

Ukraine Peace Blocked AGAIN by Europe | Ian Proud

A US armada off Iran, airlifts into the region, and Geneva talks running in parallel with Russia-Ukraine negotiations—signal for a real strike, or a pressure bluff meant to force a nuclear deal and spark unrest at home? In this episode I'm joined by Ian Proud, former UK diplomat and the voice behind The Peacemonger, to weigh the Iran buildup, Israel's trigger risk, and the odd Geneva setup with Trump's inner-circle negotiators. We also dig into Europe's role in blocking an end to the Ukraine war, the EU's push for militarization and central power, and the financial and political bombshell of fast-tracking Ukraine into EU structures. We close on the Russia-China-Iran triangle, hedging vs alliance talk, and the Hormuz nightmare scenario hanging over global energy. Links: Ian Proud Substack The Peacemonger: <https://thepeacemonger.substack.com/> Ian Proud YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/@IanProud> Ian Proud on X: https://x.com/proud_diplomat Neutrality Studies substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> (Opt in for Academic Section from your profile settings: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com/s/academic>) Merch & Donations: <https://neutralitystudies-shop.fourthwall.com> Timestamps: 00:00:00 Introduction 00:01:36 Iran buildup, flotilla scale, pressure tactics 00:05:02 Israel strike risk and US entanglement 00:06:42 Geneva dual-track talks and war theater swapping 00:10:16 Witkoff and Kushner credibility and sequencing 00:14:45 Missile demands, JCPOA legacy, Europe in lockstep 00:20:44 EU militarization, enemy politics, sovereignty pushback 00:23:49 Ukraine fast-track EU plan and budget reality 00:37:19 China Russia Iran coordination and Hormuz risk 00:40:59 Hedging logic and closing remarks

#Pascal

Welcome, everybody, back to Neutrality Studies. My name is Pascal Lottaz. I'm an associate professor at Goethe University. Today I'm joined again by my friend and colleague, Ian Proud, a former UK diplomat and now a great analyst, publishing the Substack *The Peacemonger*. I highly recommend you all go there and subscribe to it—he publishes regularly. Ian also regularly posts on YouTube, on various channels. Ian, I'm sorry—your own YouTube channel, where do people find you there? I've just started; it's called *The Peacemonger* as well, but you can find it at Ian Proud, *The Peacemonger*. So yeah, hope to see people there. And the opposite of peacemongering is, unfortunately, what we have to talk about, because the warmongers are getting ready to—or, in my view, they're getting ready to—attack Iran.

They've been building up this armada in front of Iran for a while, and they've talked it up for a while, but now they're adding additional components to the fleet. We're seeing reports on Twitter/X about flight logs showing the United States doing significant airlifts into the region. We've just witnessed discussions in Geneva—I don't think they were real negotiations, but at least discussions—between

the Americans, Viktorov and Jared Kushner, Mr. Trump's son-in-law, with the Iranians, while also doing the same with the Ukrainians and the Russians. But we'll talk about that. Ian, how do you make sense of what's currently being built up?

#Ian Proud

Well, I think Trump is clearly trying to put pressure on the Iranian regime to come to some sort of deal on nuclear disarmament. Of course, Trump is also the president who, in his first term, ditched the JCPOA, which was a good framework for Iran's nuclear program—one that the European nations were fully signed up to and that was actually bringing Iran in from the cold. Rouhani, if you remember, spoke at Davos at the time; everybody was kind of courting Iran. There was a real positive mood then. And then Trump came along and completely ditched that. He's now back to warmongering with Iran.

He obviously had the strikes against their nuclear facilities last year. This is just about pressuring them for a deal, you know, shortly after an attempt to actually provoke regime change within Iran itself—an operation that appears to have been sponsored by the CIA and Mossad. And so there are two aspects to this, as far as I can see. One is the timing—that the military side and the intelligence side are kind of totally misaligned. The military part may be coming into this a bit too late anyway. But in any case, despite the massive force the Americans have deployed to the Gulf...

