

Europe SPEEDS UP March To War With Russia | Dr. Rein Müllerson

Regime change in Iran, Kremlin threat perception, trust collapse in diplomacy, Europe boxed into living with Russia or fighting it. I sit down again with Dr. Rein Müllerson, an Estonian academic and former advisor to Mikhail Gorbachev, to map the logic he sees behind Iran, Ukraine, NATO expansion, and a US divide and rule playbook. Links: Russia in Global Affairs: <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/> 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 and setup 00:00:21 Iran war and Russia's reading of it 00:05:13 Kremlin stakes and regime change fears 00:06:20 Oil shock and military depletion effects 00:13:43 Diplomacy as cover and trust collapse 00:21:20 Divide and rule thesis and article frame 00:22:02 Russia and NATO integration rejection 00:31:04 Ukraine as proxy and neutrality bargain 00:48:42 Europe facing Russia or war 00:55:48 Where to find the article and closing remarks

#Pascal

Welcome back, everybody. Today I'm joined again by Dr. Rein Müllerson, a highly accomplished Estonian academic and former advisor to Mikhail Gorbachev. Rein, welcome back.

#Rein Mullerson

Thank you for having me. Thank you, Pascal.

#Pascal

Thanks for saying yes. You wrote a great piece in *Russian Global Affairs*, which we'll discuss in the second half of the show. But first, I'd like to ask for your assessment of what's happening in Iran, and how you think the Russians—whom you know quite well and have worked with for a long time—are approaching the situation now.

#Rein Mullerson

If we take such a long-term historical approach—which I believe is necessary—in my article about Ukraine I quoted President Mitterrand of France. Recently, Jean Glavany, who at that time, when Mitterrand was president, was his chief of cabinet, published his memoirs in January this year. There are many interesting things in them, but one was particularly important for me. Mitterrand said in 1990, when discussing the possible collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of Ukraine,

that if Ukraine became independent, we would have a war in Europe. So how did he know? Of course, he couldn't be certain about it, and he wasn't certain about it.

But he knew the history. He knew the situation in Russia—certainly in the Soviet Union and in Ukraine. And therefore, he believed, as I understand it—I'm now interpreting his words—that if it wasn't handled carefully, with caution, then such a complicated country as Ukraine might drag its neighbors into war. And that's what happened. Now, I also think that this new conflict in the Middle East—the attack by Israel and the United States against Iran—has similar long-term historical effects. In my opinion, this is one of those events that really accelerates what's going on in the world today: the West against the rest, as we can see.

The West generally, with some exceptions—like the Prime Minister of Spain, for example, or maybe sometimes like Keir Starmer, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, where I basically live and where I've worked and taught for the last twenty years—has joined the United States more or less in this war of aggression. And this has contributed to, or accelerated, a process that had already started before. The war in Ukraine was one of these accelerators. And we can see the same now in the case of the war between Israel and the United States on the one hand, and Iran and many other regional states on the other, with Europe and European states also becoming involved. So that's probably what I can say by way of introduction about this war in the Middle East.

#Pascal

Do you think this is also an emergency situation for Russia, now that Iran is being attacked and a potential regime change is underway there? I mean, that's the declared goal of the United States. How do you think this is being interpreted in the Kremlin?

#Rein Mullerson

You know, like many things, they're complicated events. There's no simple answer. Though some experts I know say it's very simple: Russia is the aggressor and Ukraine is the victim of aggression. But things aren't that simple. And what's going on in the Middle East isn't simple either. How this would impact Russia is not simple. Probably, in the West, one aspect is emphasized—that Russia has lost its allies in Venezuela, potentially in Cuba. Now Iran is under attack, and therefore this would weaken Russia's position. Maybe a bit, yes. But there are several factors that, I believe, have different interpretations and are less favorable for Russia.

The first point, which seems quite obvious, is that there's been a rise in the price of oil and gas due to this conflict—because of the closure of the Strait of Hormuz and the destruction of energy-producing facilities in the Gulf states. This has already happened, and the war continues. In my opinion, it will go on for quite a while—at least several weeks, probably a month. I believe Iran is not going to surrender. Maybe Trump would like to claim a victory sooner rather than later, but I don't think Iran is ready to give up and will continue to fight.

