

Nicolai Petro: Europe at a Crossroads at Munich Security Conference

Nicolai N. Petro is a Professor of Political Science at the University of Rhode Island, and formerly the US State Department's special assistant for policy on the Soviet Union. Prof. Petro discusses the wishful thinking and strategic vacuum in Europe as it cannot find a place in the multipolar world. Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: <https://glennDiesen.substack.com/> X/Twitter: https://x.com/Glenn_Diesen Clip channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@Prof.GlennDiesenClips> 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 joined by Nikolai Petro, a professor at the University of Rhode Island, who also served as the U.S. State Department's Special Assistant for Policy on the Soviet Union. Thank you for coming back on.

#Nicolai Petro

Nice to be with you again, Ben.

#Glenn

So we see that this annual Munich Security Conference has started, and the theme is the destruction of the international order. My interpretation, though, is that this refers more or less to the disorganized and, well, let's say destructive transition into a multipolar system. It didn't necessarily have to be this messy, but it also appears that the U.S. and Europe are moving in very different directions. The split in this transatlantic alliance is obviously a key theme. The Americans, it seems, are at times maybe overly pragmatic and disregard some of the traditional institutions in order to position themselves more favorably. The Europeans, on the other hand, seem to be trapped in wishful thinking and a kind of strategic vacuum. That being said, at the Security Conference now, multipolarity is a key theme—and therefore the breakdown of the post-Cold War order. How do you define, then, the current transition to multipolarity?

#Nicolai Petro

Chaos. Chaos. The word you use—a vacuum of strategic thinking—yeah, that's a good way to think of it. The absence of strategy in a transition to something we don't know, and from a European

perspective, something we don't necessarily want. That combination has led to the very vacuum you're talking about. You and I are not at the Munich Security Conference this year, but I wonder if there will be any defenders of the idea that a multipolar world could be a more secure world if approached differently—in other words, if it were engaged in such a way that all participants recognized and shared the benefits of participating as equals in a multipolar world.

The main difference between the hegemonic order, also known as the rules-based order, and a multipolar order, it seems to me, is that the latter is more democratic. It involves more voices in an actual discussion of the needs of the nations themselves and how they can contribute as well as benefit from a new participatory multipolar arrangement. The very concept of multipolarity presumes the existence of multiple poles of interest. So, from the perspective of the nations that saw themselves at the top of the international pecking order, this is an uncomfortable transition.

Even though they may not have been, as in the case of Europe, at the very top, they were nevertheless behind the lead dog, so to speak. And as a result, they knew where they were going because the lead dog—the United States—was leading them in that direction. So now that the lead dog is going who knows where, and may even be biting his harness to free himself from the rest of the pack, well, the rest of the pack is a bit lost, I guess I would say. But it would be good for them to at least be able to engage and perhaps listen to the voices coming out of what used to be called the Global South. But I think that term doesn't do it justice. It's better to refer to it as the global majority.

#Glenn

Yeah, well, if you listen to some of the speeches being made—especially by Kaja Kallas, as well as the German Chancellor, Merz—well, from Kallas, the message was more or less that we need order, otherwise there will be chaos. But order can only, more or less, be achieved through the structures of the past. That means, more or less, restoring the system we had. So the Europeans must work to reconnect with the U.S., and collectively we should be allowed to dominate—that is, the political West should dominate—the international system. From my perspective, this seems like a key weakness for the Europeans.

The inability to, I guess, imagine a post-hegemonic world—a world where the political West isn't unified and isn't in a dominant position. In other words, a reluctance to accept this new distribution of power as reality, and to figure out how Europe can find a new position. Indeed, Merz also used the most aggressive language you'd ever want to hear from a German chancellor. He said, yet again, that the German army must be the most powerful one in Europe, and that the war in Ukraine will only end when Russia has been exhausted economically and militarily.

And he also argued that we, meaning the Germans and Europeans, have imposed unheard-of losses and costs on Russia. So this is the new language of Germany, where it essentially sounds like Germany has now gone to war with Russia. And the defeat of Russia is what should bring stability

and order back. It doesn't seem to make any peace with the new realities—not just the new international distribution of power, but also where the war is actually going. How do you see the coming months, as the U.S. continues to chart its own path, the war in Ukraine continues to—well, as Ukraine continues to unravel? How are the Europeans going to respond to this new international system?

