

Jeffrey Sachs: Four Years of War in Ukraine - Hegemony or Peace?

Prof. Jeffrey Sachs discusses the four-year anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, why Germany is key to resolving the conflict, why the US refused to accept a common Europe with Russia, and how the world order has changed as a result of the war. Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: <https://glennDiesen.substack.com/> X/Twitter: https://x.com/Glenn_Diesen Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/glennDiesen> Support the research by Prof. Glenn Diesen: PayPal: <https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/glennDiesen> Buy me a Coffee: buymeacoffee.com/gdieseng Go Fund Me: <https://gofund.me/09ea012f> Books by Prof. Glenn Diesen: <https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B09FPQ4MDL>

#Glenn

Welcome back to the program. We're joined again by Professor Jeffrey Sachs to discuss the four-year anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which began on February 24th, 2022. It's also, to some extent, the 12-year anniversary of the NATO-backed coup in Ukraine on February 22nd, 2014, which, well, can be argued triggered this war to begin with. So, thank you very much for coming back on the program.

#Jeffrey Sachs

Sad that we're still talking about this war, and that it's still going on after all this time. Really amazing.

#Glenn

I agree. This war has been a disaster on every level. Of course, it's a humanitarian disaster, especially for Ukraine. And it's also been a strategic disaster that's destroying Europe and bringing us closer and closer to a possible nuclear war. So, given that we have these two anniversaries now, why do you think this war is still going on—with so much at stake, so much destruction?

#Jeffrey Sachs

Well, the starting point is that the U.S. assumed it would never get to war. This whole debacle, this whole disaster, starts with the ideas of the 1990s—that at the end of the Cold War, the U.S. reigned supreme and could bring Russia into a U.S.-led world. That was the basic idea. And that, in fact, not only could it bring Russia into a U.S.-led world, it would reduce Russia to a third-rate power, maybe even divide it. Zbigniew Brzezinski, who was the most articulate of all these delusionists, wrote in the

1990s that perhaps Russia would fall apart forever into three weakly confederated states: a European Russia, a Siberian Russia, and a Far Eastern Russia. This was triumphalism. The idea was that the U.S. was unchallenged and unchallengeable, and therefore there wouldn't be war.

Russia would accede to whatever demands the United States made. And when Russia did not accede to those demands, that was the reason the war went on. When Russia proved it could resist what the United States and Europe thought would be a crushing blow—after 2014 and then again after 2022—and Russia held out and showed that Western power was less than expected, that in itself became, for these politicians, the reason to keep fighting. Boris Johnson, who is one of the real criminals in all of this, a real culprit of this war, said in an interview that he could not let Ukraine sign a peace agreement with Russia in the spring of 2022 because that would be a threat to Western hegemony.

So this is children playing a board game. Of course, it's not a board game—it's millions of lives lost, economies crushed, opportunities for life squandered at the hands of a small group who have been playing what they think is a game of Western hegemony. There have been no stakes in any of this for European or U.S. security. This is not a matter of U.S. or European security; this is a matter of, first, U.S. and then European dominance. The Europeans, I should add, are a little strange in this. The U.S. led them into it. The Europeans knew this was a bad idea. I know for a fact that when the U.S. pushed for NATO enlargement to Ukraine, there was a lot of resistance in Europe, because they knew it would lead to war.

But now that Trump, who has his own set of delusions, is interested in other delusions—not this one—the Europeans still can't find an off-ramp, because they became delusional themselves, thinking, well, if it isn't the United States that's going to assert Western hegemony, we'll do it ourselves. So it's a grudge match of Germany, France, and Britain against Russia that's slogging on. And it prevents these miserable leaders—miserably unpopular with their own people; I'm speaking of Scholz, Macron, and Starmer—from telling the truth: that this was a bad idea to begin with and that it should end. The best thing for Ukraine is Ukrainian neutrality and an end to this war. They just can't tell the truth.

#Glenn

So how can we possibly get a realistic negotiated settlement today? Because I see the commentary—it ranges between optimism and full-out rejection that it's even possible. The situation is quite complicated. Russia obviously sees NATO expansion, and especially the incursion into Ukraine, as an existential threat, so it has very strong demands. Ukraine also sees itself as facing an existential threat with the invasion. And what we see is that the solutions are exactly the opposite. The U.S. seems to hold some of the keys, because it's worried this conflict will bog it down in Europe and also push Russia further toward China. But I really don't understand what the Europeans are doing. As you indicated, it doesn't make much sense at all to keep this going. So what do you see as possible settlements or solutions?