This isn't really large enough to mount a full-scale military overthrow of Iran in any case. If we think back to the first Gulf War in 1991, the U.S. had four carrier strike groups in the region. Actually, Colin Powell said he would have preferred if they'd had a six-month build-up of troops—over half a million, I believe it was, at the time for that operation. Those same military factors just don't apply in this case. I mean, obviously, it's a formidable arsenal, but it's not nearly enough to mount a credible military challenge beyond airstrikes and things like that.

So this appears to be purely a pressure ploy, but what it's actually doing is hardening the position of the Iranian government and giving them more support in the developing world, including, of course, Russia and China. I don't think the gunboat diplomacy will succeed, but the fact that the Omani government has been brokering talks in Geneva, at their embassy, between the two sides is helpful. It just seems unlikely that this will change much, as Trump tends to shift his position on a fairly regular basis anyway.

#Pascal

These are good points. And, you know, the German analyst and former spy Reiner Rupp also made the point that the American forces in the Gulf have previously been much stronger than they are now, while Iran has been much weaker. However, we're still seeing this tremendous buildup going on. One of the analyses I read that makes sense to me is that it's not just in the hands of the Americans. The Israelis, too, might start strikes, and if they do, then, well, it will necessarily draw in

the Americans in one way or another. Do you share that assessment—that it's not just in the hands of Washington whether or not this war is going to start?

#Ian Proud

No, it clearly isn't. The Israelis clearly want to provoke some sort of action against Iran for their own domestic reasons, of course. But Israel is not a major military power. It's a very well-armed one, as you know, given its horrific actions in Gaza over the past couple of years. That's clear, but it's not a credible, large enough, or indeed proximate military power to offer anything more than a threat in the skies above Iran.

But even then, you know, we know from all the open-source intelligence reporting that it would actually be a brief war, if it can even be called a war. Last year, Iran considerably depleted Israel's weapon stocks in terms of aerial interceptors and that sort of thing. So yeah, of course Israel would like to do this with the Americans too, but even so, this still doesn't amount, in scale, to a credible enough force to mount any sort of ground attack on Iran. In any case, there doesn't really seem to be support for that anywhere in the developing world, including in the Gulf states themselves.

#Pascal

Hey, very brief intermission because I was recently banned from YouTube. And although I'm back, this could happen again at any time. So please consider subscribing not only here but also to my mailing list on Substack. That's pascallottaz.substack.com. The link's going to be in the description below. And now, back to the video. Right—what can we make of this scenario, you know, which is highly unusual: two chief negotiators, at the same time, on the same day, negotiating two kinds of wars. Although, of course, what's going on with Iran at this point is a very, very hard conflict, it's not yet a kinetic war. But if you look at things from the Iranian perspective, what happened to them in January and cost thousands of lives was already a kind of hybrid warfare, actually. Still, at least there aren't missiles flying yet. And at the same time, you've got the Americans also negotiating with the Russians.

#Ian Proud

I just can't help it.

#Pascal

But it seems to me as though there's almost some kind of tag going on—you know, one war, let's end that one, and maybe we could go into the other one. It's just weird that it's being mashed together right now.

#Ian Proud

It does. And if you read the U.S. National Security Strategy that was published fairly recently, it's a mishmash of a document—it looks like it was written by a committee. Look, I mean, Iran isn't the U.S.'s biggest foreign policy priority. It may well be for Israel, but it certainly isn't for the U.S. There's no core U.S. strategic interest in regime change in Iran, even though regime change is a hard habit for them to break, going back many decades, right? Of course, China is a big adversary now, and the NSS makes it clear that's where they want to pivot. I mean, it seems to me quite foolhardy to provoke further.

I mean, this appears to be an attempt at regime change, really, because they don't pose a credible ground military threat—at least not with the resources Iran has at its disposal. This can only be pressure aimed at fomenting further domestic unrest within Iran itself, and nothing more than that. I mean, let's see whether it works. Hopefully it doesn't. Hopefully they can reach some deal that lets them back away from this massively disruptive kind of conflict, which would only, as we saw with the Ukraine war, have devastating effects for Iran itself—and, I fear, for the negotiations on ending the Russia-Ukraine war.