#Nicolai Petro

Or how can they? If Merz were a politician here in America, we know the playbook. It would be, “This is not Germany’s war, this is Merz’s war.” And I think that was the playbook, certainly, that Donald Trump used successfully against Joe Biden with respect to his adventures overseas. So, I suspect something similar will have to happen. I mean, there’s no lack of political voices in Germany and other countries calling for a new approach toward Russia. There is resistance from the established elite, which has too many sunk costs in the current policy. They can’t distance themselves from the policies carried out so far without damaging their own political reputation—and that of their party.

It’s possible—I don’t know how likely, but it’s possible—because it’s logical to assume that the more aggressive the tone of the German government becomes, the more it will be opposed by other interests in Germany. Other political forces will coalesce against it. The difficulty is entirely internal to Germany at this point. The grand coalition between the SPD and CDU—the Social Democrats and Christian Democrats—with satellite parties around them, has told the German people for so long that there is no alternative to them, that the German people will simply have to wake up one day and say, “Well, there actually is an alternative.”

In this case today, right at this very moment, it’s the AfD, and they are the biggest party. So they just have to overcome the psychological unwillingness to have what is essentially a real two-party system—a system with the establishment on one side and the anti-establishment on the other—and to actually vote for the anti-establishment. You know, we can speculate endlessly about how close this is, and in which countries the shift to the anti-establishment is closer than in others. It’s a reasonable bet to assume that if things continue along the present deteriorating trajectory in foreign policy and economic policy for the EU, voters will respond in this way—but we just don’t know when.

#Glenn

Well, I was thinking—I was wondering how you see, or what you expect from, the Americans at the Munich Security Conference. I guess last year’s conference was very much colored by the appearance of J.D. Vance, who shook the Europeans to their core by arguing that their main threat didn’t come from China or Russia, but from within—this creeping authoritarianism—which was met with outrage by the Europeans. But, you know, it’s not as if authoritarianism in Europe has been

stable. It's been, I think, escalating over the years. I mean, if you go back 20 years, when the Europeans tried to pass the EU constitution back in 2005—back then, only France and the Netherlands held referendums.

It didn't go through. And the EU mentality has always been, well, let's just steam ahead. So they repackaged the whole thing as the Lisbon Treaty, which didn't require any referendums at all in 2007. Yet one country, Ireland, demanded a referendum. And as you remember, they voted no, so they were forced to vote again until they voted yes. This was seen as laying the foundation for some authoritarianism. Since then, of course, we saw the banking crisis escalate—first in 2013 in Cyprus, then in Greece, where bank closures were imposed by denying liquidity.

And of course, now you jump forward another decade. It's very different, as the political support among the leadership collapses. In France, the main opposition figure is Le Pen. In Germany, they've already criminalized the Alternative for Germany, which is now the most popular party there, and they're even considering banning it. The Romanians voted the "wrong" way, and their election was annulled on these fraudulent claims of foreign involvement. The EU is now pushing for Orbán's removal in Hungary. The EU even sanctions its own citizens—denying money and travel—essentially making their own citizens hostages.

And these efforts to continue centralizing power, especially by taking advantage of this crisis, are a very authoritarian process. You get the feeling this isn't the final station—that we're going to keep going down this path. So, while they were very dismissive of Vance, the Europeans, I don't think the view of J.D. Vance in the U.S. has changed much. In fact, just in December, the new U.S. security strategy suggested that perhaps the U.S. should start cultivating opposition in Europe to get rid of some of these authoritarians. Do you expect something similar to play out this year as well?