#Pascal

Hey, very brief intermission because I was recently banned from YouTube. Although I'm back, this could happen again anytime. So please consider subscribing not only here but also to my mailing list on Substack—that's pascallottaz.substack.com. The link's in the description below. And now, back to the video.

#Rein Mullerson

Then the second factor here, which seems to favor Russia, is that the Gulf states, the United States, and Israel as well—their military resources, particularly their stock of TARC and Patriot missile interceptors—are being depleted. They're very expensive, as I understand it. One salvo costs about five million dollars, while Iranian drones cost twenty or thirty thousand. So this means that...

#Rein Mullerson

The longer the conflict goes on, the more military hardware and software will be depleted—the same hardware the U.S. now provides or sells to Europe, which European countries then pass on to Ukraine. And I believe some military analysts—I'm not a military analyst myself—think that this situation can't last very long. In any case, the United States and European countries have fewer of these resources now, particularly interceptors and other military hardware.

And the third factor—maybe, I don't know what impact it may have—is that Israel and the United States attacked Iran while negotiations were going on between these parties, between the United States and Iran, about how to resolve this impasse. By the way, it was at least partly created by President Trump during his first term in office, when he rejected the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, which was concluded by the permanent members of the Security Council plus Germany on the one hand, and Iran on the other. So I believe this is not the first time the West has behaved in a deceptive way. It was the same with the so-called Minsk Accords, which were signed in 2015 after the coup d'état in Kiev.

#Rein Mullerson

The conflict was then more or less a civil war between two parties in Ukraine. The West supported Kiev, while Russia supported those who had rebelled against the authorities in Kiev. As Angela Merkel, the Chancellor of Germany at the time, and President Hollande of France later confirmed, the Minsk Accords were not meant to be permanent. They were meant to give Ukraine time to become stronger and better prepared to respond to a possible Russian invasion. Of course, during that time the West sent arms and money to Ukraine to make it stronger. I believe this also shows that in such wars, you can't trust very much. And I don't know whether it has any additional impact, because Russia—particularly President Putin—is no longer as naive as he may have been more than twenty years ago, when he first became president of Russia.

#Pascal

But still, I mean, Russia, for the entire last year—during 2025, basically—was very willing to engage with the United States diplomatically, right? We've had Mr. Putin in Anchorage recently, in Alaska. There have been at least five or so meetings between Vladimir Putin and Steve Witkoff and his entourage—this diplomatic entourage—including Jared Kushner, the son-in-law of Mr. Trump. Do you think that this latest development, when the United States once again—after so many times—used diplomacy to try to fool the other side into complacency...

They already did that back in June 2025, when they attacked Iran while negotiations were still ongoing. Now they've done it again, during another round of talks. They did the same with Russia and the Minsk Accords, as you just said. Time and again, the US—or the West—uses diplomacy as a facade to prepare a hard military blow against its adversaries. And Russia seemed to go along with another round of that diplomatic facade last year. Do you think that will change now, after the Iran attack?

#Rein Mullerson

Not necessarily. As I said, Russia is not naive—it certainly hasn't been. I understand that negotiations between the United States and Russia, or at least some contact, are continuing. And I hear that soon, probably in Switzerland, in Geneva, or maybe elsewhere, there will be a new meeting. That's my understanding, and it hasn't been canceled. Russia is certainly not going to cancel it. And of course, I understand that Russia doesn't want to antagonize Trump too much.

#Rein Mullerson

One of the reasons is this.

#Rein Mullerson

And Russia hopes that Trump will put pressure on Ukraine to agree to what might be called—well, there was an article in **Foreign Affairs** a bit more than a week ago.

#Rein Mullerson

And the contacts are certainly continuing.

#Rein Mullerson

My understanding is that this war against Iran is a war on behalf of Israel. I don't remember exactly how many times Netanyahu visited Washington or Florida this year, meeting with Trump there and persuading him, as I understand it, to attack Iran. It seems that Trump was not very enthusiastic at

the beginning, and particularly the vice president, J.D. Vance, is, in my opinion, very unhappy about this war.

