

The US Empire Is Crumbling FASTER | Amb. Chas Freeman

The Proxy War in Ukraine and the War of Aggression against Iran are not shaping up the way they are supposed to, and the Washington establishment is in panic mode. Ambassador Chas Freeman—a former US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia and Undersecretary of Defence—does not think that these errors are part of a deeper strategy to weaken China, but the outcome of many individual failures. American power is, in fact, retreating as wars, sanctions and depleted arsenals expose the limits of dominance. He examines Iran, Yemen, Saudi Arabia's growing autonomy and China's gains from the energy crisis. With Pascal Lottaz, he discusses Israel's eroding support, Switzerland's neutrality debate and NATO's failures. Their conversation explores whether cooperative security, regional partnerships and greater freedom for middle powers can replace confrontation, drawing lessons from ASEAN and considering the prospects for diplomacy in a changing world. Chas's Links: Chas Freeman's Substack: <https://chasfreeman.substack.com> Books and Publications: <https://chasfreeman.net/books-and-publications/> Neutrality Studies Links: Neutrality Studies Substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> Support Neutrality Studies: <https://neutralitystudies.com/donate> Neutrality Studies shop: <https://neutralitystudies.com/shop> Time Stamps 00:00 Iran, Yemen and the widening regional crisis 09:21 America in retreat: military and economic costs 16:48 China's gains and Saudi Arabia's autonomy 24:07 Israel's eroding support 30:31 Switzerland's neutrality debate 35:12 Can neutrality replace confrontation? 39:09 NATO's failure and Ukraine's future 44:14 A changing world: ASEAN and regional cooperation

#Pascal

Welcome back, everybody, to Neutrality Studies today for an update with the always brilliant Ambassador Chas Freeman. Chas, welcome back.

#Chas Freeman

Thank you. Glad to be back, Matt. It's been quite a while.

#Pascal

It's been a while, and I really wanted to pick your brain a little bit on what your assessment is of where these big international conflicts are heading that we're seeing. On the one hand, now, if we start with Iran, we have something like a phony phase of this war where there's little missiles or no missiles flying very much, although there are attacks on some of the tankers that are trying to get through. And we have in Yemen Ansar Allah that is making big strides forward. So I wonder how you are assessing the West Asian situation at the moment.

#Chas Freeman

Well, I think the situation between Saudi Arabia and Yemen is very serious. It is escalating. But I think it is a product of their relationship. It is sui generis. It is not at the instance of Iran. It is disconnected from the broader Israeli-American assault on Iran and Iranian reactions to it. I'm sure the Iranians are delighted by the Ansar Allah blockade of Saudi shipping, which is all it is. It is not a general blockade. It is simply a blockade of the Saudi-owned or Saudi-bound or Saudi-departing shipping that goes through the Bab al-Mandab. It is a dangerous situation. It is drawing in others. There are reports that the Saudis have asked Syria to supply mercenaries to fight in Yemen. Clearly, the entente between Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey—it is not an alliance, although it has that name.

It is not an unconditional commitment of mutual aid. It is a contingent commitment of cooperation and consultation. But that has been activated, and the Turks and Pakistanis are basically backfilling Saudi defense requirements in the kingdom while the Saudis escalate against Ansar Allah in Yemen. Of course, there is—and I think the Turks and the Pakistanis have made it quite clear—they don't intend to and feel no obligation to engage in a war outside the territory of Saudi Arabia. So this is happening. The effect of the blockade of the Bab al-Mandab, of course, is to further put pressure on oil prices because of the restriction of Saudi exports. The East-West Pipeline, which was damaged by Iraqi militias acting probably in concert with at least Ansar Allah, maybe with Iran as well, has been repaired and apparently is again pumping oil to Yanbu.