#Nicolai Petro

It'll be interesting to see who the head of the delegation is. I don't know—do you? The senior person at Munich will be...? No, I didn't see the American side, no. So it'll be interesting to see if they send another symbolic figure like the vice president, or a much more junior figure. Yeah, that'll say something. And then, if it's a junior figure, it's likely not so much a political statement as a new sort of vision of some kind. It'll be a restatement of the principles of the new national security strategy, which we already know about. What I don't expect to see is—and this is curious in a way, or at least something worth thinking about—

The EU leadership is rejecting multipolarity—rejecting the principle of looking toward a diverse and multipolar future in favor of looking backward to a hegemonic past in which they knew their role. The United States, however, is not looking forward either. It's not looking forward to playing a new role in a multipolar world; it's also looking backward, trying to reestablish hegemony with an

emphasis not on obligation to its subordinates—the states tied to it in various forms of dependence—but rather on going its own way, asserting its primacy, and demanding obedience from those states with which it's tied economically and politically through treaty organizations.

So that's the real source of the friction, but it doesn't help the world order—it doesn't help the world move toward multipolarity. And there could easily be times when the United States and Europe reach an accommodation to further delay and undermine the transition to a multipolar world. I see that as more likely than any willingness by this or any future American administration to truly think about the benefits the United States might gain from a multipolar world.

#Glenn

Well, I was going to say, Marco Rubio is going, though, so I'm guessing the delegation is led by Marco Rubio. Well, there wouldn't be any—well, I guess... yeah. But...

#Nicolai Petro

Well, it could have been the U.S. permanent ambassador to NATO. But no, Rubio is a more senior, more predictable figure—one who will probably speak less to the internal or philosophical disagreements that exist between the EU and the United States, and more on the security issues as the United States sees them. From Rubio's perspective, that means how the Europeans need to deal with those issues, helping the United States solve them for the Europeans.

#Glenn

Yeah, that's it. I think it seems like the United States basically wants to make the point to the Europeans that the old order they want to bring back is over—that it's a new era. But of course, I think Marco Rubio will deliver this in a more, let's say, diplomatic manner than perhaps J.D. Vance. But I don't think that's enough for the Europeans, because you already heard from Chancellor Scholz that, you know, we have to repair the transatlantic ties, get the gang back together, and essentially go back to the way things were.

#Nicolai Petro

But I think—no, the Trump strategy, if they haven't figured it out yet, if the Europeans haven't figured this out, I think probably other nations have. The Trump strategy is to place especially dependent allies—and that's a very key point—those allies that the Americans feel are totally dependent on the United States—before an inevitable choice. The inevitable choice being the one that the United States will graciously allow them to have. But first, they'll point out all the reasons why the European leadership needs to abandon any other course than the one set out for them by the United States.

And what's interesting, when you look at examples like Greenland and other countries, are the complaints that America has made about Europe in terms of defense spending and other things. The Europeans go along with this because of their fear. As I said, to continue the analogy of the dog sled, they're only interested in following the leader's butt. The rest of the world is too frightening for them to go out on their own—or to, well, now we see perhaps Merz, sometimes Macron, but mostly Merz, trying to argue that he's the new lead dog. Well, I frankly don't think enough time has passed since World War II for the majority of Europeans to feel entirely comfortable with that choice.

#Glenn

Well, I think the Europeans are too divided in too many ways, though. First of all, in terms of how they should deal with the United States—because some suggest that the Europeans should just sacrifice more national interests and bow to the U.S., hoping they'll be rewarded. And the other group of Europeans think it's necessary to diversify their ties so they won't be captured by the U.S. In other words, if you have other partners, the U.S. won't have that much leverage over the Europeans. That's a long-term strategy.

#Nicolai Petro

In the short term, their actual policy is very similar to that of the first group, which only plays into America's hands, I think.

#Glenn

But it's also about the expectations they have, because some assume that as the United States packs up and reprioritizes where to devote its resources—now toward the Western Hemisphere and Asia—this will force the Europeans to integrate more than ever before. They think, "Now we'll finally move out of Uncle Sam's basement and stand on our own feet." The other group thinks that, well, the U.S. has always been the pacifier. So if the U.S. leaves, there's no way the Europeans will get along that well.

I mean, you just said the Germans think they're going to be the top dog now in Europe. They're going to build the largest conventional army, which I don't think any European country looks forward to. Meanwhile, the French think they should probably take the lead, while the British obviously see themselves as the junior partner of the U.S.—something that connects the U.S. and the Europeans. So they all have different views on who should take leadership. And again, this is what the American pacifier prevented or removed. But the question...

