War? Well, you could say, and this is where I always argue, that we had two failures. One, the emergence of what I would call the political West. Lavrov and the Russians love to talk about the collective West, and the Western powers love to talk about the transatlantic alliance—this very powerful body that has dominated for 80 years.

So, in other words, the postwar settlement after 1945 was an Atlanticist settlement that subordinated and failed to establish a genuine pan-continental unity. After 1989, at the end of the Cold War, Gorbachev's Common European Home, Mitterrand's Confederation of Europe—all these ideas were effectively saying, "OK, let's rethink 1945." Instead, we just got more of the same: NATO and the European Union putting themselves forward as the singular bodies that could represent all of Europe, which, of course, marginalized Russia and led to the security dilemma, NATO enlargement, and the war. So that's the third level. And, of course, the fourth one is the United States–Russia superpower relationship.

And paradoxically, we thought—and we talked about peace at the beginning—that peace could come from above. In other words, that Russo–U.S. rapprochement, détente, could, with Trump and Putin personally working together, establish a framework that would be, well, partially imposed but hopefully by consent on the European powers, and indeed lead to a settlement within Ukraine itself. Unfortunately, it looks as if the United States under Trump, even though he put questions on the table—questions that should have been asked in 1945–46 and again in 1989–91—he did put them on the table.

Unfortunately, Trump doesn't have coherent answers. It does mean that the old political West—the old Atlantic power system—is clearly on its last legs. That's for sure. Russia, Moscow, and indeed other countries saw this as a great opportunity. Of course, the European powers and Kyiv regard that with huge alarm. But clearly, things are moving and changing. So, as we said, yes, 2026 has opened with a bit of a bang, and there are a lot of moving elements there. We're in another sort of liminal moment, just as we were in 1945 and in 1989. 2026 looks as if it's going to be one of those dates.

#Glenn

I very much agree with this whole idea of a decolonial identity. It's very dangerous, because what it means is that it views the Russian element in the Ukrainian identity as a foreign imperial relic—something to get rid of. This is, of course, a problem both domestically and abroad, because if you're going to embrace this idea, as they did after 2014, then you have to begin to purge the political parties, the culture, the religion, the media, the language—across the board. And I often cite Solzhenitsyn. He made the point that this close connection between Russians and Ukrainians was a double-edged sword, because for some Ukrainians it was a source of brotherhood with the Russians, but for most Western Ukrainians it was the exact opposite.

It was what prevented them from being completely sovereign, because if you essentially want one people, then why would you be a separate state? So I always agreed that it would be good for Ukraine to develop as a nation-building project—to be distinctive from Russia. This is Ukraine: we are different, but not anti-Russian, because otherwise you trigger both domestic and international security issues. It would be a bit like Russia decoupling completely, or de-Tatarizing. I mean, you can' t just take 500 years together and cut it off, pretending that after all this time it doesn't matter. It has to be included in a more inclusive concept of what it means to be Russian. You can't cut off these other groups. But with the Russian case, it's more complicated, because, as you said, whatever relationship they have with the ethnic Russians or Russian speakers in Ukraine affects the relationship with Ukraine itself.

Russia also becomes more vulnerable to being exploited by foreign actors. Because I think that if Ukraine has foreign elements—be it traditionally the Germans, the Americans, or the British—who want to create a Europe that's more de-Russified, then you're going to see alignment with the more nationalist elements within Ukraine. But how do you see the interaction between these different levels? I mean, it looks like if the US and Russia can make some kind of deal, it makes it easier to sort out the other issues, doesn't it? But a nationalist government in Kyiv wouldn't only seek NATO membership; it would also try to purge Russian culture from the historical Russian lands, which is also not acceptable. So how do you see this working together?