But it can't be exported safely through the Bab al-Mandab. It has to go through the Suez Canal, which means smaller ships. And that indeed, you know, the price of shipping has gone up enormously. The supertanker now goes for \$1.4 million a day. This is because so many—no, it's just so many of the—this is the chartering cost. It includes, of course, the insurance issue. But the main thing is that there are so many tankers bottled up in the Persian Gulf. Now, some are getting out, as you mentioned, and I suspect that they're getting out with the assistance of the U.S. Navy. But I suspect they're also paying off the Iranians in the case of a successful exit from the Strait of Hormuz. It's not clear what's going on.

The claims of the Trump administration that everything is back to normal are utter nonsense. And everyone can see that because of the price of oil and gas, diesel, jet fuel in particular, at the pump. So this is a dangerous situation. It continues to escalate. Ansar Allah is attacking Saudi airports and warning aviation that it is not safe in the kingdom's airspace. The Saudis are mounting an offensive. They apparently have taken back Mocha, the port from which the Dutch first began the export of coffee, which is why in English coffee is sometimes called mocha. Anyway, it's a teeter-totter. They can't tell what is happening, really. On the question of Iran, I would say that things are a great deal clearer. There is a complete impasse. The Trump administration claims there are talks going on under the surface. I doubt that.

There never were direct talks in any event. There were talks brokered by Qatar and Pakistan, and even those have broken down. Donald Trump says that he intends to bomb Iran after the midterms. Not clear why the midterms have anything to do with Iran. They seem to have something to do with Donald Trump. But he won't bomb them before the midterms. But at this point, his credibility is so damaged that his statement that he won't bomb them is taken by some to mean he will bomb them. And we don't know. There is no answer to this militarily. And the answer that Scott Bessent, the Secretary of the Treasury, probably the worst Secretary of the Treasury we've had in our entire history, which is saying a good deal, he is engaged in a war of economic attrition with Iran, trying to apply maximum pressure through sanctions to Iran.

This, of course, is the strategy which was earlier applied to North Korea and which produced a nuclear weapon that can strike the United States. So what we're doing with threats to annihilate Iran, delivered at the UN General Assembly, of all places, by Donald Trump, with Scott Bessent claiming he's going to bring down the regime through sanctions, immiserate Iran, and so forth—what we're doing is incentivizing Iran to develop the nuclear missiles that can strike the United States that it lacks. And I think in this regard, it's significant that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard, the IRGC, has said that it is planning to work on extending the range of Iranian missiles. Up to now, they've had a range of about 1,000 kilometers, which has been enough to keep aircraft carrier battle groups at bay and, of course, to strike Israel.

#Chas Freeman

We now know that the damage that was done to the American military apparatus, specifically aircraft and missiles, was much greater than the Pentagon acknowledged. There is a report from the Congressional Research Service, as well as Inspector General's reports, which indicate that the number of aircraft destroyed was at least twice what is admitted. We've heard a statement from the foreign minister of Iran, Araghchi, who has an admirable reputation for truthfulness, saying that the Congressional Research report understates the actual number, that it's actually quite a bit greater. So a lot of damage has been done. And in the middle of all this, some long-term things are happening. I've been talking mainly about short-term things.

Long-term results are, first, that American bases in the Persian Gulf are essentially evacuated, not functioning. We were driven back to Jordan. Jordan has been struck by the Iranians on repeated occasions. Some of the damage that wasn't reported apparently was at Muwaffaq Salti Air Base in Jordan. And so the U.S. is in retreat. We're now in retreat also from Fairford Royal Air Force Base in England, where we've had to withdraw the B-1 bombers, about a fourth of our B-1 bomber fleet. These are aircraft that are no longer manufactured, and it costs about \$300 million each. So they're very precious. There were 12 of them at Fairford. They've now been withdrawn to North Dakota, I believe. And so we're in retreat, more generally, from this war militarily. The depletion of weaponry, the

#Chas Freeman

Depletion of the magazine depth, as it's called—that is, the supply of weapons for the U.S. armed forces—has been extreme. This causes real questions to arise about Donald Trump's threats to resume a massive bombing of Iran. Every time we bomb Iran, we should get a thank-you note from Iran, Vladimir Putin, and Xi Jinping, because we are damaging our capacity to deal with either of them militarily. Economically, I think it's very clear that the Iranian people have been inured to economic suffering. They can take a great deal more of it than the American people or Europeans can take. And so it's very unlikely that the war of economic attrition will succeed in bending Iran to our will. And of course, there is no diplomacy because the so-called memorandum of understanding, which was negotiated in the early summer, was essentially repudiated by the United States once it was signed at Versailles in the presence of Macron by Donald Trump, but not honored.