#Nicolai Petro

The key point you raised, I think, is that the second group believes that. The first group is given a leader and an ideology they don't have to think about, because it's provided to them by the leader of

the United States. The second group argues for an alternative position for the EU in world affairs. But what is it? What is the EU's vision of its role in the world? If it's essentially a liberal order like the one they believe the United States used to lead, then its only real competitor, again, is the United States. So they're not helping themselves. And I don't think there's enough of a commitment to—well, I may be wrong—but I don't think there's much of an institutional commitment in the EU to having a real global presence and to fostering some sort of autonomous or independent EU agenda.

The position that the current leadership of the EU has always been comfortable with is providing a little bit of extra funding, a little bit of extra support for whatever the United States' vision and agenda were around the world—but not taking its own initiative, because that would mean debating what the substance of an EU worldview might be. It would be interesting to speculate on what such a worldview could look like, because at its heart, given the diversity within the EU—which isn't matched by anything in the United States—multipolarity should resonate with many European countries and be seen as a recognizable alternative to hegemony.

At least for the current political leadership of the EU, I think they don't have the vision to establish any kind of individual identity distinct from the United States. And therefore, they can't compete. It's not that they don't have the resources—they can't compete because they have no intellectual vision of their role in the future. That's a much deeper problem for the EU, one that won't be resolved until there's a sweeping change in the leadership of both national and EU institutions.

#Glenn

I think that's a great point. One of the benefits for the Europeans in being led by Washington was that they could outsource strategic thinking instead of coming up with competing ideas and resolving them. Whatever Washington decided was then sold in the language of liberal democratic values, which helped unify and create consensus. The problem now, of course, is that there's no vision anymore. They're stuck with this empty rhetoric where everything they do is about "values," and they keep reassuring themselves that they're the champions of these liberal democratic ideals. But it does beg the question: do you think the European Union could realistically position itself as an autonomous pole? Or is that just not how power politics work?

#Nicolai Petro

Too many divisions. The problem is that, as you say, there's no consensus within the EU on the role it should play in foreign policy. The EU's foreign policy structure is still in the process of coming into its own, and it sometimes competes directly with the foreign policy leadership of the nation-states. In that sense, it's much more fragmented than, for example, the financial sector, where the banking system is structured under the European Central Bank and there are budgetary limits and so on. Now, there are ways of getting around this, and there are always exceptions. But nevertheless, the structure is in place. The EU, in terms of its foreign policy, still has to rely on the cooperation of national governments.

And that makes it tremendously ineffective, ultimately, at coming up with a grand strategy, because there is too much political diversity within the EU. I'm sure that the visionaries of a grand EU—an imperial EU—would want to see that go away and insist, for example, that there be a united and therefore more forceful policy that could tap into the resources of individual states. But it will never be in the interests of those states to concede that kind of power to central organizations like the EU. So the fight is on two levels, and it's very difficult to see how the EU can overcome it. One level is the institutional level, where the EU bureaucracy does not have the strength to impose its will in areas like foreign policy or even defense policy.

And on the other level, there's the simple matter of political diversity within the EU and the nation-states. So, nation-states faced with the prospect of the EU becoming more intrusive and taking over more functions will fight against it as well—delaying the prospects, perhaps weakening it, perhaps leading, as some often speculate, to an unraveling of the EU. It's not clear what the future will hold. But again, if I'm right in speculating that, in time, forces that are today considered anti-establishment will become the majority, then that will also be accompanied by a weakening of EU institutions and a strengthening of national policies.

#Glenn

I think it's a problem with the EU. There are too many of these internal contradictions. On one hand, you get the impression that the EU prefers weak national leaders because that makes it easier to rule from Brussels. But these weak leaders then fail to advance basic national interests. So you hollow out not just the political power in the nation-states but also their economic strength. It just keeps getting weaker and weaker, and the stability isn't really there. To a large extent, many of the EU's projects are based on the idea that you don't let a good crisis go to waste—because that's when you can centralize power.