#Richard Sakwa

Yeah, that's part of the difficulty in fitting it all together. It's like a Rubik's Cube—so hard to get all the pieces aligned. And, of course, all these issues interact with each other. For example, the United States—and explicitly Zbigniew Brzezinski, back in the 1990s in *The Grand Chessboard*—said that they'd worked assiduously. The U.S. embassy in Kyiv has worked assiduously to exploit divisions within Ukraine, to facilitate and empower one constituency as part of an attempt to contain, marginalize, and even humiliate, if you like, Russia. So there's been a lot happening at these levels.

Of course, now, when the United States has changed its tune, they no longer—well, we don't really know what Trump's doing, because he's playing, he's also quite deceptive in all sorts of ways. For example, the drone strike, or whatever it was, toward Valdai—the ninety-one drones in the first days of January—was clearly facilitated by the United States one way or another. So it's a fundamental question: how do these things all fit together? And, you know, I separate them purely for analytical purposes. Otherwise, we, in a sense, say that these are the threads.

You know, other approaches would say, well, these levels are a bit mechanical, and we could name other ones. A fifth one, for example, would be the way the war is presented as a larger civilizational struggle—the Russian barbarian hordes to the east. And that, of course, brings us back not just to the 80 post-war years since 1945, but to the larger question, which I do think is fascinating. A lot of Russian commentators, like Sergei Alexandrovich Karaganov, for example, focus on the 500 years of Russia's difficult relationship with Europe. This civilizational conflict—and, of course, many in the West, Biden explicitly said it was a war for civilization, for the rules-based order—is one manifestation of it, but more broadly, it's about Western culture, the rule of law, and so on, against Russian despotism.

These are exactly the civilizing missions, and Macron has talked about it as well. It's a repetition of 19th-century visions of empire—visions of empire that haven't died. And of course, commentators like Karaganov argue that ultimately this war is an opportunity for Russia to define its identity, to give up this 500-year false attempt to become a European power, though he himself is ambiguous. So the way I'd put it is that we're seeing the emergence of a post-Western Russia, but not a post-European one. And simply because of geography—Russia is a European power. It's also an Asian power, a Eurasian power, but it's their neighbors.

So, well, I speak as a European, and I've always argued that we do need—and as one of the last Gaullists in England, I'd argue that we do need—a pan-continental vision, in one form or another, some sort of political community. Because, as you well know, in Russia we have 145 million citizens who are obviously a hugely diverse people—the Buryats and many, many others—but ultimately their culture is European. They share a common sense of cultural orientation. How shall I put it? Multiple religious faiths, though I don't want to overemphasize the Christian aspect, but certainly it's a highly Christianized culture, among other religions to be respected, of course, just as Europe has to face that as well. So, in other words, the civilizational dimension is both exacerbating and, ultimately, perhaps provides a framework for the peace we so much desire.

#Glenn

But I can understand why the Russians now demand to resolve all the underlying issues. As you said, the root causes go so far back, especially if you look at the geopolitical dimension. You know, Dostoevsky was writing in the 1800s that, in order to divide Europe and contain Russia, the goal of the English was to make the Slavs hate Russia as much as they did. And then, of course, in World War I, you saw the Germans presenting themselves largely as liberators of different Slavs, particularly the Ukrainians, because they argued, "We're going to liberate you from Russian rule." But every historian recognizes that what they were really doing was trying to take that part of the world, decouple it from Moscow, and put it under German influence instead.

So, for example, the way World War I ended—or rather didn't end—with the Russian-German deal, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, that was seen as essentially what NATO is going for today. And you saw the same thing in World War II. The Nazis were then approaching the Ukrainian nationalists, saying, "Well, we also empathize with your struggle for freedom." They also presented themselves as liberators. But in reality, this was about creating a German-dominated region. And then, of course, we had the Orange Revolution back in 2004, which was also supposed to pull Ukraine out of the Russian orbit and into the EU orbit, which is German-led—and again, we did the same thing in 2014. We keep doing the same thing over and over again.