And the Iranians are very clear. President Pezeshkian, Foreign Minister Araghchi, others, the Speaker Ghalibaf in the Iranian parliament, have all made it clear that they regard the United States as having absolutely no credibility at all and not being a worthy interlocutor. So there's no diplomacy, and Iran is saying that it can sustain a state of war with the United States for three to four years. If this is the case, the damage to the global economy will be far greater than what has been suffered to date because it was mitigated by the release of strategic petroleum reserves generally, and by the Chinese ability to fall back on renewable energy supplies and to direct their refineries to reduce consumption.

China had prepared itself for an energy crisis to an extent that no other country had. But the Chinese are running out of the capacity to make further cuts. So I think the future is very uncertain. The only thing that is certain—and this will end my comments, which have been far too long, I guess, but this is a very complicated situation now—the only thing that is certain is that inflation is now afflicting the global economy. It's very much felt by voters in the United States. The war with Iran is enormously unpopular. The Republican voters who had turned out in good numbers in previous elections in support of Donald Trump and their party—or I should say, the party that he has assumed a dictatorship over—turned into a virtual cult.

The Republican voters are very unenthusiastic about voting. Many of them complain that they voted for Donald Trump and he promised various things. He's done the exact opposite. He promised peace. He's brought war. He promised control of inflation. He's generated it. He promised the reindustrialization of the United States. He hasn't achieved that. His tariffs, his wars, have taken a terrible toll on ordinary people, many of whom find it hard to survive financially. His tax reform has enriched the plutocracy, the 1%, at the expense of everyone else. And there is a general sense of despondency in the country. Democrats are very much determined to vote against Trump, who has said that this is a referendum on him, and then said, no, it isn't a referendum on him, and he doesn't care what it is. As usual, he's straddling issues on both sides.

And so we're only a few weeks away from November 3rd, which is the date of the election. We have an Israeli election October 27th, which doesn't promise to be consequential at all, since all of the

candidates are committed to genocide, ethnic cleansing, and aggression against Israel's neighbors, and whatever issues they're addressing are in that context. Two-fourths of Israeli voters are for the genocide, and apparently extolling the virtues of it is good politics. We have members of the Knesset saying that it's morally justified to kill Palestinian babies because they'll grow up to be terrorists. You know, this puts the Nazis to shame, really, in the ferocity of its rhetoric. So this is a terrible mess, and you're probably very sorry you invited me to speak about it.

#Pascal

No, I'm not. And you know, on my show, you can speak for as long as you want. I really appreciate this type of analysis because the world isn't a good place right now. But I was wondering about two things right now. In the last couple of weeks, I got to speak to a couple of Chinese colleagues and people who also spend a good time in China. And one of them said that every taxi driver in Beijing interprets the U.S. war against Iran as directed against China, actually, in order to drive up oil prices and so on. And another one, Zhang Weiwei, actually also said, "Look, we are more or less sure that this has to do with us, but the United States is basically butchering its approach, and it's actually buying China more time than not because China is not as dependent and as vulnerable to global energy markets as the United States assumed."

Maybe that's one of the reasons why China actually tried to show, look, we can reduce our intake and still be fine. What do you make of that? That's the first one. And the second one, since you were ambassador to Saudi Arabia, how independent actually is the Saudi Arabian government when it comes to these questions of war and peace? Because I talked to one Syrian colleague who said, like, look, this entire spiel of, like, arguing that Saudi Arabia by itself attacked that airplane coming back from Iran is nonsense. This is a U.S.-induced and U.S.-ordered fight against Yemen. What do you make of that?