Indeed, this was part of the criticism of the euro, because the euro was kind of conceptualized as a half-built house. That is, you know, if you impose a monetary system, you can't really make it work without a fiscal union. And you can't have a fiscal union without a political union. But they never had consent for a political union, so they just put the common currency there. Obviously, fiscal problems would come, then you'd be forced to push through a fiscal union. And in order to have that, you'd have to push through a political union. So essentially, and quite predictably, it causes crises—and in those crises, there's an opportunity to centralize power. But the problem is that... yeah, there's a problem.

Once there's a crisis, it shows that the EU is a problem and is weakening the continent. This is then used as a reason to give them more power. So they keep saying, "We need more Europe," even when Europe is failing. It's a very strange and contradictory approach. But I'm glad you brought up Ukraine, because that was kind of my next question. Do you see Ukraine as having strengthened or weakened the internal cohesion of Europe? Because on one hand, Russia—the boogeyman now—

seems to be the main unifier, the reason why 27 member states can have the same foreign policy. On the other hand, it has also increased dependencies. And of course, this whole concept of a geopolitical EU is, well, seemingly a disaster. So it's very hard. I don't know how you assess this. Is it going both ways?

#Nicolai Petro

I think it pulls in different directions at different phases of the conflict. At the very outset, there was a predictable rallying effect within Ukraine, and a largely predictable response from the EU—to support Ukraine cautiously, but to look over their shoulder at the United States to see what they would do. And when the Biden administration said, “Yes, we’re going in, and you can go in too,” basically permitting the EU to support the U.S. effort, then we had a combined and unified front against Russia. But that unified front expected a rapid defeat of Russia.

So now, without going into the technical details of who’s winning at this point, the rhetoric has changed. At the very least, we can all see that the rhetoric has changed. And specifically, going back to the EU, the EU no longer talks about victory in real terms for Ukraine. It’s talking about a ceasefire that preserves what’s left of Ukraine, and now defining that as victory. The victory is no longer pushing Russia out; the victory has now been defined as saving what can be saved in Ukraine. And this is a huge defeat for the EU if one looks back even four years at what the original demand and policy were.

And of course, a large part of that comes from the perceived withdrawal of the United States from the conflict. Although, as many analysts point out, it has on the one hand rhetorically withdrawn, but on the other hand continues to provide essential intelligence and technical support to Ukraine when needed. Whether that’s to actually achieve a peace settlement or to drag it out is, at this point, not entirely clear. So the strategy of the EU is, again, to return to the first thing we talked about—a lack of strategy—because the strategy they had at the outset of the conflict has failed, and they have no alternative.

And to this day, there is no EU peace plan, and apparently no group within the entire EU structure tasked with devising one. Instead, all of this is handed over to Ukraine, ostensibly to follow what Ukraine says. But of course, that’s only a viable strategy so long as all the EU needs to provide is funding. And funding, by the way, that comes in drips and spurts—it’s not a reliable source of support that the EU provides to Ukraine. Over the next two years, the amount allocated so far—namely the 90 billion euro funding for two years—is about a quarter short of what Ukraine believes it needs to maintain essential state functions and continue the war at a minimum level.

That's all. So the EU strategy is basically to wait. Wait for what? Well, we see maybe part of the answer in the new media campaign we've seen over the last two months or so, flooding major Western newspapers and media outlets. The expectation, again, is that the Russian economy will soon collapse. We just see article after article that, when you read them, sound as if they were

written from the same script. They're coming from the same small group of think tanks, and they're based on projections drawn from past trends—trends that are only a month or two old at the end of the year, and that we know are seasonal.

So any serious analyst can look at these and say, well, there's always a downturn in the fourth quarter, then a recovery in the spring. There are these cycles in economic life that every economist knows. But the fact that we're portraying these cyclical downturns as leading to inevitable ruin—without ever talking about the measures the Russian government has successfully taken in the past, and is already beginning to take now to counter these—well, that's the problem.

And secondly, without ever actually discussing in a comparative way how the same problems are affecting the Ukrainian economy—their own problems—it leads to the distorted impression that seems to be the one the EU wants to promote. Namely, that if somehow Ukraine, with the EU's assistance, can continue this devastating war for at least another year or so—well, two years, given the budget outlays so far by the EU—then certainly this time, unlike previous times, the Russian economy will indeed collapse. And then, I'm not sure what exactly is supposed to happen, but in some shape or fashion, Russia will withdraw or want to make major concessions, and that can be sold as a greater defeat of Russia than the current terms being discussed. And therefore, again, the EU is saying to Ukraine: keep fighting, keep dying, we'll pay most of the bills.