It looks like either we accept that Ukraine is part of the Russian orbit—which I don't think is reasonable anymore, given how public sentiment has shifted in Ukraine—or it becomes a bridge instead of some kind of front line. But then you need a pan-European security system that actually doesn't make Ukraine a front line, which would be good for its economic development and its ability to respect all the people who live within its borders. But how can you break this cycle? Because no matter what peace deal we get out of this, the animosity will continue. The idea of the Russians being essentially our primary "other," our main outgroup—all of this will likely continue for quite some time. So how do you actually deal with the root causes here?

#Richard Sakwa

As you say, once you start dealing with the root causes, you find it's a very tangled web of interlocking conflicts and recurring ideas. One way we might break this endless cycle—and as you said, it's not just the last ten years but the last thirty or more since the end of the Cold War, or even since 1945, going back to the 19th century, the Crimean War, and so on—is by rethinking the framework entirely. I'm arguing that, as you said, we may not know exactly how to get there, but usually after a war, if you want some kind of lasting peace, you need to put new ideas on the table.

Now, we haven't even reached the first stage yet. That's why I say we're only at the end of the beginning. So where are these new ideas? Instead of new ideas, we have the European Union and most of the European powers doubling down on war fever—this virulent Russophobia, the

cancellation of Russia—which even the United States is finding excessive. J.D. Vance, Hegseth, and others—not because they love Russia, but because they'd like to focus on China, which is perhaps the only new element in all of this. In other words, they're perpetuating a vision of international politics that has to be about conflict and spheres of influence. As you suggest, if Ukraine isn't a bridge, then it becomes a barrier, and so on.

Luther would need to, as it were—well, a classic negotiating technique is that you move, you escalate upward, if you like, and try to look at the picture more widely, more broadly. That's what I think we have to do. So the first element of that is to generate a new debate about—well, you talked about a pan-European security system, yes—but that will only be a reflection, perhaps, of some larger pan-European political community. Now, it seems absurd to even be talking or thinking about it at this moment, but it's precisely in the darkest days of a war that we need to start thinking the unthinkable. How do we get there? I don't know. But that's where the second leg comes in.

Because the danger in all of this, at the moment, is that this war—it's a European civil war. And of course, this is how the Trumpists see it, by the way, more and more: as this endemic European civil war. And indeed, in much of the Global South, it's seen as yet another war of the Global North. That's why so many countries in the Global South want nothing to do with it. They haven't joined the sanctions. They just say, "Look, these ridiculous Europeans—they had one world war. Wasn't that enough for them? So they had to have a second, and now they want a third. Well, guys, we don't want anything to do with it." But that then takes us to the other huge danger today, and that is to the United Nations–based Charter international system.

Already we see Ukrainians trying to exploit it as far as they can, but ultimately to denigrate it, to smash it, to destroy it. And, of course, the Israelis do as well—they have nothing but contempt. We've seen that Trump, just in the early days of 2026, pulled the United States out of—what was it—fifty-six international organizations. So the United States is defecting not just from the political West, its Atlantic alliance system, which many people would welcome, saying it's time to put NATO to bed. It's served its rather destructive functions very well since 1989. But what we now need to see is that he's also defecting from the Charter international system, which the United States did so much to establish in 1945. That is catastrophic, in my view.

We have many Russian commentators arguing that it's time to build parallel institutions—maybe through BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, or alternative financial institutions to the Bretton Woods ones, like the World Bank and the IMF. Well, that's perhaps one way you could try to break out of this very vicious circle, where for four years of war we've just been repeating the same thing over and over again since 2014—repeating the same issues over and over again since 1989. Who was for NATO enlargement? Who's against it?

Oh, the Eastern Europeans wanted to join NATO—how could we stop them? This is such banal, bankrupt thinking. We need to think about international politics in a new way. And this is where peace movements, where peace thinking, are so important. This old, classic American-style

international relations is all about power politics and so on. Well, you know, many would say that humanity is facing so many challenges—and not just environmental and other challenges, but also opportunities. The technological achievements in recent years are fantastic.