I mean, that's something where I actually think the Americans do seem to want to end it. And maybe they want to end it because they'd rather start wars elsewhere, you know, whatever—but they do seem to want to end that war, and the Europeans don't. I think that's the big problem we're butting up against right now: the Americans are kind of brokering these really difficult, really complex talks on the basis that, yeah, up until Trump came to power, there'd been absolutely no dialogue at all between Western nations and Russia.

So, you know, with the Russians themselves, they're starting from a very low base in terms of building trust in the negotiations. But the negotiations are happening, and they're sort of edging forward. I hope they deliver results soon. I see those talks as a fundamentally positive sign, although I think there are massive obstacles to actually delivering peace in Ukraine—because of the Europeans, but also because of resistance in Kyiv, with Zelensky at the top.

#Pascal

Why do you think these talks are organized the way they are? Steve Witkoff is not a trained diplomat—he's a businessman and a friend of Mr. Trump. Jared Kushner is his son-in-law, a very young person. I think he's probably 38 or 39, something like that. He's one of the top team. The Russians are obviously going along with it. They even agreed to fly to Geneva. They wouldn't fly over Eastern Europe, so they went down south and flew over Italy just to be sure—which the Swiss apparently also had to broker, to make sure their airspace would be open to them. But they agreed to it. They agreed to come to Geneva, although they could have said, "No, if you want to negotiate, we'll do it either again in Abu Dhabi or somewhere else, maybe Istanbul." I mean, that was kind of the obvious choice. But they did that for the Americans, because the Americans said they needed to be there, since they need the Iranians in there as well. It's just a bizarre kind of setting.

#Ian Proud

It's a bizarre sequencing of events. I mean, the Geneva talks happened hot on the heels of the Munich Security Conference, obviously. There's that proximity issue in terms of the U.S. negotiators. As for Kushner and Witkoff's experience as diplomats—no, they're not diplomats. But all the so-called diplomats have actually repudiated diplomacy over the past twelve years since the Ukraine crisis started. So if they don't have experience, well, okay, that's certainly an issue, but they've been able to get the Russians to engage, and I think that has to be seen as a positive sign. Witkoff has been given—quite frankly, somebody who isn't a diplomat has no real status.

He's been given a title now, you know, access to President Putin on various visits to Moscow. It's a sign that the Russians take this process seriously, whatever his background or CV might say. So I don't really see that as necessarily a problem from the Russian side—or indeed, well, I think it might be more of a problem from the Ukrainian side than from the Russian side. And the people who complain about this tend to be in the mainstream media, you know, people who complain about Witkoff's lack of experience. They tend to be the same ones in the mainstream Western media who think the war should continue. So I slightly discount their concerns as they relate to the Russia-Ukraine negotiations.

If they can deliver something over the line, that would be a massive achievement in ending this truly dreadful war. They're less independent and impartial when it comes to broader issues related to Iran, given that Kushner in particular has very, very close links with Israel and the vested interests that exist there—including some of those outlandish plans for turning, you know, Gaza into a kind of Las Vegas on the Mediterranean—when this terrible, you know, starvation and collective punishment of the Palestinian people has finally been brought to a close. I mean, they say it's over, but atrocities still seem to go on anyway.

So I think they're much less impartial when it comes to negotiating with Iran. I think there they have much less credibility—and rightly so. But who is going to step in and broker? I mean, this is actually, ironically, an area where the Europeans should be stepping up more, you know, to kind of broker, as they did over the JCPOA, when Europe actually played a leading role in delivering the JCPOA—at a time when they had a credible foreign policy as it related to Iran. But sadly, the Europeans, given their desire to keep the war in Ukraine going—and this is where the two issues intersect—you know, they've essentially just green-lighted whatever the Americans want to do in Iran, it seems to me.