#Chas Freeman

Well, I think these are exaggerated views in both cases. I think the Chinese, in many ways, are just as paranoid as Americans are these days about the machinations of the United States. Yes, there are people in the United States who would foolishly believe that the attack on Iran had something to do with diminishing China's influence in West Asia, or generally. If that was the case, they were fundamentally mistaken, because a major winner from this war really has been China. It's developed a vast new market for its renewable energy and electric vehicle technology. Sales of both are surging to the extent that the German automotive industry is now seriously threatened.

It's a little bit odd to see Porsche raising the price of cars because they're being undercut by superior electric vehicles from China. I mean, I don't think raising prices is a very good marketing technique for German customers. But perhaps I get the Germans wrong about it. Last time I was in Germany, I

had the impression they were fanatically frugal and careful about their money. Anyway, so I think if indeed there were those in the United States who agreed with your Chinese interlocutors that somehow this was all aimed at China and intended to put up energy prices in China.

As you said, the taxi drivers claim—I always enjoy talking to taxi drivers, but I don't regard them as reliable political analysts. So I think that's that. As for the independence of Saudi Arabia, it is vastly more independent now than it ever was. It has agency. We've talked before about the changes in the global order, which are having the effect of boosting the agency, the autonomy, the independence, and the freedom of maneuver of middle-ranking powers like Saudi Arabia. And I think this is reflected most clearly in the entente that I mentioned between Pakistan, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. This is not to be sneezed at, as the French say.

So it is a serious matter that unites the Pakistani nuclear arsenal, Pakistan's preferred position with regard to Chinese military technology, and the abundance of Pakistani labor with a normally capital-rich Saudi Arabia. At the moment, Saudi Arabia is non-capital rich because it is suffering from the loss of oil revenue, which oil and gas constitute about 56% of the Saudi economy. So it's not a trivial matter to lose those revenues. And this also brings in Turkey, which has one of the most formidable armed forces in the world and also is industrially advanced. So what is this? This is not a collective security organization. It has no designated enemy.

It has no common unified command. It has a secretary general, but it's not quite clear what he, a Pakistani, is going to be doing. It is incipient rather than mature. So it is cooperative security. What it means is, it is a substitute for the lost ability of the United States to manage affairs in West Asia and the Persian Gulf in particular. And it is seen by the participants in it as such. Those who seek to join it, including Qatar notably, but Egypt flirting with this and others, see it in the same light. It is a counter to the Greater Israel Project, a balancer, therefore a counterforce to Israeli aggression. It is also a balancer of Iran. But Iran has welcomed it because it does mean the removal of American influence from the region.

And Iran may indeed—Iran will have some sort of relationship with it, whether it's simply a consultative relationship of the sort that Egypt has had with the same three parties, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, with regard to issues like Palestine and the Iran war, or whether it is actual membership, is unclear at this point. But what is clear is that this represents the eclipse of American military presence and influence in the Persian Gulf and West Asia generally. And here I'll just close by saying that, you know, the countries of the Persian Gulf are—you know, Iran led the way in casting off Western tutelage 47 years ago in the Islamic Revolution.

The others are now following Iran in dissociating themselves from Western dominance. None of them want a foreign patron to guide them—not Western, not Chinese, not Indian, not Russian. They are seeking strategic autonomy and have a good chance of achieving it, in my estimation. This is part of a general trend, and Israel is not exempt from it. Israel, too, is disillusioned with foreign patrons, specifically the United States, where it is losing ground steadily. There's an enormous effort

at Hasbara, meaning exculpatory propaganda, going on in the United States at the moment, hugely funded by the Israelis, in an effort to retard or reverse the erosion of Israel's reputation. But the figures are quite telling.

Very few people in the Democratic Party now have a positive image of Israel. Even the Republicans, the minority now, are in favor of Israel, and independents are more toward the Democrats than the Republicans in this regard. So we're talking about the erosion of Israel's foreign support in a context where most Israelis recognize, certainly Benjamin Netanyahu does, that Israel's survival depends on foreign and specifically American support. He has come out with various proposals to turn Israel into a sort of independent Sparta, but these don't have much credibility and are widely regarded as infeasible. So Israel is losing big time as a result of its own success in persuading Donald Trump to join it in attacking Iran.

