

# Ukraine and Iran Wars are Ending 500 Years of Western Empire | Prof. Richard Sakwa

The Iran War is increasing the speed of western decline that began 4 years ago with the intensification of the Russia-Ukraine Proxy War. How did that happen? How could the US-Europe alliance miscalculate this grossly? I sat down with Emeritus Professor Richard Sakwa to test the hardest claims around this war: folly or strategy, proxy war or direct clash, exclusion or security failure, peace process or staged theater. The talk moves from NATO expansion and Ukrainian neutrality to Europe's crisis, Russia's place in the post-Cold War order, and the shrinking space for real diplomacy. Links: Richard's Book as ebook or paperback: <https://www.amazon.com/Russo-Ukrainian-War-Follies-Empire/dp/B0FTGNL2J9> Richard's Book from Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Russo-Ukrainian-War-Follies-Empire/dp/B0FTGNL2J9> 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 00:00:15 Follies of empire 00:08:37 Proxy war and Europe's decline 00:13:03 Russia excluded from the West 00:17:50 Security logic and war models 00:24:25 Neutrality buried in Ukraine 00:35:38 Nuclear risk and false diplomacy 00:45:07 Paths to peace and the UN

## #Pascal

Welcome back, everybody. My name is Pascal Lottaz, and today I'm joined again by Emeritus Professor Richard Sakwa of Kent University. Richard, welcome back.

## #Richard Sakwa

It's my pleasure, thank you.

## #Pascal

It's great that you're coming online, and you wrote a new book, which is actually going to be the topic of our discussion. You wrote this piece, this entire volume here, and you're discussing \*The Russo-Ukrainian War: Follies of Empire.\* And if I'm not mistaken, it's either out now or coming out in just a couple of weeks.

## #Richard Sakwa

It's actually formally coming out on the 24th of March—so just a week away.

## **#Pascal**

The 24th of March—this video will be shown right around that time. So everybody, if you want to get the book, please go online and order a copy. But let's discuss it now. Richard, what are the main arguments you're making there? What kind of follies are we seeing in the war?

## **#Richard Sakwa**

The subtitle *\*Follies of Empire\** is a reference to Barbara Tuchman's magnificent book with a similar title. Initially, I was going to use *\*The March of Folly Redux\**. She did marvelous work, as you know—*\*The Guns of August\** on the First World War—but she also wrote *\*The March of Folly\**, which goes all the way from the Peloponnesian War to the Vietnam War, covering the American War of Independence and other events in between. And what she does is define what folly is.

A folly is when, for example, the Greeks went up against Sparta—what Graham Allison has called the Thucydides Trap. It's the idea that you start a war that ultimately destroys you, even though you had other choices. Athens was weakened and eventually lost the Peloponnesian War, the United States lost the Vietnam War, and the British lost the War of Independence in America. She defines it very precisely—I won't go into all the details—but that's what a folly means. And I believe this war in Ukraine can again be added to that list of world-historical follies.

Why? Of course, then we saw that on one side we have the expansion of what I've been calling, in this book and elsewhere, the political West. Now, it's easy to talk—as you know, at the latest Munich Security Forum, the Davos meeting, the World Economic Forum, and so on—endless talk about the international order collapsing, rules-based orders, and so on. Mark Carney made that fine speech about how the middle powers need to get together, and so on. But what everybody seems to have missed is that after 1945, a very specific political formation took place. You could call it what you like—the Atlantic power system, the transatlantic alliance, and so on.

But the political West is why—and the Russians love to call it the "collective West"—but what I want to say is that this political West, first of all, repudiated and challenged some of those traditional elements of the West, going all the way back to the origins of something definable as "the West." Obviously, the Judeo-Christian culture, the Greco-Roman tradition, Babylonian elements, and so on. And then, of course, you've got the 500 years of the imperial West—the West expanding through colonialism. In East Asia, where we are, of course, quite famously in 1853, the black ships came to Edo and forced open what had been, for 250 years, a closed system. But all these are parts of the West.