#Jeffrey Sachs

The real solution here lies with Germany. Germany is the key. Germany's terrible leadership is the reason this war broke out and why it continues. It's very poignant to read the memoirs of Angela Merkel, where she describes the moment Germany gave in to U.S. demands for NATO enlargement at the Bucharest summit in 2008. On the first day of that summit, when George Bush was recklessly pushing NATO to commit to expanding to Ukraine and Georgia, France and Germany—and I know others, like Norway—thought this was a very bad idea. They tried to resist, explaining to Bush that it could provoke war, that it would provoke a crisis in Europe, and so forth. But the United States persisted. This is just an example of the U.S. deep state.

In this case, Bush was a very weak president, with Cheney as a very dark figure behind him, but really it was the deep state still pursuing a policy it had set more than a decade earlier—that NATO would enlarge—pushing the Europeans to accept that. Merkel resisted on the first day of the summit but gave in on the second. That, to my mind, was the turning point for Europe. She said she salvaged something because there wasn't a literal plan for accession, only a commitment to the accession of Ukraine and Georgia to NATO. That didn't make much difference from the Russian point of view, and it didn't make much difference for the politics that unfolded afterward.

So Merkel, who was a very decent person in my view as chancellor, gave in. That was her mistake. Scholz was just impossibly weak and confused. He didn't utter one sentence of truth or sense about any of this during his time as chancellor. And Merz has been a great disappointment as well, because when Merz came into office as chancellor, he just beat the drums of war from the first moment. He didn't say, "Well, I'm newly arrived. I'm going to contact my counterpart, Vladimir Putin, to see whether it's possible we work something out." He just said we're heading toward an even bigger war. So German leadership has been terrible, and it's consequential because Germany is really at the center of this story in a lot of ways.

Most importantly, in 1990, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when Germany was still divided between the People's Democratic Republic—the GDR—in the east and the Federal Republic in the west, Helmut Kohl was chancellor and wanted to move toward fast reunification. That required the approval of the Soviet Union. To obtain that approval, Kohl explained to Gorbachev on February 10, 1990, that German unification would not threaten Russian national security because, in part, NATO would not move eastward. That commitment was made by Kohl, and it was made repeatedly by Hans-Dietrich Genscher, the German foreign minister—publicly, privately, in countless ways.

That's the basis of German reunification. Merz should understand this. Germany cheated in a very big way—of course, it cheated alongside the United States. It was both Germany and the U.S. that, from 1993 onward, started to push for NATO enlargement. I often talk about the U.S. being the main driver of this, and I think it was, but Germany was an enthusiastic NATO enlarger, even though Germany was the main, the overwhelming, beneficiary of the commitment that NATO would not

move one inch eastward. This is all well documented. Merz should know it. Then we come to the anniversary of the Maidan coup, in which the U.S. did a lot to overthrow a neutral government in Ukraine.

We should recall that on February 21, 2014, the German, French, and Polish foreign ministers negotiated an agreement with Yanukovich to end the unrest in the Maidan—much of it stoked by the United States itself—in return for elections later in 2014. Germany was a signatory to this agreement, a party to it. The deal was also coordinated with President Putin and President Obama. The next day, the coup leaders stormed government buildings in Kyiv and overthrew Yanukovich. At that moment, the Western governments should have said, “We don’t accept this coup.”

Yanukovich was the legally constituted president. He was in Kharkiv that day and said, “I’m still president.” But Obama immediately recognized the new government, which was part of the U.S. deep state plan. Germany went along again. This is terrible. Europe failed. Europe had signed an agreement with Yanukovich and then, completely within 24 hours, buckled to the United States. Then Germany cheated again, because in 2015, after the war had broken out, the two oblasts in the Donbass—Donetsk and Lugansk—had broken away and declared that they were not following the coup regime in Kyiv.

And a war began with the people of Kyiv, with the government attacking the breakaway regions. President Putin helped to orchestrate what became first the Minsk I and then the Minsk II agreement, more importantly in 2015. The Minsk II agreement said that the fighting would stop on the basis of political autonomy for the two ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking regions of Lugansk and Donetsk. The guarantors of that agreement were to be Germany and France. And we now know, from the testimony of both of them, that they did not enforce the agreement. They did not pressure Ukraine to follow through, as was their responsibility.

As Merkel later said in a rather shockingly brazen statement, they regarded the Minsk II agreement as a holding period—a time for Ukraine to build up its strength for war. I don’t know if Merkel meant that at the time in 2015; that’s how she explained it in 2022–2023. But in any event, Germany did not fulfill its role. So, to my mind, Germany has the highest responsibility as the largest country in the European Union, as the one that was at the very center of this story from 1990 onward, and as the one that has failed in its political responsibility at the crucial moments—on the question of NATO enlargement, on the question of the putsch or the coup in Maidan in February 2014, and on the enforcement of the Minsk II agreement. Germany failed repeatedly.