The fact that we can sit here and talk on this machine is just unbelievable—it's science fiction. And yet, what do we do constantly? We squander the opportunity. And now the Europeans want to spend the next decades rearming. Our magnificent foreign minister, Yvette Cooper, was in your country, in northern Norway yesterday, calling for massive new defences up in Kirkenes, as we'd say in English. She was up there, I think, the other day. And of course, we've just sent a huge military force to Greenland—one soldier—to defend it against our ally. But this is just, you know, we're getting to a level of farcical politics.

#Glenn

The Norwegians sent twice as many soldiers to Greenland as England—so we sent two.

#Richard Sakwa

Okay, well done.

#Glenn

No, it's not very impressive at all. But I'm wondering if you're a bit hopeful about the new international distribution of power, because now that—well, in the past, at least from a perspective of political realism—when power was concentrated in Europe, you could assume that competition between the European powers would result in them more or less dividing the world among themselves. So it kind of made sense: you could have this fragmented Europe, but still the center of the world. But now that the distribution of power has shifted dramatically away from Europe—and this is quite evident, also reflected in the U.S. national security strategy, in how little regard it has for Europe, for its relevance—in such a Europe, we really can't afford these dividing lines.

We're not the center of the world anymore. So if we have a divided Europe today, it's not like after World War II, when the U.S. would try to build up the frontline states and put them in a good position. Instead, a divided Europe now means Western Europeans become too dependent on the U. S., and Russia becomes too dependent, perhaps, on China. And this allows the U.S. to start converting all that dependence—whether economic or security—into massive loyalty. So the Europeans end up having to do everything they're told, only becoming weaker and less relevant. You' d think that if there were ever a time for Europe to try to—well, to do what the Charter of Paris for a New Europe in 1990 called for—it would be now: a Europe without dividing lines.

You see now that at least the distribution of power favors it, because after the Cold War, I can see why we went for the hegemon—that is, the Europeans teamed up with the U.S. so we could have

collective hegemony. You know, if the Russians had joined a common Europe, then it wouldn't have brought America in the same way. So it wouldn't have been a system of collective hegemony. There was a strong incentive there. But today the unipolar order is gone. I just don't see the same—well, from a structural perspective, I don't see the same incentives anymore to keep Europe divided as it was in the past. I mean, from my perspective, re-dividing Europe was the price we paid to keep the Americans present and focused on Europe. But if the Americans are deprioritizing it anyway, why are we making an enemy out of Russia? It doesn't really make any sense.

#Richard Sakwa

Indeed. And worse than that, we bandwagoned and spoiled relations with China to some degree. They're now trying to mend their fences. But because the United States in 2018 started the tariff war, Europe then paused the investment treaty, which had been worked on for years, and so on. It really doesn't make sense. What we see now, clearly, is a decoupling of the Atlantic power system. But as you know, the European strategy is to see this out—to try to, as it were, placate the demonic energy of Donald J. Trump and hope that in 2028 some new leader is elected and normality is restored. So I don't see that there's much strategic thinking beyond that, except in one rather deleterious respect—and that is to build up a European army.

Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission, is now arguing that Europe needs to build itself up as a military power—which, of course, is sensible in many ways if it's done in a positive sense, to say that Europe needs to stand on its own feet and become an independent agent. But what is Europe? The United Kingdom has left, Norway is not in, though of course it's very close to Europe. But it's not... This European Union—I think one of the lessons of this war is that, on a functional level, some of the elements of the European Union will be reproduced in a new format. But this European Union is quite clearly being reproduced. We don't know how this war is going to end, but I think it's going to end badly.