And, you know, at the moment in the West, we're having this huge debate about the West—the decline of the West—and we've got all these overtones of Spengler and Toynbee and all of that. All

of that is part of it. But what I'm saying is that we need to be very specific. Since 1945, this US-led political West emerged. It was transformative of the various states and ideologies that constitute it. Liberalism, in one respect—the Cold War liberalism, as we know it—was very peculiar; it lost its emancipatory edge. It became suppressive, it became disciplining. Of course, the ideology of freedom was all fine, but it became instrumentalized. So I'm arguing that the political West transforms its member states, just like the European Union transforms the character of the nation-states that become part of it.

But I'm pushing that forward and saying, look, membership in this political West changes the very nature of the state. And it applies as much to Japan as it does—though to a lesser degree—to South Korea. But the core West—the United States, Canada, and the Western European states—was transformed, along with their associated ideologies. Anyway, after this was established after 1945 as a world order, the Soviet world order collapsed in 1989–91. We know that. And therefore, this political West then claims to be universal. It radicalized in all sorts of ways—ideologically, in the end-of-history ideology, the Hegelian, the Kantian human rights agenda, the Hegelian imperial element of suppressing alternatives—all sorts of elements take place within it.

So this political West—and then gradually you have, in a Karl Polanyi sense, a counter-movement—and that counter-movement is the anti-hegemonic alignment of Russia, China, India, some other states, the non-aligned states, and so on. So that's the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war. And we have this political West—summarizing it very briefly—it has two facets. It has the Commonwealth aspect, which is the common, you know, the public goods that it has genuinely delivered: open trade, whether you like it or not (of course, all of that is contestable), free trade, the alleged commitment to positive goods or freedom, and so on and so forth.

But the other side of this political West is the imperial West—hence *\*Follies of Empire\**—and that's our... So that's the political West after 1999, as it expands, and that's the context in which any debate about NATO enlargement or EU enlargement needs to take place. But it does entail the association that the European Union's enlargement to the east was similar in style to that of NATO, in an ideological and meta-ideological sense. It was the expansion of this Western political formation. And of course, then it ultimately meets the resistance of Russia, just as it will in Asia with China and some other countries. On the other side, of course, you have Russia, and they say, look, you're just blaming the West here—what's the political West? What about the other follies, the Russian follies?

And of course, again, the mismanagement, in some ways, of relations with its neighbors. I mean, you could also say Russia has this Commonwealth aspect as well—post-communist Russia. And also, they are articulated by, in particular, the LDPR, Zhirinovskiy, when he was alive, with this sort of imperial attitude, which is definitely there, though combined with this Commonwealth aspect, trying to establish a post-Soviet community through the Eurasian Economic Union. One way or another, of

course, it's failed as well. But then these two projects, if you like, combine in conflict over Ukraine. So that's the context. Sorry to go on so long. But that's why *\*The Follies of Empire\**. Then, of course, we could look at the more detailed aspects.

## **#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](https://pascallottaz.substack.com). The link's in the description below. And now, back to the video. Yeah, and we should—especially the role now of the Ukraine war. The book itself is still called, you know, *\*The Russo-Ukrainian War\**, but within the book, of course, you go into the proxy-war aspect of the whole thing. Which is why, you know, the Russo-Ukrainian war is really a war between Russia—or it's a contest between Russia and Ukraine. The political West, as you call it—and I think actually “political West” is a better expression than “collective West.”

It kind of captures more of the essence of what this group approach to international relations is about. Of course, as you pointed out, it goes back much further—like 500 years of European expansionism around the globe, with all the colonial crimes committed in the process. But the post-'45 version of this collective approach among several countries has a very distinct flavor, especially after '89–'90, when it really led to a collectivization of decision-making. And what we're seeing at the moment is the vassalization of Europe under the wishes of the imperial core. Can you speak a little about that, and where you see the Russo-Ukrainian war impacting the entire system?