Immigration is at a historic high. We've seen an editorial in Haaretz, a great Israeli newspaper, calling on Israelis who emigrated to come home to vote to save Israeli democracy, meaning to save the democracy for Israeli Jews, which, like the democracy for Afrikaners and English settlers in South Africa, was real democracy, but excluded the majority. In the case of Israel, the Palestinian co-equal population. So we have seen the ultra-Orthodox condemn the state of Israel for its mistakes in words that are quite outspoken. Not unusual. I mean, I have Orthodox Jewish friends in the United States who have the same opinion. But in the context of an election campaign and all the stress that Israel is under, this has obviously evoked a ferocious reaction from the fascist right wing in Israel.

We also have, at the same time, as Israel's options are narrowing and Israel's strategic support is decaying, we have the perverse reality of Israel doubling down on genocidal talk, talking about, as I said, killing babies in Gaza as a moral thing, doubling down on the genocide there. Israel is supposed to withdraw from Gaza, in return for which Hamas would agree to disarm itself. Instead of doing that, it has now seized 70% of Gaza and occupies it militarily. And it's killing people daily. It's also violating the so-called ceasefire in Lebanon. It's annexing land in Syria. It is more belligerent, more genocidal, more murderous, more ambitious than ever, despite the fact that I think a realist would judge that its future is increasingly in doubt.

And that, I think, is the main loss that the Israelis have suffered in all of this, which is the loss of hope, the loss of confidence in the survivability of their country, the realization that it, like the two Crusader kingdoms of the 11th and 12th centuries, could well disappear as a result of its forfeiture of foreign support or the indifference of the world beyond its borders to its survival. So I think this has been a very bad war for the United States, for Iran, but mostly for Israel. And it has advanced Chinese interests, importantly, notwithstanding the taxi driver's critique. And it is changing the world. The tripartite entente to which I referred, the replacement of American management of the geopolitical status of the Persian Gulf and West Asia with an indigenous state-organized force, is really very interesting.

I see a precedent in the past in the emergence of ASEAN as a forum for managing Southeast Asian affairs without regard to the defeat of the United States in the Vietnam War or the Indochina Wars of the 1960s and '70s. And so I think we're seeing, you and I have discussed before, the emergence of a world order in which middle-sized countries, small countries, and larger countries all are focused on their own interests and not responsive to great power dictation. You could perhaps add Ukraine into that in a way. And the only exception, I'm sorry to say, is your own country, Switzerland, which has foolishly signed up with NATO in sanctions on Russia in a referendum. You can explain that to me. I can't understand it.

#Pascal

I was engaged in that referendum, or in the preparations for it, for the last three and a half years. And I was, of course, a ferocious supporter of this idea. And I gave speeches in Bern in front of people. And we convinced ourselves that this might work. And we lost 30-70. We lost 30-70 because the other side convincingly reframed the whole thing. The thing was actually about writing a definition, a stricter definition of Swiss neutrality, including neutrality and sanctions questions, into our constitution. And the other side successfully reframed it as a referendum on being for or against Vladimir Putin.

They reduced it to him, and successfully so. So what we have is the ironclad proof that 70% of people in Switzerland are in favor of continuing the current course, which is putting sanctions on Russia. It doesn't even include whether sanctions on Iran or U.S. or whatever are included in that, but it's 70% for that. And that's, of course, the thing that Russia now says is not a neutral act. And actually, Vladimir Putin said so in Valdai, that they interpret that as, you know, not a neutral act. And the Swiss keep saying, "Oh, but we're neutral militarily." But of course, the Russians couldn't care less.

#Chas Freeman

Well, you know, it's a direct result, I would guess, of the fact that Switzerland is part of the German, French, and maybe Italian media-verse, and the ferocious information warfare that has accompanied this terrible abuse of Ukraine and Ukrainians on behalf of a kind of quixotic charge at a Russian windmill, mistaking it for a giant. This, you know, has reinforced Russophobia to an extent that I find quite unbelievable. You know, our friend Ian Trowd, on his return from Valdai, which you mentioned, was accosted and detained at Heathrow Airport. His laptop and phone and so forth were confiscated. I guess he has them back now.