It's already ending badly for NATO. It's been discredited and so on—and I think also for the European Union. That's why I think we need to start asking: what sort of Europe do we want after this war? The one we want is the one that was on the agenda in 1945, and again in 1989–91. And that is, as you imply, a pan-continental vision. Of course, it would be a post-American Europe, but not an anti-American one. Who will work with the United States? Who wants to be in conflict? Again, it may be about genuinely returning to the normative foundations of the European Union—as a peace project.

But at the moment, Europe is reconstituting itself—this post-American Europe—as a war project. A war, a long war, as they say, as Mark Rutte and others have been warning, against Russia—a generational war. And indeed, in Britain they talk about a "whole-of-society" war, which means, of course, what they mean by that: you need internal repression. Some of us have really felt the harsh blows of that—the censorship and so on. This is a catastrophic path. So this is why I think it's so important to outline an alternative, and that is a genuine, progressive, pan-continental vision. It'll be

hard. And within that, a rump NATO, a rump, reconstituted European Union will play a part. But we need to have something new—you know, a North Eurasian Confederation would be my way of arguing this one.

#Glenn

I keep hearing the rhetoric that we have to keep the alliance systems and the anti-Russian bloc alive because, well, look how necessary it is because of Ukraine. But again, this shows the two different logics behind NATO's role. Would NATO become more relevant now that we see the threat from Russia, or would it discredit itself for actually provoking a war? And, you know, it's hard not to point out that the frontline states we claim we have to protect—Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia—all of these countries are being crushed, or may be crushed, as a consequence of reviving bloc politics.

I just have a genuine problem understanding why the British, for example, are taking the lead—along with other Europeans—in this generational struggle against the Russians. What exactly is it? Why? I mean, again, the Russian objective since the end of the Cold War was to create a common Europe, and they warned that expanding NATO would re-divide the continent, re-create the logic of the Cold War, this whole zero-sum competition over the shared neighborhood. And everyone recognizes that Russia didn't make any claims on Ukraine before the coup in 2014, but after that... they responded in this way.

It's very strange to me. I don't see a cohesive argument being made for why we keep hearing this whole imperial narrative—that Russia is just an imperialist power wanting to swallow territory and rebuild the Soviet Union. That wasn't the case the day before the coup in Ukraine in 2014. I mean, I think you're the one who wrote in one of your books that NATO is now a security organization that exists to deal with the conflicts that arise from its own existence. I might be messing up the wording, of course, but that was more or less your point. It is.

#Richard Sakwa

Yes, indeed. I mean, if Russia were simply about territorial or imperial expansion, it could easily have annexed or taken over the Donbass during those seven years between 2014 and 2021. It didn't. It hasn't absorbed them, even though plenty of books, by the way, claim that Russia has taken over Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It hasn't. It's recognized them as independent states, and of course, that's something to be negotiated with Georgia in due course. But the larger question—why—is one we really have to focus on. There are all sorts of answers to that. The first one, you know, the psychosocial one, is that you have a totally degraded elite—certainly in the United Kingdom we do.

Just look at our leaders in all the top political parties, all repeating, thoughtlessly, the same militaristic talk—except for a very few exceptions, who are mostly no longer in Parliament. So you could put... And then you have this larger context within that framework, which goes back, for example, to the Anglo-Russian rivalry before the revolution, the Crimean War, and even further

back. But there's a lot of counter-evidence as well. When Tony Blair, right at the beginning in the year 2000, when Putin came to power, it was quite clear there was an attempt at a reset, and Putin came on a state visit. So there were positive elements. But of course, the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq spoiled all of that—and then Libya, the ABM Treaty, and everything else. So there's, if you like, the psychosocial approach.

There's the historical approach of Russophobia. Or even, you could say, you could go back to René Girard and this sort of mimetic rivalry between two representations of modernity—that Russia will always have its own civilizational distinctiveness, and that is to be welcomed, just as British distinctiveness is its own. And, of course, my specific argument is that after 1945—all of this, you know, we were allies in the war—this whole situation arose because of U.S. hegemony, which sought to dominate after 1945. By 1947, that hegemonic project had taken shape; it was going to dominate Western Europe. And we know the Dulles brothers were quite cynical and ruthless in imposing that—one in the State Department, the other as head of the CIA. So it was quite clear they intended to dominate Western Europe. And this is why you didn't get the unification of Germany in a positive sense; instead, you got the negative unification.

