

Rein Müllerson: Kissinger's Nightmare & European Quagmire

Rein Müllerson was Gorbachev's legal advisor and then Estonia's deputy foreign minister. Müllerson discusses how Kissinger's worst nightmare is coming true as US hegemonic ambitions are pulling China, Russia and Iran closer, while Europe has entered a quagmire of its own making. Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: <https://glennDiesen.substack.com/> X/Twitter: https://x.com/Glenn_Diesen Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/glennDiesen> Support the channel: PayPal: <https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/glennDiesen> Buy me a Coffee: buymeacoffee.com/gdieseng Go Fund Me: <https://gofund.me/09ea012f>

#Glenn

Welcome back. We are joined today by Ryan Mullerson, an Estonian professor of international law who advises governments and international organizations. Now, I feel like I should give a bit more background because it's quite fascinating. You were a legal advisor to Gorbachev within the Soviet Union, but as an Estonian, you became the first deputy foreign minister of Estonia after restoring independence. You even—sorry—you wrote the declaration for restoring Estonia's independence. And as I understand it, on the Russian side, you assisted Yeltsin in drafting the recognition of Estonia's independence. I always find it fascinating that you sat on both sides of the table. But overall, I think it also speaks to your way of writing. You've written a ton of articles and books, and since you reside in the UK, you taught at King's College in London before you retired.

And, well... I think it's an interesting background, because these days we all seem obligated to hate each other. I like how you have both understanding and empathy for the different actors involved in the conflict now—be it Russia, Estonia, or the UK. I think we need more of that at this time. So, thank you very much for coming back on.

#Rein Müllerson

You're welcome. Always happy to be with you, Glenn.

#Glenn

You wrote an article recently that I found fascinating, which tries to, I guess, capture the troubled times we're in. The title of your article was *From Kissinger's Nightmare to European Quagmire.* How do you see the geostrategic—or geopolitical—situation we're in right now?

#Rein Müllerson

Okay, maybe a few words about my article, since that's what prompted our interview today. It's mainly about how the United States basically pushed European states—some willingly, others not so willingly—into the conflict in Ukraine. First by organizing the coup d'état attempt in 2014 on the Maidan in Kyiv, and then by arming and rearming Ukraine and Europe. All of this was contrary to Europe's interests, but it served the interests of various administrations in Washington. I also focused on how the war began—first as a kind of civil war with foreign involvement, as is often the case, and then, in February 2022, it turned into an international armed conflict, no longer just between Ukraine and Russia.

It started initially, maybe, but already between the West and Russia. And then, maybe at the end, we can also talk about how the conflict might end, because I foresaw three basic scenarios. They could be a combination of any of them, but that's how I see the current war in Ukraine possibly ending. Now, about your question—it's interesting, because I still believe what I wrote then. The article was written at the end of January this year and published almost immediately, because it was timely. The basic points in my article would remain the same if I had written it today.

But of course, there is one factor that makes this conflict—and all other geopolitical issues—a bit different now. And that is, let's say, from a legal point of view, as I am a lawyer, the unprovoked armed attack by Israel and the United States against Iran. Now, with the Iranian responses and everything that's going on, all of this affects the conflict in Ukraine as well. There are aspects of this influence that may be considered, let's say, more or less negative for Russia, and in that sense maybe positive for Ukraine and its supporters—mostly European states. Russia, by the way, had this north-south corridor, and through the Emirates and Saudi Arabia, of course, it traded with the rest of the world.

Both of these countries, especially, were trading partners of Russia, and this may now negatively affect Russia. But there are other aspects—three of them, I would say—that could be considered favorable for Russia. One of them is the rise in the price of oil and gas, which is already happening. And as I foresee, like many others, the conflict will not be short-term; it will probably last not only weeks but months—some even say until the end of the summer. That's because of the closure of the Strait of Hormuz and the destruction of energy facilities in the Gulf countries. This, of course, means that Russia earns more for its oil and gas—more money. The second factor, maybe in the short and mid-term even more important, is that the West—basically the U.S. and Israel—are depleting their interceptors for drones and missiles, like the THAAD and Patriot complexes.

And we see that this is a very expensive business. While Iranian drones may cost, as they say, about \$20,000 or \$30,000 each, these interceptor missiles cost around \$5 million. And, of course, we already see that the leadership in Ukraine is very worried, because the U.S. now has less military hardware to sell to European countries, which then pass it on to Ukraine. This is maybe the second factor that has an impact on this conflict. And the third one—maybe not so important, but still worth noting—is that some commentators have said that since the Israeli-American aggression took place

during the negotiations between the United States and Iran, Russia may now be more reluctant to negotiate with the United States.