## **#Richard Sakwa**

Yeah, indeed. Until 1989, paradoxically, during the first Cold War, you had a more dynamic relationship between the various wings of the political West. Surprisingly enough, after the end of the first Cold War, you'd think we wouldn't need NATO anymore and could move beyond bloc politics. Instead, bloc politics was consolidated. It consolidated internally and expanded externally. In some ways, it became a more far-reaching and, if I can use the word, insidious body in the way it intensified the vassalage, if you like, of its members and harnessed them to the purposes of the U.S. empire—the imperial aspect of the political West. For example, during the 2003 invasion of Iraq, you had countries opposing it. But today, and especially after Libya, they don't.

And now, of course, this whole disciplining mechanism is even more intense. The European Union has totally failed to deal with it. As you know, earlier this week—when we're talking—she addressed 140 European Union ambassadors, and she spent over two-thirds of the time talking about Russia, at a moment when you have genocide in Gaza and the world's worst war, not just in the Middle East but, in a sense, the most threatening war since 1945, which could spin out of control in all sorts of directions. The European Union's utter failure to condemn what's going on in Gaza or to take any action is striking. So, yes, bloc politics is intensifying. It's intensified just before the whole thing unravels—which is where we're heading next.

## **#Pascal**

And just one second—again, in comparison to the First Cold War, as you previously called it—you know, during the First Cold War we had Ostpolitik with Willy Brandt in Germany. We had Olof Palme. We had people who were not in line with Washington's wishes. And that was bloc politics; it was actually a negotiated bloc politics. That negotiation has completely left the scene. Anyone with eyes to see understands who's playing first fiddle in the cacophony in Brussels, right? Yes, yes. So then, how did that—A, how did that happen? And B, the folly that is the Ukraine war, the proxy war—how do you see that impacting the entire system? And maybe a third question: why was Russia never let in? Russia actually asked to join, and they were not let in. They never tried to domesticate Russia in the same way the rest was domesticated.

## **#Richard Sakwa**

I'll start with the last one first, because that's the most fascinating part. If this vision or concept of a political West has any validity, then it really does help explain the politics of exclusion—of Russia. As you know, Gorbachev and Yeltsin were keen to join, and Putin, when he first came to power in 2000, also asked to join. As he's been saying in recent speeches, he said, "Let us join, because if we don't, then we're on the outside—and once you have a border, you get all the classic frontier issues that come with a border between an expanding military alliance and the one left outside it."

So, Putin—anybody in Moscow could see that quite clearly. Why? Because if Russia had joined—and that's why it's not just a question of joining NATO or something like that—it's much bigger. The political West is a military and economic entity, but above all, an ideological project to maintain U.S. hegemony. Now, if they let Russia in, it's a whole new ballgame. It means the political West is no longer the political West. It becomes something else entirely, because new elements are introduced into that political unit—one of them being a kind of pan-continental Europeanism.

So then you have a totally different logic—this Atlantic-based system versus a European one. And then you have all of us, as, you know, envious Europeans, who start talking about neo-Gaullist ideas of autonomy and so on. And, you know, why would Washington want that? Russia would immediately, manifestly, and massively increase the power of this European dimension with huge—well, it's not just economic resources like oil, gas, iron ore, and all the rest, but also enormous intellectual potential. We shouldn't, you know, suggest that Russia was just going to be a raw materials provider.

It's got a full-spectrum economy—maybe not so developed in certain ways, but still, it's a full economy. That, of course, would then change the economic framework of the political West; it would change the ideological framework toward a greater Europeanism. And, of course, other ideas, perhaps, already from the start. Russia is a different—now, I hesitate to use the word—but it's a different spiritual formation. It's a different constellation because its history is different. It's got

Russian Orthodoxy, and indeed that peculiar mix with Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, and many other religions within Russia. Of course, it is a different civilization—let's put it that way.

I'm not happy about its civilizational discourse, but clearly it's part of it—a different culture, let's say it that way. Again, that's that third question you asked: why didn't they let Russia in? It's a fascinating question, which I'm working on in other aspects at the moment. So, the other element about Ukraine—of course, you're absolutely right. The title of the book, in a sense, is *\*Misleading the Russo-Ukrainian War\**. But of course, to have said *\*the Russo-Ukrainian slash Ukraine–West or NATO war\** would have been a bit clumsy. So the Russo-Ukrainian war is, if you like, the cockpit of a much larger constellation, of this larger conflict.