And of course, 1989 was, as we can now see, a set of negative revolutions, because they have not... The country—this is why the bitterness of a country like the Baltic republics, like Lithuania, against Russia—one of the failures of the European Union is that instead of transcending the logic of conflict, it has actually facilitated and amplified it. So there are many elements there, but... You have no beginning. Way back in 1990, or was it 1991, I was at the Political Studies Association conference—our British Political Science Association conference—and Landsbergis, who was the leader of Lithuania at the time, Vytautas Landsbergis, it was a long time ago, gave us the keynote speech.

And I remember the delegates—there was a very large body, 500 or 600 political scientists. We were shocked at his language, his virulent, racist, anti-Russian language. This was 1990–91, when Russia, under Yeltsin, had facilitated the independence of Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia. So it was just astonishing—where did this come from? And of course, these were the hidden demons. And these demons, instead of being slain, were being fed and nurtured. And we have, you know, leading scholars from Estonia and elsewhere talking about memory politics, for example. All it boils down to is: we hate Russia, and we have to have memory politics to make sure that no one ever forgets this.

And we must then use all instruments at hand—and the Poles go along with this—to destroy the historic enemy. Now, as I've been arguing for a long time, you know, my father was Polish. He was nearly one of those in the cohort captured and taken to Katyn. He met the Soviet forces as a Polish army reservist on the 17th of September 1939. And yet he never had the bitterness. He understood the larger issues, and maybe that's why I am what I am. Because, yes, he understood how awful things were—you know, Katyn, the murder of nearly 24,000 Polish officers in cold blood. But if we don't digest this history, then we're doomed to repeat it. And unfortunately, we are repeating it in an even worse form than anything before.

#Glenn

Yeah, well, that's the problem—when it becomes a matter of one side being right and the other wrong, or good and bad. Whenever you have a form of unification, it doesn't really harmonize the two sides. The Germans had the same discussions. When West and East Germany unified, the assumption was always, "Well, the Western part got it right, so let's just discard everything from the East." But in Eastern Germany, it wasn't cloudy skies every day—they did have other things. But I want to ask you about the distribution of power, whether you think it can help us now. Because, again, when Russia was the largest power—or you could call it an adversary, as it was in the 19th century to the British or in the 20th to the political West—then there was a natural incentive to balance against the Russians, and you embraced all the required ideologies that portrayed them as everything you were not.

But under the current distribution, with China being the larger power and even overtaking the American economy in terms of purchasing power parity already twelve years ago, you would have an incentive not to push China or Russia away. This was even the logic of the Germans and the French before 2022—let's not push the Russians too far away, because then they end up with China. And indeed, now you see part of Trump's idea seems to be inspired by the advice of Kissinger, who made the point that you don't put these two Eurasian giants together. China is the big one; you should get the Russians on our side of the ledger. So you have the incentives there in terms of power.

But we're not doing anything. All the things we knew wouldn't work, or were most dangerous—that is, to go to war essentially against Russia—we did all of them anyway. So it's very hard to see it as only being about power politics, because there's something more profound there in terms of the hatred. I would use the word "hatred" of Russia. It's been ongoing for so long.

#Richard Sakwa

In Washington, of course, there's a big debate. You have the Elbridge Colby school of thought, which is very much focused on China as the main adversary, and this was reflected in part by the National Security Strategy. Then you have the Montlibios and others who are still fighting the Cold War—certainly vis-à-vis Cuba, but also vis-à-vis Russia. So, in other words, you have a debate going on in Washington of the sort that we're not even beginning in London, Paris, or Berlin yet—or in Brussels—in the way that you suggest. Because, yes, the world has moved on. Europe is marginalized; it's lost its firmness as an ally. Even whoever is elected in 2028, we can't go back to what it was before. And even then, there were always tensions within the Atlantic power system. And yes, the balance of economic and indeed political authority is shifting.