But I don't think it has such a big impact, because I don't believe Russia's leadership is naive. Russia's leadership has been naive—particularly Gorbachev, maybe, who really trusted the West too much, and then the more opportunistic Yeltsin, who didn't care so much, and even maybe Putin initially. But Putin and the Russian leadership have learned their lessons in that respect, and I don't think they're naive or trusting now—especially of the West, in this case the United States. Of course, the Russian leadership doesn't want to antagonize Trump and therefore behaves quite cautiously, not very actively criticizing him personally, for example. That's a correct assessment of what the United States and Israel are doing in the Middle East.

#Glenn

One thing I thought about with Iran and Russia was that a key lesson for Russia after its long entanglement in Syria was that it undermined relations with other Arab states in conflict with Syria. It was more beneficial for Russia in the end, as it doesn't want to be pulled into alliances or conflicts where it sides with one and then alienates another. So there were some benefits in being able to improve relations with everyone after its presence in Syria came to an end. But again, Russia can't afford to see Iran being knocked off the geopolitical chessboard of Eurasia.

However, as they get involved now, they also risk alienating a lot of Arab states again. But if we put the Iranian issue aside—well, actually, none of us have really put it aside—when you refer to Kissinger's nightmare, obviously it's a reference to the threat of these two Eurasian giants, Russia and China, coming together. And again, that's what your article was about. But you could, I guess, expand on it now, because the consequence would likely be Iran also pivoting closer to this. So you'd have Russia, China, and Iran essentially all standing back to back against a common adversary. Do you see an extension of this?

#Rein Müllerson

Yes, of course. My article is mostly about Kissinger's nightmare. Back when the Soviet Union and the United States were leading their respective alliances, the Americans—especially Kissinger—didn't want the Soviet Union and China to grow closer. That's what led to Kissinger and Nixon's China policy. In 1972, Nixon went to China unexpectedly, and for many, that move was also a step against the Soviet Union, aimed at weakening it. This is an old policy, and Russia is practicing a similar one now. Russia is also trying to drive wedges between different European countries and various forces in Europe. In my article, I showed how the United States did almost everything to prevent Russia and the West from becoming closer.

It started even earlier, when Germany began making those energy deals with the Soviet Union, and it just carried on and on. And of course, the United States is eager to keep Europe divided and to

prevent Russia from being accepted as a European country. So, what about Iran? On the one hand, we see that this conflict may weaken Iran, at least temporarily. Of course, Iran is suffering greatly, but I don't think the West—or the United States and Israel—are going to win this war against Iran. Iran seems ready to go all the way and fight for its survival, and no regime change is foreseeable there. Iran will fight, let's say, until the last missile. If you remember, the Americans—and Senator Graham—used to say that they are supporting Ukraine financially and militarily, and that Ukraine will fight until the last Ukrainian against Russia, to weaken Russia.

So I believe Tehran would fight until the last missile and drone, so as not to surrender to Western or American pressure in that case. And therefore, Iran will remain, in my opinion, a player—very much anti-Israeli and anti-Western, an anti-United States power in the Middle East. I would say, historically, maybe what this conflict in the Middle East means is that this tendency, which has been taking place for at least 30 years since the Soviet Union collapsed, shows that many in the West—and not only in the West—were Fukuyamians who believed that the end of history was coming, that all states would eventually become liberal democracies, and that economic globalization would be beneficial for everybody.

This worldview is now over, and due to the mistakes made by practically all American administrations—starting particularly with Clinton, George W. Bush, his son, Obama, and so on—these mistakes of trying to accelerate the coming of the “end of history,” spreading democracy in the Middle East, in Afghanistan, and so on, have drastically weakened the West even further. And now this conflict in the Middle East, the war against Iran, is another accelerator of this historical process, in my opinion. This can be seen as one of the elements of the ongoing struggle between the West and the rest of the world.

#Glenn

One of the themes in your article, though, is that the United States has an interest in being in Europe, both to keep the Russians and the Europeans divided, because this is a source of influence for the United States. And again, this was one of the reasons to expand NATO—to maintain this security dependence, this relationship that kept the US in and the Russians out.