## **#Pascal**

You know, one of the things that fascinates me at the moment is that the Russians actually go along with this, right? The Russians, right now—as we speak, on March 13, 2026—still accept the fiction by the United States that they are some kind of intermediary, providing a space for the Russians and the Ukrainians to meet and find a solution, right? They're still fine with that kind of fiction, and they still meet with Vitkov and Kushner and so on. And they don't actually challenge that framing as of now, obviously, although it's utterly clear to us, and to many others—many Russian colleagues, U.S. colleagues, and so on—that the proxy war aspect of this is the meat on the bones, right? And the bones, then, being the hard trench warfare on Ukrainian soil, which is absolutely horrible and devastating. But the political issue is, of course, the larger aspect of it, right? Why do you think that is? And are you also going into the Russian way of portraying this war?

## **#Richard Sakwa**

Yes, indeed. I talk about the various models explaining the war. Much of the West basically follows the Michael McFaul line, which is that internal, domestic authoritarianism needs an external war to validate and legitimize itself. I don't think that's the main motivation. All these things feed into it, of course. The second big model is Russian imperialism. Now, this is a very popular view in the Baltic republics, in Poland, and, of course, in the United Kingdom—for some strange reason, even at the other end of the continent—which regards this as simply traditional Russian imperial expansionism and a land grab. Which is bizarre, because if it really were a land grab, why didn't they annex the Donbass republics any time after 2014 or 2015—those bits of it?

Or indeed, they keep saying, you know, so many histories, so many books and commentaries in the West get it wrong and claim that, for example, Russia incorporated Abkhazia and South Ossetia—which, of course, they didn't. They were recognized as independent entities. Again, a tragedy in its own right, though that's not our subject today. So I dismiss the second model of explaining it. And I really go to the very simple, the classic one—and I've said this for 30 years—that it's a security issue.

When I was speaking in London at the Ministry of Defence, when they used to invite me there and to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, I kept asking this question to our officials making policy: what, in your view, are Russia's legitimate security interests?

## **#Pascal**

What did they say in response?

## **#Richard Sakwa**

They never did. That was the thing—they never answered it. So the default position was that even asking this question was like a "Moscow question." Insane, of course—a Moscow talking point. And no, in other words, the bottom line was that Russia had no legitimate security interests. A kind of nihilism, a negationism, which generates all sorts of conflict potential—and which exploded, as one would expect, over Ukraine. I just want to say one other point, which I've now also lost in all of this—but yes, an associated point about legitimacy. So indeed, it's a security model which, as it goes on, then transcends this logic—this war, the Russo-Ukrainian war—together now with the war in the Middle East, and so on.

We're witnessing a transformation of international politics. And just to say, it's the end of this 80-year period since the end of the Second World War. We talk about world order—the political West on one side, the anti-hegemonic alignment with China, another model of world order on the other. But overarching it all is the United Nations Charter international system, based on international law. And unfortunately, these conflicts—if you like, on the one side, the Israelization of U.S. policy and international politics—which is, you know, resolute, and, you know, we don't need to go into detail there.

And on the other side, the Ukrainization of European policy, which is part of this negation. I mean Ukrainian ethno-nationalists, not the other Ukraine—to which this book is dedicated, by the way, the other Ukraine. And I dedicate it to the Ukraine that I love, the Ukrainians whom I admire, and that is the Ukrainians fighting for a Ukraine that is multilingual, pluralistic, tolerant, democratic, sovereign, and so on. And out of this war, I'd love to see precisely that sort of Ukraine emerging. But it can't, because the political West was using Ukraine. This isn't to deny agency—unfortunately, there were plenty of ethno-nationalist Ukrainians who loved that.

And of course, as you know, the U.S. Embassy in Kiev at one stage had 700 staff members. You know, it's like the Saigon embassy during the Vietnam War—we were basically running the war. And since the 1990s, the U.S. Embassy in Kiev had been working might and main all those years to separate and make sure that Ukraine did not align with Russia, and to ensure that it was part of this larger sphere of interest—let's use the old-fashioned geopolitical term. And so Russia, if that was the case, did not have a sphere of security, which is an interesting debate we've been having for some time now.