And you can see now, in the United States internally, not only Democrats but many Republicans—and the people as a whole—are against this conflict, this war against Iran. It is not in the interest of the United States. In that case, this is the tail wagging the dog, as it's sometimes said, although in this case, who knows who is the dog and who is the tail, really, because of the Israeli lobby in the United States. So I believe Russia is interested in these negotiations, and the best outcome would be—well, in my article I write about three scenarios for a possible endgame in Ukraine. The first one is, of course, a negotiated agreement, trading land for peace. This would be the best for Ukraine, for Russia, and also for Europe, of course. The problem is that, in that case, it would be seen as a victory for Russia, and Ukraine's leadership—particularly President Zelensky—doesn't like such an outcome, which would be viewed as a victory for Russia and a defeat for Ukraine and its European allies.

So I don't know, therefore, whether these negotiations will succeed. But I believe that President Trump wants to have this conflict in Europe end soon, in order to concentrate on other issues, because the most important aim was to face China in the Far East. Now the United States is bogged down in the Middle East and still involved in the European conflict. This is certainly not in the interest of the United States. Therefore, I believe it's still possible that the conflict in Ukraine could be resolved, notwithstanding what is going on in the Middle East. And it may even be that, if the conflict lasts longer, a solution for the Ukrainian conflict might come more easily, also because of the factors I described earlier.

#Pascal

Right. So let's use this as a way to actually talk about your article, which I've got here with me. You wrote—it carries a very nice title—*From Kissinger's Nightmare to European Quagmire: Divide et Impera in U.S. Foreign Policy.* You're making the argument that the United States is using that strategy right now—divide and conquer, or divide and rule—and that the entire way the U.S. approaches the Ukraine war actually shows how it wants to implement foreign policy. Right, I highlighted a couple of memorable quotes. The first one being: "As America tolerates only vassalized allies, incipient Russo-American rapprochement came to an end after the disastrous 1990s, once Russia began to emerge from its coma and demanded respect." Can you talk about this a little more—the reason why the United States or NATO were never able, or never willing, to truly integrate Russia and make it an equal partner?

#Rein Mullerson

Yeah. I believe that in the 1990s, Russia was in a situation that, in my opinion, has occurred only quite rarely—maybe three times in Russian history. President Putin—I don't remember his exact words now—but in 2012 he said that most of the time Russia has pursued an independent foreign

policy. And there have been times, for example, at the beginning of the 17th century, when the Poles attacked and even took Moscow. That period in Russia is called the Time of Troubles.

So Russia was on the brink of collapse. Then came the Bolshevik Revolution, and that period when Russia was also invaded by the British—from the north, from Murmansk. And the third time was the period that started under Gorbachev, when the Soviet Union still existed. I don't remember if I mentioned that I was Gorbachev's advisor on international law. I was in Moscow then, and I remember that quite well. Gorbachev was really a bit naive—trusting the West, not asking for written confirmations of the promises that NATO would not expand an inch to the east, and so on.

#Rein Mullerson

And then President Yeltsin, already leading the Russian Federation.

#Rein Mullerson

...was also on the brink of collapse, or of losing its independence, because this was the period of what's called oligarchization. Oligarchs ruled and tied the hands of President Yeltsin, and Western firms also tried to get their hands on resources—particularly energy resources in Russia. There were attempts at disintegration in the Caucasus especially, but in some other places as well. So Russia was really in a kind of coma before the year 2000, when Putin became president of Russia. And why the West didn't...

#Rein Mullerson

I want Russia to become a member of NATO, for example, because that was what Yeltsin had offered—and Putin as well when he became president. I believe Russia is too big to be, let's say, swallowed like other countries. In my opinion, at that time—during the Cold War and also at the end of it—in the West, particularly in the United States, there were more experts and advisors who really knew Russia. Now I don't see such people at all anymore. Some of those who are called experts on Russia are simply Russophobes. They hate Russia, and therefore they believe they know it—but they don't, not at all. I lived there for 25 years, and though I speak Russian with an accent—probably better than most Russians, true nevertheless—I believe I know Russia. Though I'm not an expert on Russia, simply because of my background, I understand. And then you can't...