But this seems to have to be balanced by other considerations—namely, multipolarity, the recognition that when there are many centers of power, the Europeans can't be the only consideration. The more the US maintains a presence in Europe, the less it's able to pivot toward Asia or the Western Hemisphere. And at the same time, the stronger its presence in Europe, the more the Russians will align themselves with China instead of trying to balance those relations a bit more. So how do you see the United States addressing this problem? Because ideally, it wants the Europeans to keep doing as they're told—to have them as close allies or even vassals—but at the same time, it can't afford to stay so focused on Europe for these reasons. How do you see the Americans balancing this dilemma?

#Rein Müllerson

I believe that Trump has, let's say, maybe the right instincts sometimes. He's all over the place, of course, and keeps changing his views. But one correct assessment, from his point of view, I think, is that America can't be everywhere anymore—it has to choose. And of course, the main threat, not even for America itself but for American hegemony in the world, is China—first economically, and now also militarily. So, I don't think that even Trump alone defines this; there are different forces in America. You can see Rubio is one, J.D. Vance is different. So it's an interesting game going on, in my opinion, even in Washington. But Trump certainly wanted less presence in Europe, and to have Europe do more of its own work—while still keeping Russia out, of course, which also serves American interests.

Why? There's an interesting conflict in this worldview—an American worldview. You can see, on the one hand, Trump is negotiating with Russia not only to end the war in Ukraine but probably even more about economic issues—using Russian energy resources, rare earths, and other facilities—and talking about the Arctic as well with Russia. And at the same time, he's encouraging European countries to militarize, to increase their defense budgets—or, I would say, military budgets, not defense. Everybody calls them defense budgets, of course. And therefore, against whom? Against Russia, of course, in Europe.

So the U.S., or the Trump administration, wants to have relatively normal relations with Russia, while at the same time wanting Europe to maintain hostile relations with Russia. That's contrary to European interests, and probably some, like Pedro Sánchez, the prime minister of Spain, understand this. There are many forces in Europe that recognize these contradictions in the political landscape. But it's very confusing, in my opinion, to make sense of it. Keeping Russia away from Europe, as you said, is also pushing Russia closer to China. At the same time, there's no consistency in the policies of the U.S. administration, in my view.

#Glenn

Well, I don't understand the European position, because it looks as if, for the United States, it's not simply that Trump is a man of peace or something. He doesn't just want to end the conflict with Russia altogether, because yes, Russia is not the main peer competitor, but it is a significant pole of power. So they would like to see Russia contained and weakened over time, but they don't want to do it themselves because they have to maintain bilateral ties. That suggests to me they don't want to end the conflict or the weakening of Russia—they just want to outsource it, or transfer it, to the Europeans. I just don't understand why the Europeans would want to carry this burden, because again, it goes back to the core question: why do we need a conflict with Russia?

If Europe wants to prosper and have more autonomy, it doesn't make sense to have a redivided continent with militarized dividing lines. It seems to me that the decision to expand NATO, which very predictably made an enemy out of Russia, was the price we were willing to pay to ensure that

the U.S. would maintain an enduring role and presence in Europe. But now that the Americans are pivoting away, why still hold on to this? Why allow ourselves to be divided in this way? Because we become excessively dependent on U.S. security, which gives us less autonomy. Europe is destabilized, less economically prosperous, and its relevance in the world is declining. Wouldn't it make more sense to pivot, shift, diversify? To me, this makes no sense. And this is the one thing I can't understand about the Europeans.

#Rein Müllerson

Well, nobody can really understand them. And we're both Europeans, so we're thinking and suffering too. You know, I'm an Estonian citizen living in London, and I see how these states and societies are suffering because of the conflict in Ukraine, because of the anti-Russian sanctions, and so on. But the question is why—everybody probably asks that. In my opinion, if we compare Trump's administration or his policies, Trump is a relative newcomer. He can say that the war in Ukraine is not his war, not our war—it's Biden's war. Had he been elected president instead of Biden, the war wouldn't have happened, as he says.

Maybe yes, maybe no—but it may even be true. Many American politicians might say, "It's not our war, we'll wash our hands of it," or that they have other priorities in other parts of the world. But current European leaders can't say that. As I wrote in my article, European states were dragged against their own self-interest into this conflict. Most of them were, as they were all vassalized, and therefore followed—more or less willingly, sometimes even enthusiastically—like the governments in Great Britain, Estonia, and other political states such as Poland, these American policies.