## **#Pascal**

Yeah, the “sphere of security” idea was introduced a while ago by Jeffrey Sachs, and he’s talked about it too.

## **#Richard Sakwa**

No, no, it's well before that, and there's... okay, you get it. You get it. If you said it before, Sachs, then you get the credit for it.

## **#Pascal**

Because actually, Sachs was asking Mearsheimer, “Do you know anyone who framed it in this way?” Mearsheimer said, “I don’t know.” But that means we found the man who said it first—Richard Sakwa. Okay. Because this sphere of security is very, very important if you think about it in overlapping circles, right? And everybody actually needs a certain reassurance that no threat will emanate from its direct borders, which is why I work so hard on neutrality—because it’s exactly the kind of concept that allows that to happen. And we know that neutrality almost solved the entire problem when it was first included in the Ukrainian Constitution in 1991, 1993, and 1995.

And then again in 2022, when it was the linchpin of the Russians’ demands to stop the initial assault. Right. And we know that for sure today. Unfortunately, this was rejected by the political West, which said, “No, no, no, we’re going to fight it out, and we’re going to win. They don’t have any legitimate security concerns.” I wanted to go somewhere with this, but the point, maybe, is that we need to understand how the political West managed to get into this mindset—that it can steamroll over Russia and everybody else. And yes, yes, these wars of choice.

I mean, the war in Iran is very easy to understand. It shows how it’s a war of choice by the United States and Israel, because they attacked even though they had many other options. There was really no necessity—this was not a provoked war at all from the Iranian side. Whereas on the other side, with the Ukraine war, of course it was highly provoked. It was built up over a long time, this kind of goading the Russians into actually invading. But I also view it as a war of choice in the end—especially choosing Ukraine as the battleground. Because, let’s be honest, for four years they kept saying, “Oh, you’re going to be a member of NATO one day.” They could have made them a NATO member at any point in time, but they didn’t, which means they chose this place to be the one where they’d fight the war instead of having an all-out war, right? So, can you maybe—do you have some thoughts about this in the book?

## **#Richard Sakwa**

Absolutely. So, in terms of Ukrainian neutrality, it was in the Declaration of State Sovereignty all the way back in 1990. And then, as you say, in the Constitution and indeed all the way through things.

But you're right—the mindset, you used the term “mindset of the West,” which is absolutely right. The political West isn't just a geopolitical formation; it's an ideological formation. After the end of the first Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union—and I describe some of this in my book *\*The Culture of the Second Cold War\**—the political West becomes hermetic. It cannot engage in dialogue or debate with anybody outside of it. It becomes rebarbative, insulated. As I said, I'd go to these officials and ask, “What, in your view, are Russia's legitimate security interests?” And I was always met with silence. Never—never actually got an answer. At Chatham House, I kept asking this question and never got an answer, because it's closed. They cannot answer.

## **#Pascal**

The solipsistic security mindset.

## **#Richard Sakwa**

Yes, it's exactly that—totally self-enclosed, self-referential, and of course self-aggrandizing in doing so. So that's right. And it's hermetic, which does make, as you say, Ukraine a war of choice. But of course, it's also a choice made by a particular strand of Ukrainian leadership. I'm always accused of saying, “Oh, you're denying Ukrainian agency.” Unfortunately, I'm not. I'm doing the opposite. I'm saying that part of the Ukrainian political community was the architect of its own destruction, in the sense that it failed to understand exactly what you've just said—that for Ukraine to survive, as for any country to survive, it needs to understand the security interests of its neighbor: Mexico or Canada for the United States in the old days, and Russia's neighbors today.

You say, “Oh, why do you prioritize Russia? Why didn't they give the Ukrainians the United Nations Security Council seat?” At that point, you realize these people have lost connection with reality. Unfortunately, so much of that Ukrainian political community did lose connection with reality. I keep using this example: if, for instance, a neutral country like Ireland—a splendid country next to England—decided to invite the Chinese in to build a military base there, all the British discussion about choice and so on would be out the window in less than five minutes.