But this is remarkable. For a country like the UK, that has a proud history of supporting free speech, that gave birth to John Stuart Mill, to turn totalitarian is quite extraordinary. And it illustrates the point we've discussed before, which is the British interest in stoking Russophobia historically because they did not want Russia to be a counter to their ability to divide and manipulate European politics.

They wanted the Russians excluded from polite company, and therefore maligned them as some sort of Asiatic horde that lacked a conscience. Anyone who spent any time in Russia—I never went to the Soviet Union.

I'm happy I missed that period of Russian history, but anyone who does spend time in Russia will see that there is a very high level of culture and a very strong Western bent to it, even if the Russians claim to be a separate civilization. And here, I will just say that I am appalled by Marco Rubio standing in front of the Acropolis in Athens and giving a speech claiming that every barbarity that the United States is now committing was somehow in defense of Western civilization. If Western civilization is represented by genocide in Gaza and the refusal to talk to adversaries, then I want nothing to do with it. And it all recalled to me the famous remark of Mahatma Gandhi when he arrived in London. He was asked what he thought of Western civilization, and he replied, "I think it would be a good idea." Very good reply.

#Pascal

May I ask you about, you know, the perennial topic, or maybe the name of my channel, right? This neutrality thing that I research as well. But the sad conclusion I've come to is that the greatest, not only impediment but enemy of neutral solutions to global affairs at the moment is, of course, the Western NATO war alliance, which constantly tries to use front states as weapons against others instead of trying to build security structures around shared spaces of security or so on. But we are now getting closer to a moment when, as you said, the U.S. is in retreat. The production capacity of the U.S. and NATO for these implements of war is decreasing.

At some point, it might just sink through that this is not a game they can play anymore, and that the U.S. and NATO might become more receptive to the idea, okay, if we cannot dominate it, let's just make sure the Russians can't dominate it, and let's create a structure which creates buffer states. And, you know, Vladimir Putin at Valdai actually said—he was asked by Lukyanov, "Is neutrality for Ukraine still a goal of ours?" And his answer was like, "Yes, it is." So the inevitability of the rest of Ukraine, whatever's left of it, to be a buffer state—is that, do you think, at some point the West will actually say, like, maybe that's the least of the bad options?

#Chas Freeman

Well, be of good cheer, Pascal. I think the day when neutrality will be recognized as a useful antidote to strife internationally will come.

#Pascal

Let me make a couple of comments.

#Chas Freeman

First, non-alignment is dead because there's nothing to align against. There's no bipolar order to escape. There is now what's often called a multipolar order. I prefer multinodal, because I think pole is the end of the line, and I think we're dealing with a much more complicated reality than a sort of jumble of bilateral relationships between countries. Countries are, as I've argued, now able to maneuver. We are in a period of diplomacy of maneuver. And in that context, neutrality makes a great deal of sense. So, you know, I think we got, in the Cold War, into a mixture of strategic and ideological confrontation, which over time we came to believe that ideological convictions were strategic and strategy was inseparable from ideology.

But, you know, having been involved in the opening to China, I think the most significant element in the China communiqué was the statement that the United States and China have different socioeconomic systems and ideologies. Nevertheless, we can cooperate on those things where we have common interests. And I think we're coming into a period in which nations behave as nodes, meaning three-dimensional or four-dimensional nodes, objects with varying degrees of connection to each other in a network. This is not a bunch of poles. It is a network, and the nodes are the connectors in the network and the source of the dynamism of the network. Anyway, in this context, I think cooperative security becomes very possible.