For them, it's impossible to change their opinions on that matter. It would be political suicide. For example, I sometimes feel pity for Zelensky. You know, maybe when he ran for the presidency in Ukraine, he genuinely wanted peace with Russia and to resolve the whole internal conflict in Ukraine. But he wasn't allowed to do that—first of all, by the extreme Nazi forces, very small in Ukraine. Yes, they're not big, but very active and very vocal. And I believe they would have put an end not just to his political career, but to Zelensky's physical life if he had done it. And of course, he was not allowed to do it.

We already know that in the West, when in '22—what they call, very talkatively, the "full-scale Russian invasion." In Russia, it's called, just as talkatively, a "special military operation." Okay, it's an armed conflict, the use of military force, and so on. And then Boris Johnson flew to Kyiv, and the message was that if you concluded an agreement with Russia, you'd be left alone and no assistance would come from the West for Ukraine. Europe also pushed Ukraine to fight until the last Ukrainian.

Now, therefore, for European leaders, it's politically impossible—or for some, maybe even physically impossible—to completely change their tune. But there are already some signs. Glenn, I believe I read an article, and you've probably read it too, in **Foreign Affairs** a bit more than a week ago. It was by—what was his name—Michael Tesh, titled "Ukraine Is Losing the War: Kyiv Should Trade

Land for Peace.” *Foreign Affairs* usually doesn’t use such headlines. I see in my own country, in Estonia, there’s now a conflict between the current president, Alar Karis, and the foreign ministry, and also between the prime minister and the foreign ministry.

So, because the Estonian president was in Kazakhstan and didn’t say anything critical about Russia, the foreign ministry reacted. They even dismissed the Estonian ambassador in Kazakhstan, who had told the president not to spend much time criticizing Russia or Ukraine—Russia in Kazakhstan—especially because it was during the period when Ukrainians bombed the pipeline through which Kazakhstan’s oil went via Russia to the West. And, of course, criticizing Russia at that moment in Kazakhstan would have been wrong. And now the conflict is that the president, who earlier, a year ago, said we would put Russia on its knees, is already saying something different.

Now it’s also being said that Europe, in order to be at the negotiating table, has to start talking to Russia. There are already signs of that in some countries. Macron says it too, but I don’t trust Macron at all. I’m so disappointed, because he’s always said good things—almost too often—but then done the opposite, or done nothing good. So this, in my opinion, is the main reason. The European leaders, most of them, have tainted themselves with these anti-Russian policies to such an extent that they can’t change their tune now. While in the United States, because of the change in administration, they’re different in that respect.

#Glenn

Yeah, I think there are some indications that this could come to an end for all these reasons. Of course, within Ukraine there’s a problem with manpower, with military equipment, and with the fact that most of the good defensive lines are now behind the Russians. But there are also the economic problems they’re having in Ukraine—they can’t keep this going; it’s going to go bust. They also have more political divisions now after these scandals. But I do think, as you say, the lack of foreign support is also important now. I think the attacks that have affected Kazakhstan are another indicator. And as we began discussing with Iran, not only is the U.S. less willing now to assist with weapons, but it also has no capability.

I mean, they’re handing over all their defenses immediately—to the Gulf states or using them themselves. So, yeah, the European diplomacy, after four years of boycotting diplomacy, it’s quite significant that they’re now recognizing you can’t demand a seat at the table and also refuse to talk to Russia. It doesn’t make any sense. I just feel like the desperation is setting in for Zelensky—the fact that he threatened the life of Viktor Orbán of Hungary. I mean, you probably saw the video. It’s quite wild that this is where we are now. So it does appear that it could come to an end. I just don’t see the Europeans having the will. That’s my concern.

#Rein Müllerson

Yes, Zelensky has changed recently. He hasn't always been reasonable, of course, but now—starting maybe from his behavior during the Munich conference and afterward—this is not at all a sane person speaking. I was so surprised how people there applauded when he was using those swear words against Putin, against Russia. It's both funny and sad, really.

#Glenn

That's a tragedy. You mentioned this before—the tragedy of Zelensky, that he was elected on a peace platform.

#Rein Müllerson

One point I would make is that even during the Soviet period—and I remember it quite well because I grew up and worked in Moscow—my first foreign visits were mostly to Washington and New York. I only stopped in London or Amsterdam sometimes. And then, in the West, particularly in the United States, there were experts who knew Russia. Now there are almost none—very few. There's one in Norway, and one Englishman who's mostly in Washington. Yes, there are still a few experts who know and understand Russia.