And so you can't—hopefully, Ireland will retain its, you know, splendid tradition of Irish neutrality in its own way. That's sensible. Why? And Ukraine, of course—no one is saying... then, of course, there's “Finlandization,” which you've obviously written a lot about, but Finlandization as a negative term. In some ways, that's a quasi-Finlandization of Ukraine. No—well, yes, in one sense. But internally, do what you like; simply respect the security concerns of a nuclear-powered neighbor. You don't like it? Well, as I said, it's like the Mexicans say: so far from God and so close to the United States. That's international politics.

## **#Pascal**

The term “Finlandization,” just for anyone listening, was always a propaganda term from the political West, used to discredit this kind of neutral approach by sovereign states—because they didn’t like it either. The neutrality of Finland was meant to create some wiggle room toward the Soviet Union, which it did. The West didn’t like that, since it would have preferred a firm ally. You can see that same dynamic playing out in Ukraine—the destruction of Ukrainian neutrality, the systematic destruction, most clearly in 2014 during the Maidan events, when the then-elected president of Ukraine, Mr. Yanukovich, was portrayed in the West as being pro-Russian.

He was pro-Ukrainian, but for a neutral Ukraine. He was clearly part of that strain, and he was chased out of office and then replaced by the group that, in the end, got rid of that neutrality article in the Ukrainian constitution after the Russian annexation of Crimea. So you can see how this tit-for-tat started playing out, which is exactly the kind of idea you get when you make sure that, you know, this entity comes into your camp and you eradicate the mutually beneficial spheres of security that exist in the overlapping areas—those buffer states.

## **#Richard Sakwa**

Yeah, you're absolutely right—the discrediting of the very concept. And of course, then you have willing allies within those countries. In Finland, it was, of course, the president today, Alexander Stubb, who's been fighting against this sort of neutrality or balancing. And just one other concept associated with that is multivectorism. Now, multivectorism is what Ukraine had under Kuchma and the like, and of course in Kazakhstan under Nazarbayev and Tokayev today. But multivectorism needs clever states, step-by-step management, and others after the Second World War. Unfortunately, the quality of the Ukrainian leadership left something to be desired.

So, as for multivectorism, the Ukrainians do get upset with me when I praise the way the Kazakhstani leadership, since independence, has managed multiple relationships. And of course, Kazakhstan also has China in its neighborhood. What multivectorism means is, indeed, an intelligent foreign policy that can actually be a positive vision of how to benefit from your difficult geopolitical neighborhood, rather than playing it as a zero-sum game. The Ukrainians used it, if I may say so, from the very beginning all the way through to the end, in an opportunistic manner—to see what they could get out of it, you know—and it benefits by playing one side off against the other. Which, of course, in the end, means you find everybody is using you rather than you using them.

So, multivectorism—you know, a term that, in my view, needs a bit more theoretical elaboration—because it simply means that in a multipolar world, you can’t just play a single alignment. In other words, going all in on one side, like post-Maidan Ukraine did with the pro-Western camp, is inevitably going to generate conflict. The Kazakhstani leadership, and many other Central Asian states, understand that. Whereas the quality of leadership in Ukraine has been abysmal, of course,

because instead of not—well, in one simple element, by 2022 Ukraine was, effectively per capita, the poorest country in Europe. And that's in a country so richly endowed, not just with natural but also with human capital—a magnificent, well-educated population, and so on.

And yet they managed to squander these advantages—they managed to squander or destroy their geopolitical benefits of being able to trade with Russia and other neighbors in the East, and with the European Union and other neighbors to the West—and ended up getting the worst of all worlds. So this is agency. This is their agency, because they were then played in this huge dynamic. And just one final point: of course, they were encouraged by regional neighbors like Poland and the Baltic republics. You remember this old organization called GUAM—Georgia, Ukraine, Armenia, Moldova—sort of idea, which didn't last long. But again, it was an early attempt to pull Ukrainian influence fully into the Western sphere of influence.