And here, going back to your own continent of Europe, I think NATO, as a collective security organization, has failed. It has done very abusive things to Ukrainians and Ukraine. It has its ardent, fanatic supporters in the Baltics. In particular, sometimes the Poles are a bit overwrought on behalf of confrontation with Russia. But I think, you know, the failure of collective security could lead to the reemergence of the cooperative security opportunity. And we came up with such a thing at the end of the Cold War with the Partnership for Peace, which the Russians found acceptable, admired, and part of it was a Russia-NATO Council that gave Russia a role in the management of European affairs.

That has been savagely rejected by the West. Russia, I think, wanted to become part of the West. Certainly, that is what Vladimir Putin wanted, I think, and it was rebuffed. And so it's in the position of Turkey, which also spent 300 years trying to Europeanize itself, only to find itself rejected in that case because of an antipathy, Islamophobia, basically. And there are other factors, but that's the main one. And so we have a situation where Europe, instead of being whole and free, is divided and imposed upon by blocs. We have a Russian invasion of Ukraine, which is slowly succeeding. Ukraine has been remarkably resilient and innovative.

And unfortunately for Ukrainians, they are the cousins of the Russians, who have been equally innovative and resilient. And so we're seeing Ukraine—the Ukraine that now promises to emerge as one we should all be worried about—because it may very well have no Black Sea coast. It may have no connection to Europe. It's not qualified to be in the European Union on any criterion. The level of corruption is too high. The absence of democracy and civil liberties is too great. The requirements of subsidies from the rest of Europe are too large. French farmers and others who are protective of their agriculture are not going to allow the best farmland in Europe to be part of the EU. And so we may end up with a Ukraine that is...

#Chas Freeman

A failed state managed by a revanchist ultra-nationalist from Western Ukraine. That is, if, as has happened in the European past, others don't simply divide Ukraine. That is not impossible to imagine. Anyway, it's very clear that the experiment with the coincidence of strategy and ideology and collective security structures, far from bringing peace, has brought turmoil to the world. I don't expect, by the way, that the American effort to establish a hegemonic rule in the Western Hemisphere is going to succeed either. I'm watching the Brazilian elections with great interest. I think they're very important. They're being decided not on international issues, although the young Bolsonaro, the opponent of Lula, is committed, he says, to much the same sort of obsequious relationship with Donald Trump and the United States that Milei in Argentina has pursued.

Whereas Lula is not. But it's being decided on domestic issues, much as I think the midterms in the United States will be decided on domestic issues rather than foreign policy ones, although the foreign policy issues have domestic consequences, and that are very painful for people. So I think we're seeing the emergence of a very different world, one in which middle-ranking powers in particular have great freedom of maneuver. You see that with the Turkish-Pakistani-Saudi entente. You see it with ASEAN, which incorporates Indonesia, a future superpower. And I think, you know, the West is about 12% of the global population. You know, that means 88—sorry, 78—88, sorry, 88% is not Western. And, you know,

#Chas Freeman

Again, one of my objections to the concept of multipolarity is that it's essentially a repudiation of bipolarity. Saying bipolarity doesn't work anymore. That's true. The world is not divided between the East and the West. Maybe it's divided between the North and South, or between the former imperial powers and their former colonies, who are now quite assertively independent. But I think we're in a transition phase. We're beginning to see some of the things that are coming out of this. And one of them, which I rather deplore in a way, because I accept the necessity of it, but we see a diminished role for organizations like the United Nations with universal membership.

And we now see voluntary limited-membership organizations that come into being to mitigate the failures of the UN to live up to their expectations, to provide their services. We have the Asian Infrastructure Development Bank, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the BRICS, and the RCEP in Southeast Asia, and the whatever-you-call-the Enhanced Trans-Pacific Partnership, which has an impossibly long name, that Japan has seized leadership of. And so this is a very different world from the one that you and I grew up in. I mean, you are old enough to have grown up in the previous world, I think.

#Pascal

Yeah, but, you know, maybe it's not even a bad thing. I mean, many roofs also make for, you know, good sleeping. Not everybody needs to be under the same one, as long as they don't go into conflict with each other. And that's one of the things we don't really see, right? We don't see these different structures then competing with each other. Even the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS, they're not competing. They do things on different levels. So it's... I agree. Or structure, right?