But one thing—what Putin said in one of his speeches in Switzerland, well, I don't remember now, I haven't checked it recently, in what context or when—but he said something like that Russia has always had its independent foreign policy, almost always had. Of course, that means not always. And there are several periods in Russian history—at least at the beginning of the 17th century, when the Poles took Moscow and then retreated, during the revolutionary period of 1917 and the First World War, and then, of course, at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. This is not what Russia is about. And that means, yes, states react differently when somebody tries to vassalize them.

Some follow a useless policy, or what's called a bandwagoning policy, and follow the leader eagerly, enthusiastically, even trying to please the boss. But there are states that don't do that, and Russia belongs to this category, and therefore I like this. I would say—very rude, of course—that Russian leaders don't carry in their back pocket a bottle of Vaseline, just in case somebody stronger wants to screw them. So this is, in my opinion, the difference. These attempts to vassalize Russia in the 1990s didn't really succeed. Therefore, there's a lack of understanding of Russia, and those who believe they know Russia often hate Russia. There are some Western experts who simply hate Russia, and therefore they are very prominent now on different platforms. This is very sad, in my opinion.

#Glenn

Well, I think the problem across Europe is that the expertise of the past is gone. At least during the Cold War, Russia had been more focused. The dismissal of Russia since the 1990s has been less significant, I think—a lot of expertise got lost. And also, probably more importantly, the statesmen of the past are, many of them, gone. They've been replaced by some very low-quality bureaucrats, I would say. It's all gone. And what I hear from politicians across Europe is just moral slogans. More or less, at least in this country, what I see is that the only argument is, well, Russia is simply going for territory, wants to restore the Soviet Union, and anyone who disagrees is a Putinist.

That's kind of the depth of debate and discussion—which means there is no debate, there is no discussion. This lack of understanding about Russia, the incompetence, and when you mix it with the hate for Russia, it just makes it very dangerous. And yeah, I don't know. Well, I know you're in the UK now; at least I'm here in Norway. It's just the worst politicians you can imagine, and the media is equally incompetent. So no one's doing their job. It means there can be no adjustment to the new realities. Instead, it's just about how they wish the world was. Europe, I think, is going through some hard times—or, as you said, a quagmire.

#Rein Müllerson

There are some signs, and I believe this tendency that the West is really... well, the West doesn't disappear. There are many good things, I would say, from the Enlightenment and so on—nobody can deny that. There are some in Russia who want to push the West, or Europe, away completely. We probably even know some of them personally. I don't belong to that category. But yes, now, as history is changing radically, in the West those in power want to prolong, let's say, this agony of becoming less relevant and less equal to others, because other forces, other parts of the world, are becoming more and more important. They also want their place—an equal place under the sun. And in the West, those forces still in power would like to put the brakes on this trend in geopolitics and geoeconomics.

#Glenn

I see that as well. But I do agree there's a lot that's good about Europe, which should be saved. That's why I was a bit disappointed when I heard Marco Rubio's speech at the Munich Security Conference, where he said that Europe should rise again—and what he referred to was 500 years of imperialism, as if that's what we needed. I mean, there's a lot more to Europe than the days of empire, I think. And, you know, those are the things worth preserving, not restoring the old empire. But, you know... any final thoughts?

#Rein Müllerson

A final thought: this Europe we really miss, the one that has given so much to humankind. Russia belongs to that Europe, because imagine European music without Tchaikovsky, or European

literature without Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, or Pushkin. They were all Europeans, and they spoke—at least were fluent in—French. So Russia has always been part of Europe, and I hope that, gradually, this wish of mine will come true.

#Glenn

Yeah. Well, again, we have the same problem on the Russian side as well—that is, many people in Russia no longer see it as possible to have a relationship with Europe anymore. I know some common friends of ours in Moscow who also think along these lines. But here you have to give it to the Russians: at least they're very pragmatic. If you saw with the United States, there was resentment toward the U.S., and then as soon as Trump came in and said, "Oh, you know, we can make peace with Russia," suddenly the mood shifted—"Okay, we can work with the Americans." So I think it's not too late to try to fix some of the things that are broken. It just becomes very hard the longer this horrific war goes on. And, of course, the destruction of Ukraine, which is a tragedy of its own. So thank you very much for taking the time, and I hope to see you in person again very soon.

#Rein Müllerson

Thank you, thank you. It was a pleasure, as always, to talk to you, Glenn.

#Rein Müllerson

Bye.