#Pascal

Yeah, it's important to remember that the JCPOA was essentially done with the help of the Europeans, the Chinese, and the Russians. I mean, it was a fantastic achievement in balancing all sides' needs, and it was the fruit of a bygone era when that kind of cooperation was still aspired to. So, two things connected to that: the demand that Iran basically destroy its long-range missile capability, right? And only keep missiles that cannot hit Israel—while Israel, obviously, is allowed not

only to have nuclear weapons but long-range missiles too, and so on and so forth. Is that, in your view, an approach that makes any kind of agreement impossible? Because it's just absolutely obvious that this is something no Iranian could ever say yes to under the current circumstances.

And even from a purely security, strategy, and deterrence perspective—which the West is very accustomed to—nobody can expect that Iran would actually say yes to that. Secondly, about the Europeans: when we look at the speech that Marco Rubio gave in Munich, he basically praised empire. He said, "We need to reestablish empire, and we need to do it together. We Americans love you—just come and be with us in this new empire-building moment." Do you think he said that explicitly to make it clear that they should never, ever think about not going along with what the U. S. is doing in Iran, and to stay in line—just the way the German chancellor did back during the Twelve-Day War, when he called it "the dirty work"?

#Ian Proud

Yeah, the Americans' position on Europe is deeply confused. On one hand, they want Europe to become less centralized, to hand power back to the nation-states. And yet they talk about Europe as a civilizational entity, as if it's a single thing, when of course it isn't. It's made up of the EU and its 27 different sovereign nations, with very, very different historical, cultural, linguistic, and religious backgrounds, and so on. There's also the question of where Russia fits into this in civilizational terms. If they want to decentralize power back to the nation-states, where does Russia fit within that family of nations? It's essentially a European—or Eurasian, but still a European—country. How do you include Russia within that mix as well?

I think, even though it isn't made explicit in the national security strategy, part of the reason Trump is engaging so heavily with the Russians is that they want to normalize relations between Russia and the rest of Europe. The big strategic reason for that is that, ultimately, they see Europe as an additional counterweight to China over the longer term. And this goes back to the age-old idea of getting the Russians onside to compete with China. I mean, I think that's, frankly, the big game at play here.

But in terms of being a colonial power, I don't really see that the Americans want any nation or group of nations to contest their hegemony as the leading global power, even though, of course, China is now a peer competitor. In that regard, I think they have a very kind of patriarchal view of Europe, where they see Europe as being there in this big imperial endeavor where we all club together and ultimately take on the big beast, which is China. And I think that's what this is really all about. And, you know, the Europeans are going along with it. They say, "We can't live without the U. S." I mean, you heard Macron say that, you heard Keir Starmer say that, you heard Ursula von der Leyen say that in their speeches.

You know, we can't live without the U.S., so they seem to be willing accomplices in this. But what they haven't done is actually start to address the massive issues they have with Russia—where they

don't want any normalization at all with Russia, where they obviously don't want the war to end, because that could unleash even bigger pressures within Europe itself as Ukraine pushes to join that club. So the European position is also, I'm afraid, deeply, deeply confused. And the Chinese are sitting back, watching this as a single sovereign state, and probably chuckling to themselves at the complete mess that's unfolding in the so-called transatlantic alliance.

#Pascal

I've heard several interpretations of this recently. One that really strikes a chord with me is from people who say, look, at the end of the day, the war in Ukraine—basically a NATO proxy war with Russia—serves the European establishment, the EU elites, very well. I mean, it's the very enemy you need in order to unify the continent. Basically, I mean, look at us: we're talking about "the Europeans." We don't talk very much anymore about the Germans, the French, the Italians—maybe sometimes the Germans and the French, because we know they're sitting at the helm of the whole thing—but not much about the others. Yes, in particular instances, but we're really starting to think of and perceive the Europeans as one entity.

And if you look at the EU's sanctions regime, if you look at all the competences the EU has actually grabbed—wrestled out of the hands of the member states—I mean, it might very well be that we're in a moment of power consolidation, of sovereignty consolidation under the larger EU umbrella. Something that might not be reversed, even if the war ends. And it's something the EU elites might be interested in keeping going because it serves their purposes so well. And the militarization, right? Any sovereign state needs a good army. This is the moment. I mean, being in Europe right now, the kind of militarization talk I hear—even in Switzerland—is astonishing. You know, that we need more military, more capacity in order to integrate and defend together. It's like a real drive; it has momentum. How do you see that?