#Chas Freeman

And again, I think ASEAN is a forerunner of this. It is a very important economic bloc. It now consists of 11 members, having brought in Timor-Leste. And it has a dialogue partnership with China, everybody. And it is a zone of peace and security that is quite impressive. You know, you can say, well, it didn't grow into the European Common Market-type integration. But then, you know, look at the European Common Market—that's failing. So, you know, what is Europe going to do? It has to do something.

#Chas Freeman

And

#Chas Freeman

Can't go on the way it is. It is far less than the sum of the parts. And, you know, maybe Switzerland has now abandoned its neutrality in some respects and joined the EU spiritually, if not. But what is the EU? You know, I see right-wing parties in Europe, the Alternative für Deutschland in Germany, but the Rassemblement National in France as well, posing a serious challenge to the inherited European identity, which never really took hold.

#Pascal

No, absolutely. And I don't think that other parts of the world should ever try to emulate the European Union. And the ASEAN framework is a much better template. And I, you know, two years ago, the Indonesian ambassador told me that when—ASEAN ambassador—that when they come to Japan and negotiate with Japan as ASEAN, they insist that there's an empty chair for Myanmar because Myanmar is currently suspended.

#Chas Freeman

Of course. Of course, and it is inclusive. And it's very effective. I remember in Washington, there was always a designated representative of ASEAN, which meant that one of the then ten countries who belonged to ASEAN would carry the water in negotiations. And sometimes, you know, a country

like Singapore, which is small but punches above its weight because of the quality of its thinking and its government, then if the Thai had a problem, if the Singaporeans were the ASEAN representative, they would ask the Singaporeans to go in and make their case. And they benefited greatly from that.

And so this is a model of cooperation on a give-and-take basis, a loose association, bookended in its integration and in its relationship with great powers, that is very appealing, I think. There is a similar organization, or there was, in Southern Africa, SADC, the Southern African Development Council, which, of course, is dominated by South Africa as the superpower in the region. I see things emerging in Africa as well that are interesting. Subgroups, some of them probably for the wrong reasons or out of reactions to French neocolonialism in West Africa, that the Francophonie never really acquired its full independence because of the Central African franc, which tied all the finances to Paris.

And now we see, there too, we see associations in the Sahel. We see Nigeria becoming a real force on the continent, in some ways capable of balancing South Africa. We see Ethiopia, although it's in a civil war in Tigray, a tragic situation, also emerging as an important player, Kenya and others. By the way, I always treasure the judgment of Julius Nyerere, the founder of Tanzania. Tanzania—he had a one-party state in Tanzania. The West accused him of having a one-party state, and he said, "Well, the United States also has a one-party state. That was typical American extravagance. They divided it into two. It's not that great."

#Pascal

The one-party. Yeah. Ambassador Freeman, I think, Chas, I think this is the right place to end it because we did the tour around the world, and I couldn't agree more. I think we're seeing actually some encouraging signs of regional arrangements and trying to fill in the void. Although the overall picture is still bleak, especially for the situations in Gaza and also for the many people who have to die in these front states where the war is raging. Chas, where's the best place for people to follow you? Where would you like to direct everybody?

#Chas Freeman

Well, you know, I wanted to retire from all involvement in public affairs, but I have failed. And I do give speeches once in a while, and I put them up on a Substack, which is Chas Freeman is the name of the Substack, and I put up a bunch of material that represents things I did years ago, which have held up remarkably well in their predictions. So I will continue to do this. I'm in the process of writing something for a conference in Qingdao, in Shandong Province, across the way from you in Japan, and trying to fit some of what we discussed this evening, my evening, your day, your morning, to integrate the Belt and Road Initiative and other things into this analysis. I'm having a bit of trouble. I'm struggling with it, but I hope it will be worth reading and will be on the Substack.

#Pascal

I'm sure it will be a wonderful read, and I will put the link to your Substack and to your other publications in the description box below. Ambassador Chas Freeman, thank you so much for your time today.

#Chas Freeman

Well, thank you, Pascal.