For Merz to come into office as chancellor and just declare that Putin cannot be trusted betrays either a basic ignorance of the key facts of the last 25 years or a brazen disregard for those facts. I hope it’s ignorance. The way to address ignorance is through dialogue. Merz should have immediately picked up the phone, called his counterpart, and said, “I’m newly elected as Chancellor of Germany. We have a major responsibility to try to find peace, and I believe our foreign ministers should meet immediately and discuss what might be done. Maybe we won’t reach an agreement,

maybe we will, but we should try.” Nothing of that sort happened. I believe that’s what should happen right away. I assume that after Mr. Merz hears our interview just now, he’ll immediately call President Putin and try to find peace.

#Glenn

I do like your optimism. Well, if the key is Germany, we may have some problems, because some of the most dangerous rhetoric is coming from Germany now. And also, as Merz stated at the Munich Security Conference, he essentially denounced the whole effort by Orbán to talk to Zelensky and Putin. Well, Zelensky is okay to speak with, but you can’t talk to Putin. You know, this was immoral, essentially. So, I’m not having too much to bet on this, but I like the wider perspective you take here, because the Ukraine war is, to a large extent, about the collapse of this pan-European security architecture.

I think this wider context is important. At the end of the Cold War, when there was this ambition to build a common European home—a greater Europe that included Moscow—there were many opportunities that weren’t taken. You were there then, negotiating or advising Poland. You advised the Soviet Union under Gorbachev, and later Russia under Yeltsin. What was it that they wanted, vis-à-vis what the Americans wanted? Why wasn’t it possible to reach a mutually acceptable post-Cold War settlement?

#Jeffrey Sachs

I began advising in Poland in 1989. Poland, of course, entered into a coalition government under President Jaruzelski, who was the Soviet-backed president, together with the Solidarity movement, which was the anti-communist movement, to form a government that year. I was very much involved in that, and in the economics around it. When it came to the economics, the point was that Poland was broke. It had no foreign exchange reserves, its currency was collapsing, inflation was very high, and there were shortages of goods. So, as a macroeconomist, I was able to devise a stabilization program that I recommended to the Polish government and to the European governments.

Those recommendations, broadly speaking, were endorsed. From a practical point of view, Poland was able to end the high inflation, stabilize the currency, and, after about a year, begin a process of economic growth that would last for the following 30 years. It was a very successful transition from a very fraught financial situation. The tools to do that are rather well known if one studies such crises or has been involved in solving them, as I had been. When it came to the Soviet Union, the same situation applied, although on a much larger scale. So I recommended a similar package, but on a much larger scale.

Those recommendations were flatly rejected by the West. The same kind of economic policy that was working for Poland was turned down by the U.S. government. Twenty-five, thirty years later, I

read the minutes of the White House meeting where it was rejected. I was shocked by the flippancy, the brazenness, and the ignorance of the participants at that meeting. So there was, naturally, an element of Machiavellianism and an element of bravado from the winners of the Cold War, as they saw it. But there was also, Glenn, just plain stupidity—people who understood nothing about economic stabilization, nothing about what Gorbachev's government needed, and so on.

So the incompetence also needs to be highlighted here. It turned out that both in the Soviet case and, later, in the Russian case after the Soviet Union ended, the West was completely uninterested in even the most routine kind of financial support to end a deep crisis. At the same time, I heard directly from President Gorbachev and from President Yeltsin that what they wanted was the same as what Poland wanted—an end to the divisions, a united European home. President Yeltsin's favorite word was "normal." Russia should be normal. No more revolutions, no more Bolshevism, no more divisions, no more Cold War—just normal.

But the United States wasn't pursuing peace. The U.S. was pursuing hegemony. That's the difference. Peace means you deal with your counterparts with respect and even help them in the short term. Hegemony means you crush your counterparts because your aim is to dominate. And that's what we got instead. That's why NATO enlargement was on the table when Russia was not only no threat—it was saying exactly the opposite. It was asking to join NATO, wanting a common European security agreement. There was no threat, but the U.S. wasn't interested in that. The U.S. was interested in dominance. And that's what I witnessed at the time.

#Glenn

Well, I was going to ask, how do you think the war in Ukraine has reshaped the global order? Because the world looks very different now than it did just four years ago.

#Jeffrey Sachs

One of the interesting chapters in Zbigniew Brzezinski's 1997 book **The Grand Chessboard** asks the question: as Europe and NATO push eastward and surround Russia, what will Russia do? Brzezinski devotes a chapter to this and asks, well, Russia might agree—buckle in—or Russia might resist. Could it form an alliance with China, for example, or with Iran? Brzezinski analyzes all of this and declares very confidently that there's no chance Russia will do anything but accept its European vocation. Russia has no other option. That proved to be decisively wrong. Russia said, "OK, goodbye. We turn toward Eurasia. We turn toward China," which, by the way, is a great economic fit. Russia and China are very complementary economies—as Russia and Europe were, by the way.