#Ian Proud

I see it as a very mixed picture. On the one hand, the Americans are talking about reversing that trend—handing power back to the nation-state. And if you look at the nation-states themselves, you see increasing pressure not to be governed by Brussels. You already see that in Central Europe, but it's also growing in Germany, with the AfD, and in France, where that sentiment has been developing for a long time. France is probably the most likely nation to leave the EU next, if any nation does. And of course, in Britain, we chose to leave the European Union project to have our own independence.

Now, I was against that at the time, but now I kind of start to understand why it may have made sense—because of the creeping centralization of powers. Reform is surging in the polls. We could, in the third election running, go from one majority party to another, to another, in the UK in 2029. And there's a very real prospect of Reform possibly winning and becoming the government of the UK, which would completely change the complexion of our relationship, you know, with Europe. Now, as

to your point—yes, of course, any kind of, any autocratic, if you want to call it that, leader needs an enemy to justify the militarization, wars, and so on.

You see that consistently throughout history. In the Second World War, for example, it was largely driven by feelings of humiliation about how the First World War ended—feelings that Hitler built upon to create his Nazi narrative. You see similar patterns in Southeast Asia, which is a subject I know quite a lot about, particularly in places like Indonesia at the end of Sukarno's reign and that sort of thing. So this is kind of a classic tactic. But I'm not sure, in this case, it's going to work, because you're dealing with a grouping of sovereign nations whose citizens increasingly want their governments to serve their own needs, not some big supranational agenda. Those larger agendas are often dominated by wars that actually affect society—people's day-to-day standard of living, the cost of living, and feelings of insecurity or anxiety that another war could be forced upon them, one they didn't choose.

So I think the Bond Alliance, the calluses, are swimming against that tide, and I think that tide is going in one direction at the moment—and that's toward individual sovereign nations actually deciding on their own affairs in Europe. That's how I see it. So yes, I get the theory that Euro elites may see this as being in their interests, but I think if they step back from the picture, they might notice that the political sands are shifting quite significantly in Europe right now, and there's very little they can do to stop that. Increasing centralization of power may only accelerate that trend.

#Pascal

Right, right. In this regard, it's also quite strange that the Europeans—the most creative ideas they come up with at the moment, or not the Europeans, but let's call them the EUcrats, the EU bureaucratic establishment—the most creative things they come up with are basically solutions that, in my view, will necessarily lead to the destruction of their project. I mean, the idea of giving—what did they call it?—like integrating Ukraine into the EU first and letting them tick off the boxes of the checklist later? What was that? They gave it a bizarre name, like “advanced access to the EU” or something, “advanced membership” or something like that.

Basically, okay, they become an EU member now, and then later they have to fulfill all the points about fighting corruption and so on. Which, obviously, if they did that—if they actually included Ukraine and gave it a seat at the table—the whole thing would immediately become a major stumbling block for any kind of future decision-making, right? Because they still function largely on the principle of unanimity, and Ukraine would immediately gain a huge say in how the EU itself works. I can't see how this is beneficial to the project, but how do you see it?

#Ian Proud

Well, the bigger question is whether Europe can afford to expand. And the short answer to that is that it can't. I mean, its budgetary envelope is now fixed until 2034. There's no subsidy money to go

around for Ukraine if it joins. And actually, you've got this whole list of countries queuing up that are far better prepared than Ukraine to join. Montenegro, I think, is the most advanced. Serbia is doing quite well. Albania, and so on—all these countries. And Turkey, which has been in the deep freeze, possibly because it's a Muslim nation. I mean, that's just my view. I don't think the Germans would ever really want Turkey to join the EU. But that's an aside. I mean, can the EU afford to bring in all these nations and give them the same subsidies and benefits as everybody else? The short answer to that is no.