#Rein Mullerson

From the point of view of the United States, which tolerates only vassalized allies, to vassalize Russia would have been much more difficult. Therefore, it was preferable either to keep Russia out and try to weaken it, or to exploit its resources. And this is why Russia could never have been an equal or a co-president of NATO. Let's say you include China in a regional security organization together with the United States—it would really mean that if China, Russia, the United States, and India were all in

one international security organization, the world would be much more secure, of course. But that would also mean the United States could not dictate its policies within such organizations.

#Pascal

Yeah, and there we have the big problem, of course. I mean, there were all these hopeful visions for the future of the Eurasian continent, including a hopeful vision for Russia to be part of NATO, and for NATO basically to become the military arm of the OSCE—doing real collective security together, like the kind of security the Russian view imagines, where the security of one cannot come at the expense of another. You'd have a structure, a proper architecture. But that's not what NATO is there for.

That's not its purpose, so it was definitely rejected. And you have another very nice quote in your article, or rather a very explanatory passage, that says by arming Ukraine and making it a de facto NATO member—but without Article 5 guarantees—the West was not only playing with fire, but deliberately dragging Russia into Ukraine. Today, the Americans have apparently judged that millions of Ukrainian lives are less historically important than the collapse of a vassalization-resistant Russia. Can you explain this a little bit?

#Rein Mullerson

You know, of course, one may say that maybe the United States and its European allies behaved recklessly, not thoughtfully enough—expanding NATO to the borders of Russia and then including, or trying to include, Georgia and Ukraine, particularly Ukraine. You know, Ukraine, and Kyiv especially, has very important emotional significance for Russians, I believe. Kievan Rus started there, and both Ukraine and Russia claim their roots are there, while Ukraine denies that Russian roots come from there—saying instead that Russian roots come more from Mongolia and the Tatars. Okay, this is a complicated matter. I also believe it's interesting that Russia is a very complex country, and in that sense it's also a civilizational entity, maybe like China or India.

#Rein Mullerson

And maybe some other big countries as well. The United States, meanwhile, is a country of migrants—right—and therefore unique. European countries, and this is a problem for Europe in my opinion, are nation-states. The concept and practice of the nation-state is relatively narrow if you compare it with other parts of the world. This concept and practice started in Europe, and at that time it was very beneficial. These European nation-states had their colonies, exploited them, and became rich as well as powerful—economically and militarily.

#Rein Mullerson

Oh, uh, I got distracted now—because you have that sentence there.

#Pascal

I mean, you do this analysis in your piece where you say that the grand strategy of the United States has always been about the big picture, right? And you use the example—wait, sorry, I should be here—you use the example of Brzezinski, who was once asked if he regretted arming the Taliban against the Soviet Union. And his reply was something like, well, what was more important: a few radical Islamists or the collapse of the Soviet Union, right? And in this sense, the United States is currently using Ukraine as the implementation partner of its strategy to break up Russia, right?

#Rein Mullerson

Yeah, so as I said, it may be that, yes, the United States didn't take Russia very seriously. Russia was really a very weak country in the 1990s—particularly at the end of the decade, with the financial collapse in 1998 and so on. And now you refer to Brzezinski, and I really quote him here. In this interview he gave in 1998, it wasn't only that they had armed the Taliban and al-Qaeda—well, not the Taliban then, but al-Qaeda and other Islamist forces in Afghanistan who fought the Soviet Union, which foolishly, in my opinion, went into Afghanistan. What was important in this interview with Brzezinski was that he said President Carter and I wanted the Soviet Union to have its own Vietnam.

#Rein Mullerson

They invited trouble by helping the Islamist opponents of the government of Afghanistan, which was more or less friendly with the Soviet Union. It wasn't a communist government—though the Communist Party, maybe even two of them if I remember correctly, existed in Afghanistan at the time. But the government was relatively loyal or friendly toward the Soviet Union, and therefore they enticed the Soviet Union into Afghanistan. And I believe the same may have been the purpose in Ukraine—not necessarily at the beginning, but later on.