That was a good fit, too. It was good for Germany and good for Russia—that partnership worked. Then came the West, with its twenty rounds of sanctions and so forth. But Russia said, "Yeah, we'll look in a different direction—toward India, toward China, toward Central Asia, toward Western Asia, toward Africa." That's the world that's being built right now. So the U.S. thought, "We're the

hegemon, we'll run the show." But in fact, what we have is a bully in the United States—still very violent and very powerful, no doubt—and a vassal Europe, utterly confused, demoralized, and divided. The U.S., Europe, Britain, Japan, Korea to some extent, Australia to some extent, and New Zealand together make up about twelve percent of the world's population.

Maybe, if you're being generous, it's up to 15 percent of the world's population. What's taking shape is a multipolar world, and increasingly the other 85 percent of the world's population is saying, "What is this U.S. bullying? What is this U.S. hegemony?" Now, we're not past the delusions of the United States. If you were to ask Donald Trump—who is a master delusionist—"What's your map of the world?" he would say the following: "We own all the Americas. That's the Monroe Doctrine. We just own all the Americas. And we proved that—we kidnapped a president in Venezuela. We own all of Europe. We don't really want it; it's pathetic. These people are useless. But anyway, we own all of Europe."

We own all of the Middle East, and we're going to prove it because we're going to go to war with Iran. We own India because India is afraid of China. And we own half of Southeast Asia and the Pacific, so we're surrounding China. So we're pretty good—we're still in charge. That's the American delusional view of the world. Quite dangerous. The other view of the world—and by the way, Africa, which I didn't mention, because the United States doesn't think about Africa except for getting the cobalt, that's all, and some rare earths—the U.S. has absolutely no attention span for Africa as Africa. It's only seen as a place where there are some minerals we want. Now, if you look at the world from a different point of view, the BRICS countries would say, "Well, we're basically half the world."

We are Russia, India, China, Brazil, South Africa—now Egypt, Ethiopia, the United Arab Emirates, Iran, and Indonesia. We don't want to be bullied by anybody, and we're about half the world's population. The African Union as a whole—that's 55 countries with almost 20% of the world's population. It'll be 25% by mid-century. And we don't want U.S. hegemony. We're real. We're not just a bunch of minerals—we're real. And, of course, the other parts of the world are contested, and Europe once in a while even says, do we just want to be pathetic vassals of the United States, or do we have some history, culture, society, and different points of view that we'd like to assert?

So Europe doesn't quite fully accept its vassalage, and I think the fair way to put it is that the United States, in relative terms, doesn't have anything like the authority, the reputation, or the desire for alliances in the rest of the world. The Western world is a small part of the world, and the vast truth is that the 85 percent outside the U.S. and Europe—and a couple of East Asian countries—want prosperity. They want good trade. They want to advance in technology. And China will be a good partner for them. India will be a good partner for them. Russia will be a good partner for them.

And so this is hardly the U.S. hegemony that Trump and the American deep state imagine. That, I think, is a much more accurate view of the world. The faster the United States gets beyond its delusions—hopefully fast enough to avoid a war with Iran, which would be disastrous—the better

the whole world will be, including the United States itself. The faster Europe escapes from its pathological Russophobia and says, you know, we were led down a path that we ourselves chose to walk, it was a mistake, we need to make our continent safe and secure based on collective security, the faster Europe can thrive once again.

#Glenn

The chapter on Brzezinski reminds me of a speech Joe Biden gave at the Atlantic Council back in '97, where he said the Russians were worried about NATO expansion. And, you know, they said, "We might look toward the east, to China." And he mocked it, saying, "Yeah, well, if that doesn't work, you can always work with Iran." The whole audience just broke out in laughter—it was the funniest joke. But that's it, really. It's the inability to predict possible consequences. What seems awfully patriotic today turns out to be a very foolish policy, one that puts us in a very difficult spot for tomorrow.

#Jeffrey Sachs

I recently reread a famous speech by the arch-imperialist Joseph Chamberlain, head of the British Colonial Office, delivered in 1897. One of the notable points in that completely obnoxious imperialist speech is when he says, "The British realms extend throughout the world. We are a quarter of the whole world. There is no one who can begin to challenge us in all the future of history, as far as we can see." And, uh, half a century later, it was all gone. So these predictions—this bravado, this arrogance, this belief that you can run the world—are the pride before the fall. And that's been America's and Europe's big mistake.

#Glenn

Well, thank you, as always, for taking the time. I really appreciate it. I know you have a big day ahead, so I'll let you go. Thanks again.

#Jeffrey Sachs

Good. We'll talk to you again soon. Take care.