And the challenge with Ukraine is that it would be by far the costliest project. They want to accelerate it first because of the size of Ukraine's agricultural land, which would make up, if it joined the EU, about 25% of all agricultural land in the European Union. Then there's the massive infrastructure challenge—it's been destroyed and devastated by four years of war that the Europeans, you know, have provoked and wanted to continue. That would take up a lot of cohesion funding, infrastructure funding, from EU subsidies because of the massive levels of poverty in Ukraine, again caused by the bankruptcy that's been aided and abetted by the European elites. Which means they'd get higher subsidies per capita than others, simply because of the lower income level of the population.

You know, Europe just can't afford to do this. I mean, it really can't. It doesn't have a budget. In any case, its budget is tied up until 2034. So what's going to be offered to Ukraine is something like, "Well, you can have our flag, and you can come to our meetings." I mean, Zelensky seems to go to all the meetings anyway. Yeah. So what's going to be different about that? Not much else. And I think ordinary Ukrainians will say, "Well, is this what we fought for four years for?"

Just to have an EU flag over our building and not actually have any money to help us rebuild, at a time when the Europeans want them to keep an army of 800,000 people—which they also can't afford. And any EU money that goes into Ukraine will be paying for an army, but not paying for schools, hospitals, roads, power stations to be rebuilt, and that sort of thing. It's a completely crazy idea that could only have been thought up in the corridors of Brussels, which seem to be completely insulated from the real world outside. I'm afraid to say it's a total disaster.

#Pascal

I mean, why would they even pitch that? I don't understand the point of presenting this as a serious idea. I understand why Donald Trump would pitch the idea of, you know, incorporating Greenland into the U.S.—I get that. That actually serves a diplomatic, power-political purpose: either trying to achieve it for real or at least, you know, make the flock of hens flutter around, feel very insecure, and then go back and reassure them—the good cop, bad cop kind of game. I see how that serves a purpose. I don't see how this stupid idea serves any purpose other than embarrassing the EU elites, because to everybody else it's so obvious that, for so many reasons, it's such a dumb idea. But they're still pitching it.

#Ian Proud

Well, the Americans just want to get the Ukraine war albatross off their back. For them, they're not really thinking about the policy consequences of this. They say, "Yeah, why can't they just join, like it's some sort of fast track here at JFK? Sure, they can just join." None of the economic or political consequences matter to them at all. They're not going to have to pay; they're not going to have to deal with the disruption and the chaos themselves. But they want a way out of the Ukraine war, and so shoving Ukraine into the EU before it's ready seems to make sense to them—thousands of miles away from where the real issues are decided. And I think, again, the bigger question is actually: how can we create a situation where Europe doesn't feel it needs to continually expand? Because another way to look at this is, how do you even distinguish the EU from NATO these days?

They both have exactly the same goal. They both want to defeat Russia—politically, militarily. They want to kind of break the regime. Kaja Kallas talks about breaking Russia up into smaller states. Ukraine and the EU, NATO and the EU, are basically the same thing right now. So while Putin has said that he's happy for Ukraine to join the EU, there has to be a bigger discussion about how you can actually foster better mutual coexistence between Russia, the EU, Ukraine, and other countries in Europe that are not inside the EU but want to join in some sort of bigger collective—not in a supranational body, but some sort of format that allows all countries in the region to coexist, to have economic cooperation, to open up social and cultural links, and that sort of thing.

So, you know, the problem is really that if you rush Ukraine in before you've had that discussion, then what you're actually at risk of doing is just pressing the pause button on a much bigger general war between Europe and Russia. Because you'll be admitting Ukraine, which is essentially antagonistic toward Russia, and wants the EU to maintain a fundamentally hostile posture toward it. It becomes like the Baltics and Poland on steroids—wanting the EU to have a fundamentally hostile, antagonistic, and aggressive policy toward Russia.