I don't think that this was a long-term plan. But then, after the coup d'état of 2014, when the rearmament of Ukraine was underway—and, you know, the OSCE observers, and this is documented—they showed that in February, before the 24th, when Russia invaded Ukraine, the bombardment by Kyiv's forces of the territories in Donbas accelerated greatly. Taking into account also some statements by President Zelenskyy, Russia may have really believed that Kyiv was about to take back those rebel territories in Donbas.

#Rein Mullerson

And therefore, Russia started its "special military operation," as it's called. The West, of course, calls it a full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia. It was not a full-scale invasion—probably today it's a full-scale conflict already going on in Ukraine—but at that time it was really a very limited military operation. The main aim was to force Ukraine to abide by the Minsk agreements and remain neutral, and this neutrality would have been guaranteed, at least partly, by autonomy for the Donbas region,

because the people there were Russophones, Russophiles, and simply Russians mostly living there. In that case, if they had more autonomy, they wouldn't have allowed Ukraine to join NATO. This was, in my opinion, one of Russia's purposes when the Minsk Accords were signed. Negotiations followed almost immediately—first in Belarus and then in Istanbul—and by April they had basically agreed that Ukraine would become neutral.

#Rein Mullerson

...country and these territories—then it was not other parts, it was only two territories, oblasts or regions: Luhansk and Donetsk. They would remain parts of Ukraine, but with cultural and linguistic autonomy, the Russian language, and even...

#Pascal

The agreement was so favorable to Ukrainian interests that even the Ukrainian negotiator famously said he couldn't really believe the Russians were willing to concede all those points. But then we know what happened next—Boris Johnson came in and said they should reject it. One of my main frustrations was that the core of this agreement would have been the neutrality of Ukraine. And that neutrality would also have preserved the neutrality of Finland and Sweden, and even enforced neutrality in Moldova. It would have proven that the concept works to de-escalate—that these buffer states can create security on all sides. But that was explicitly torpedoed by the West, leading to the horrible war of attrition we now see.

#Rein Mullerson

This also shows, in my opinion, that the West really wanted it.

#Rein Mullerson

At least.

#Rein Mullerson

The West is also obligated. There are different opinions, of course, but there were those who wanted to drag Russia into Ukraine and weaken it—using Western money, weapons, and Ukrainian manpower.

#Rein Mullerson

Men and women.

#Rein Mullerson

And also, when I saw on TV that the negotiations were starting in Istanbul, I was optimistic for one specific reason.

#Rein Mullerson

And it was that I saw my friend Oleksandr Chalve, who was a member of the delegation behind the desk—a member of the Ukrainian negotiating team. He had written before, and I knew him personally quite well during the Soviet period. He was a young scholar in Kyiv, I was in Moscow. We were students almost at the same time, and we always communicated very well, visited each other. He also wrote—I don't remember exactly when—an article about the neutrality of Ukraine, arguing that Ukraine should remain neutral. And I myself published an article already in March or April 2015...

#Rein Mullerson

In one of the Oxford University journals, the title was *Ukraine: A Victim of Geopolitics.* I knew not only Russia—I know Russia better, of course—but I knew Ukraine quite well too. I had been there. I have very close friends among Ukrainians, and Oleksandr Chalve was one of them. It's a very complicated country, which has been part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, then the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the Russian Empire, of course. It's not impossible to build a state out of these parts, and Switzerland is probably one of the great examples of that—and Sweden, Finland maybe—where Swedes and Finns have lived together for centuries.

Well, there are at least two conditions that are necessary. One: responsible leaders who take the task of state-building seriously. But Ukraine has never had such leaders. None of the presidents has been of that caliber. Zelensky was elected because there was hope for peace with Russia, to end the conflict, and I believe he genuinely may have believed in that. But there were not very big, yet very powerful and vocal, nationalistic forces in Ukraine, and there were also forces in the West that didn't want Ukraine to be neutral, but to side with the West. And then Russia would have been, as Trushinsky also famously said, with Ukraine, an empire; without Ukraine, it would be, let's say, a regional state.