#Glenn

So, okay, we come full circle then. We're back to the Europeans' wishful thinking and strategic vacuum—that is, keep fighting a little bit longer and hope that somehow Russia will just fall apart without...

#Nicolai Petro

The main thing...

#Glenn

It's not clear how an economic crisis would actually look like a victory. I think if we're honest, the Russians see this as an existential threat, and we'd have to reconsider some of these assumptions.

#Nicolai Petro

Yeah. The main weakness of the current spate of articles about the imminent collapse of the Russian economy is not that we've seen this argument before—although that should be a cautionary signal to anyone—but that there's no actual new information here. And the information, as it's presented, is extremely one-sided. Every economy has its ups and downs. The economy is a complex organism, and when one part of it becomes weak, other aspects—particularly things like interest rates, lending

patterns, foreign trade partners—step in to rebalance the structure. So an actual economic collapse, whatever that may mean—and again, it's telling that this is never defined—is nearly impossible to envision in the modern world.

Curiously, for all the rhetoric that EU leaders occasionally spout about Putin being unreasonable or unwilling to negotiate, the assumption they're making about the impact a collapse of the Russian economy would have on its military strategy is actually based on the supposed reasonableness of Putin and the Russian leadership. They're saying, well, once costs of this magnitude have been imposed, a reasonable leader—presumably like Putin—will decide to withdraw. So there's this two-facedness in how European leaders view the Russian leadership. And again, there are persistent reports from both Russian and European sources that France—and, for example, the French administration, if not Macron personally—has in fact reached out and begun to re-establish high-level political contacts with the Russian leadership. So that's also in the wind, although not being publicly discussed.

#Glenn

Yeah, well, I think that's an excellent point. Betting on the reasonableness of Putin—while at the same time warning that there is no reason—is another contradiction coming out now as well. The German chancellor was making the point that Merz was saying that two years ago Orbán went to Moscow. He didn't have a mandate, because the prime minister of Hungary needs permission to talk to Putin, and he achieved nothing. So what's the point of talking to Russia? That was more or less the argument. But of course, he said, at the same time you have Macron now looking to set up diplomatic ties. So there's no... I think this is another indicator of the strategic vacuum—that they're just punching in all different directions and seeing what sticks. Yeah. Well, thank you very much for sharing your insights on this. To summarize, the US is seeking to revive a dominant position for itself in the international system by reshuffling the deck, and the Europeans are running around like headless chickens.

#Nicolai Petro

If I could summarize something in one phrase that I want to emphasize, it's that the EU and the United States do share a great deal in terms of their political vision, but it's essentially backward-looking. However, they have different ideas about what they're trying to get back to, and that's going to lead to conflict—even though it's backward-looking, which isn't a good thing in either case. By contrast, the multipolar view promoted by the BRICS nations, particularly Russia, is forward-looking—it's seeking an alternative to what existed in the past. And I think that makes it ultimately more promising, because it's more hopeful.

#Glenn

But again, there's the contradiction. I don't think it's possible for the Europeans to consider a multipolar system within the framework of BRICS, because they keep looking backward. I've even suggested that perhaps the Europeans—and the Americans—should consider joining BRICS. But this was interpreted as, "Let's join the Warsaw Pact," you know, because they see it as one bloc versus another. So, going back to the Cold War, I tried to make the point that BRICS isn't a bloc. The UAE and Iran aren't in a bloc. India and China aren't in a bloc. That's not the point. But again, they keep looking backward. They keep looking for someone to discipline them.

#Nicolai Petro

And the BRICS world—the multipolar world—is less disciplined in many respects, but in some ways it's easier. It will be diplomatically easier to reach accords because questions that are values issues—axiological issues, questions of what gives you the right to have the kind of government you have—within the BRICS context, within a multipolar context, are off the table. And those are the main sources of conflict in the world today.

#Glenn

Well, once again, thank you for letting me pick your brain, and have a great weekend.

#Nicolai Petro

Thank you. You too.