So, you know, can you imagine a Ukrainian version of Kaja Kallas as the EU High Representative for Foreign Policy and Security? Just think about what that would be like. So, without this bigger question of how you can reset economic, social, and cultural relations—including with Russia and all the other countries that see themselves as part of this bigger Europe writ large, not the EU but Europe and Eurasia writ large—then you're not really getting to the root cause of how to bring real peace to the continent.

#Pascal

No, but unfortunately there are quite a few people who don't want that. I mean, we know the neocon game. We know—Rubio spells it all out, right? It's about spheres of interest, it's about colonial empire building. And these people, they want to use violence and war as tools of great-power politics and statecraft. These sick people—especially the neocons in the United States—they think of this as a chessboard, as Jeffrey Sachs keeps reminding us.

And to them, basically, integrating Ukraine into the European Union—and thereby Europeanizing the war—is actually kind of a logical next step. At the same time, they're disengaging from it from the American perspective, because the U.S. now has to focus on Iran or whatever else, and they're dumping it on the Europeans so they can continue that fight. The Americans then fight with Iran and start engaging China through that, because China has made it very clear that they're highly opposed to this, and then they move into the third theater in the Pacific. I mean, these people—unfortunately, some of them really do think in those stupid, warmongering terms.

#Ian Proud

Yeah, they undoubtedly do. But I go back to the point I made earlier—that actually, U.S. policy is fundamentally confused. It's confused as it relates to Europe, it's confused as it relates to Russia. You know, on one hand, the U.S. seems to want some big economic reset with Russia, partly for economic reasons, of course—in terms of access to natural resources and joint projects—but also to build up their relationship with Russia as a counterpoint to China, to discuss strategic nuclear deterrence, disarmament, and that sort of thing. But on the flip side, they want to compete with Russia in the Arctic. So they think they need to take over Greenland, they need to militarize the Arctic as a counterpoint to Russia. So... the American position is deeply, deeply confused.

#Pascal

Yeah, but this is where people point out—and even the Russians have been saying—that the Americans said for the last year that the Trump administration wanted better relations with Russia and a working relationship. But the reality was the opposite. They imposed more sanctions, more pressure, more attacks started. So maybe it was just a speed check—just good old lies—whereas the underlying strategy, as Brian Berletti keeps pointing out, never changes. It's just the rhetoric that's different.

#Ian Proud

Yeah, you may well be right. You may well be right. But I do think that Trump is kind of hemmed in by the Beltway blob, to a certain extent. I think there's a part of him that sees people like Putin and Xi as his sort of peers—you know, powerful leaders. I don't really see that the Americans want to take on Russia, even though they want to keep the Europeans onside. It's a very confused position. But I think that if you go back to 2017 and the implementation of the CAATSA sanctions act against Russia, that was actually against Trump's design.

He actually wrote an addendum to the law explaining why he disagreed with it, but he was hemmed in by, you know, the U.S., and had to do it anyway. So I think—I think, I mean, this comes back to the very confused nature of U.S. foreign policy, and to the kind of toxic nature of U.S. politics itself. There are just so many people in D.C. who want to take on the world, who think America is the

greatest—"USA, USA," and all that sort of malarkey. And yeah, maybe Trump is part of that too. But there's no shortage of people like Lindsey Graham or Joe Wilson and all those types who basically see the enemy as being outside.

They're the modern-day McCarthyists who, if they see any small country even talking to China, for example, it has to be labeled as communist, or, you know, as people who are anti-transatlanticism, that sort of thing. So I don't think it's fundamentally about Trump. I think it's fundamentally in the nature of the U.S. political system itself. And that, you know, really is a good reason for the Europeans to cut themselves loose from the U.S. and deal with their own dysfunctional politics themselves—and, in the process, kind of find some way to live in an accommodation with Russia over the long term. But this is just such a complete chaotic mess right now.

And so many people are to blame, you know. I sort of want to lay that on the Eurocrats there—Western leaders who can see their power eroding; Zelensky, who sits on top of a corrupt regime in Kyiv; you know, Trump, who kind of supports Israel to the exclusion of all rational logic and wants to pick a fight with Iran. And, you know, the one nation sitting quietly and just watching all this happen, of course, is China, who see their power continuing to grow on the world stage at a time when the developing world is gravitating toward them as they see the decay in the U.S. and in the EU itself.