#Pascal

Yeah, and, you know, we know all of that today. There are no more mysteries about this. Even Victoria Nuland went on TV later on. Of course, she was active in 2014. She then later became the Undersecretary of State. And later, I think in 2024 or 2025, she gave that interview in which she said the agreements that were almost reached in Istanbul were not acceptable because they would have, and she used the word "neutered"—"neutered Ukraine." So she used a very, very disrespectful term to describe that concept. But it really shows the mindset of these people, including, of course, other neoconservatives who view everybody as a tool to implement great-power ambitions.

But that brings me to my last point, which is the Europeans—the very sad and sorry role the Europeans are playing. And you have here, toward the end of the piece, this quote saying: “After blindly following Washington into containing Russia, after sacrificing Ukraine on the altar of Washington's geopolitical ambitions, Europe will be left with only two options: to live with a strong Russia as its neighbor, or to fight it.” And this is a very sad and scary conclusion. Which one do you think the Europeans are going to choose? I agree. I completely agree with that assessment.

#Rein Mullerson

At the moment, it seems that the European states, with a few exceptions, are preparing for war with Russia. And, okay, you may really strengthen your security and increase military budgets, but then you should also negotiate, as was done during the Cold War. That prevented the Cold War from becoming a hot war between the Soviet Union and the United States and their respective allies. Because, yes, they militarized their economies, but particularly after the Caribbean, or Cuban, crisis of 1962, they started negotiating and concluding disarmament treaties and agreements that increased trust between the superpowers. But now we cannot see any proposals from European leaders on how to live with Russia.

Yes, some say we were forced first to end the war in Ukraine, but they are actually fueling this conflict in order to prolong Ukraine’s agony. And therefore, at the moment, it seems that the first scenario applies—that they were somehow dragged into this geopolitical conflict by the United States, and they followed the U.S. like vassals in most cases, sometimes even enthusiastically. But Russia is where it is, and therefore it’s inevitable that they either fight Russia or learn to live with it. And of course, the latter scenario is preferable.

And I hope that a new generation of leaders in Europe—and there are some already in a few countries—will emerge. I follow, of course, the British, though I haven’t seen any signs there yet, but I also follow Italian and French channels. There are forces that favor contact and negotiations with Russia. I still hope it’s possible for Russia to become part of Europe, as it once was. My article was also inspired by this idea: one of the purposes of the United States was to drive a wedge between Europe and Russia, particularly during the years of President General de Gaulle in France, who spoke about a Europe from the Urals to Lisbon.

#Rein Mullerson

And then, of course, when Germany in particular started its eastern policy and began buying energy resources—oil and gas—from Russia, the United States was always unhappy and tried hard to prevent this rapprochement between Russia and Europe. Back then, European leaders, especially German chancellors, were not the vassals of the United States as current leaders have been.

#Pascal

Yeah, no, I mean, the history of what happened over the last 30 years during the unipolar moment, to me, shows that while normal nation-states learn how to enlist their populations for their military purposes, hegemonic powers learn how to enlist foreign states and their militaries for their purposes. And the Europeans have been enlisted, and the Ukrainians have been enlisted. You know, you need the will to fight in order to fight a war—and they managed to create that. You create the environment in which you then have the people who will run with the guns toward the enemy.

It's a very sad development, and I fear that the next line of offense might actually be the Europeans, in that scenario, fighting Russia. Rein, thank you very much for this brilliant exposé of your thoughts in this article. Anyone who wants to find it can access it for free on the Internet. You can find it on the homepage of **Russia in Global Affairs**. It carries the title **From Kissinger's Nightmare to European Quagmire: Divide et Impera in U.S. Foreign Policy**. Dr. Rein Müllerson, thank you very much for your time today.

#Rein Mullerson

Thank you for having me, as always. It's a pleasure to talk to you. Thank you, Pascal. Bye.