It's a multipolar world. It genuinely is. But of course, multipolarity operates at many different levels. At the power level, yes—definitely, China is now emerging as a separate power. But of course, that's one reason why there's so much effort to delegitimize it, and so much work to say that this is a despotic communist dictatorship, pointing out the deficits and deficiencies in that system—which, of

course, are there. So yes, multipolarity ultimately—and this is where I would hitch my wagon—is really a normative vision based on the United Nations Charter. Today, there are 193 sovereign independent states in the United Nations, and we need to work—yes, the great powers need to work—and I use the word "comity," that they work together too. And that was the initial idea of the five permanent members of the Security Council: that they would have a special responsibility.

It wasn't just a privilege to have this permanent veto power; the responsibility was to work together, to try to solve global issues collectively. And, of course, what we saw at the end of the Cold War is that France and the United Kingdom almost always voted with the United States and took the lead alongside it. So you've got a bloc of three. Also, the British have managed to take over the Secretariat and manipulate it. You now have the United Nations General Assembly chaired by—well, you couldn't make it up—Annalena Baerbock, a virulent Russophobe, which is undermining the credibility of the General Assembly. Of course, they have to respect the views of the Global South, but nevertheless, through agenda setting and the kinds of motions they put forward, they shape the process.

So, in other words, the catastrophe today is that the international system—the United Nations—has become an instrument of what you could call a new Cold War, an instrument of great power politics and contestation, rather than a forum for the settlement of these disputes. So we're in a very dark place, and it's leading to the destruction of the greatest achievement we've had in the last 80 years—and that is the United Nations, not just as an institution but as an idea. An idea that we find peaceful ways of working, the normative foundations of sovereign states working together. So it isn't just Westphalia; it's Westphalia plus sovereign states working through internationalism and multilateralism within the framework of the United Nations and its norms. And that's what we're losing now—the spirit of 1945.

#Glenn

Well, you can put it in a wider context, though. All historical efforts to create an inclusive security architecture—one that actually reflects international law—aim to seek security with other members instead of against non-members. In other words, if you want to distinguish between a collective security architecture and an alliance, whether it's the Concert of Europe, the League of Nations, or the United Nations, there's always the risk that countries will start grouping into alliance systems—little exclusive blocs—and then their loyalties to that bloc go beyond those of the collective security framework. Translated into current institutions, that means we put NATO ahead of the United Nations. And, well, this is essentially what's been done, especially since 1999. But as we wrap up, do you have any final thoughts of optimism? Or do you think, as you said, we're heading into a bit of a dark place?

#Richard Sakwa

No, I actually started this year very, very pessimistic. And unfortunately, I think that's still the case, particularly from a European perspective. There's almost—yes, the leaders are now saying we need to actually have diplomacy with Russia. Well, isn't that amazing? Diplomacy means you actually talk. In peace talks, you talk to the other side across the table. So there's at least a tiny glimmer of understanding that we need to move toward a new dynamic in these peace talks to bring an end to this awful war—this awful war which, just last Monday, exceeded in length what the Russians call the Great Patriotic War, from 1941 to 1945. But unfortunately, for the United Kingdom, the Second World War lasted five and a half years. So I have a feeling there's still some way to go before we reach any kind of resolution. So yes, I'm very pessimistic.

#Glenn

Well, being allowed to argue for diplomacy without being smeared, censored, or cancelled—I guess that's a positive development. But we're setting the bar a bit low. Nonetheless, yes, something seems to be moving in the right direction. But yeah, I share your pessimism; it's been a very rough start to 2026. So thank you very much for taking the time.

#Richard Sakwa

My pleasure. Thank you.