#Pascal

Are they sitting quietly, though? We're now hearing about joint exercises between Iran, Russia, and China. And we're seeing that apparently the Russians are exporting more oil to China. Alexander Mercouris interprets this as maybe the Chinese are starting to stockpile more oil in preparation for a possible closure of the Strait of Hormuz—which, obviously, is what the Iranians would do if a full-scale war actually broke out. I talked to Stas Krapivnik and said, look, the Chinese, the Russians, and the Iranians are cooperating, but they're not an alliance the way NATO is an alliance.

You know, they're not in that game of deep integration building. He then said, like, oh, but, you know, NATO is not a real alliance—it's a power tool, basically a way for the United States to shepherd its vassals. Whereas what China, Russia, and Iran are doing is a proper alliance—equals who cooperate on various levels, but as equals, balancing among themselves. Do you see it that way as well? Or how are you interpreting this trilateral coordination that's going on?

#Ian Proud

Well, I sort of echo that sentiment about NATO, but I also think NATO is a massive cash cow for U.S. defense firms, you know, because all these countries—why would Montenegro want to join NATO? I mean, nobody in NATO is going to fight for Montenegro.

#Pascal

I mean...

#Ian Proud

But not anybody's sweating more than either. But you know what I mean? They haven't even fought for Ukraine, and that's been a bit of a tragedy in itself. So I think it is a massive cash cow. When it comes to China, I think countries are basically hedging. Russia is certainly hedging with China. You know, Russia is as worried about China on its eastern border as it is about NATO on its western border—and let's be completely clear about that. It makes sense for the Russians to align with China in terms of their economic interests—selling oil and gas—but let's be under no illusion that they also worry about China as a big threat to their very underpopulated Far East. So they're hedging.

The Iranians are probably more closely aligned with China than Russia is. But everybody is hedging. I think that's... And Southeast Asian nations are definitely hedging. You look at Thailand, which has been a traditional ally of the U.S.—they have a big Thai-Chinese community—they're hedging. Singapore, you know, all these nations are hedging. The only outliers are countries like Japan, which is fully on board with the Americans in taking on China. So I think, as it relates to China, everybody's hedging. I don't think—even though people talk the language of equal alliances—I don't think that's really the truth of it in terms of the political factors at play, certainly as it relates to Russia, although Russia undoubtedly does have a good relationship with China.

They also see the game there—about weakening U.S. control over the global financial architecture and agenda—which the Chinese share. So where interests align and overlap, they work together. Right now, it makes sense for Russia to engage with China, but that doesn't mean they're closed to engagement with Europe or the U.S. if those countries can get their act together, although there's no sign of that happening anytime soon.

#Pascal

Right, that does make sense. I would only add that the Japanese are also hedging, but they hedge internally. For them, the whole talk of indigenous capabilities is actually, at least for a good part of the establishment, real in the sense that, in case they have to go it alone, they need to be able to do so—which isn't hedging with somebody else, but basically standing on their own. However... Ian, that was very interesting. Thank you for a very wide-ranging assessment of the situation. Again, for people who want to follow you, they should look for **The Peacemonger** on Substack and **The Peacemonger Ian Proud** on YouTube. Is there any other place people should go?

#Ian Proud

Yeah, I'm on X as well—also as The Peacemonger. So I am The Peacemonger, although my YouTube channel is under Ian Proud, but it's all branded as The Peacemonger too. That's my title. I mean, it's kind of—yeah, it's a burden I carry—but there are so many warmongers in the world that,

God bless people like you, Pascal, and others who can promote the cause of peace everywhere, because quite frankly, we really need it right now.

#Pascal

We do, we do. I love the name, and it's exactly what we should do. Everybody, join Ian Proud in peacemongering as far and wide as you can. Ian Proud, thank you very much for your time today.

#Ian Proud

Thanks so much, Pascal.