## **#Pascal**

So basically, what this shows us, again, is that if you let yourself be captured completely by one side or the other, then you'll be used and abused for that side's purposes. And Ukraine is probably the prime example. Of course, the current public narrative is that Ukraine is being abused by Russia, and that it's only Russia to blame for the war. For four years now, this has been the mantra of the Europeans: this war could be ended today if Russia just stopped it. But that completely, utterly neglects the entire security dimension—the dimension for the Russians—which they've now proven they're willing to fight for. Now, the folly, though, I believe in your concept goes even further, because it's the undermining, of course, of the system that underpinned the post-Cold War U.S. hegemonic structure, which was very successfully set up on the continent, actually.

## **#Richard Sakwa**

Yes, indeed. The consequences—obviously, it's too early to tell the long-term consequences. But just as in the Middle East, we've come to, I don't want to use Mark Carney's term, a rupture in international affairs, where the political West has finally met its match. You asked earlier why Russia has continued to negotiate in good faith, especially after the Iranian example—twice in negotiations, and negotiations used as a ruse to lull the proxies, those with whom you're negotiating, into a false sense of security. Now, this comes back to the quality, or rather the nature—the character—of Putin's leadership personally.

And as you know, he's under huge pressure within Russia to intensify. "Why are we fighting?" I spoke to Sergei Kuryanov about this, and I mentioned the question of Russia pulling its punches. He said, "No, no, it's worse than that. It's as if Russia is fighting this war not just with one hand tied behind its back, but with both hands behind its back." In other words, there's huge pressure. And then Putin—this isn't a question of praising or condemning him, simply an observation—that he has a kind of preternatural calmness or stillness in his policymaking. In other words, when he hits, he hits hard.

But in the sense that, in this war, he has understood—just like, by the way, Biden to a degree did—that this could escalate. And, uh, we've heard all this. There's been much discussion, even now, that basically the world could be destroyed in seventy-two minutes. There's a book about this—it's not me making it up—by a lady who gives a very good, very interesting analysis. She talks about how it initially happens: North Korea sends a missile, it's misinterpreted, and there's a counter-response from the United States. And Russia doesn't know whether these missiles going east are headed for North Korea or for Russia.

So it responds. Within seventy-two minutes, the Earth is just a smoldering ruin. Now, we're close to that—closer than during the Cuban Missile Crisis. And that's why Putin is, you know, in a sense, objectively speaking, absolutely aware that the stakes couldn't be higher—the future of humanity. And Ukrainians, of course, and Europeans are blithely ignoring that. They say, "Oh, Russia is just bluffing." No, it's a bluff until it isn't. And when it isn't a bluff, that's it. It's over. Game over. So as long as the game continues, it's a bluff—because once the bluff is called, that's it.

## **#Pascal**

Yeah, it ceases being a bluff. But what you very importantly pointed out in this discussion—and I hope you have it in the book—is this issue of the solipsistic mind, especially among Europeans. Again, we've seen this in action now for, what, two years basically, right? When they talk about negotiations, they negotiate with themselves. I think the epitome of that was the peace conference in Switzerland, at the Bürgenstock, where they held a peace conference without inviting Russia—without even inviting them. Although Russia said, "We wouldn't join even if you did," but let's leave that aside. They didn't invite the Russians. So you pretend that you can have serious negotiations and debate about peace without one of the three warring parties, which is really... And they continue doing that to this day when they call something "negotiations." It's fascinating that it never actually occurs to them that this is doomed not to work. It's just fantastic to me.

## **#Richard Sakwa**

It's utterly bizarre that you negotiate with yourself. This reflects the long-term decline in diplomacy—the practice of Western diplomacy. All it can do is talk to itself. And that's, of course, what the West has been doing. That's why I use the word "hermetic." You used, I think, a very good word—"subsistence." It's hermetic, it's closed, it can't deal. To involve the Russians would mean you actually have to negotiate. That's why, in a sense, you have Kushner and Witkoff doing the negotiating now—because it's not really a negotiation of diplomacy.

These are not diplomats. And, of course, this is the coalition of the willing—it's a perfect example of that. The coalition of the killing, one could call it. The coalition of the... And it's a typical example, by the way, of the Keir Starmer approach to politics: a totally vacuous emptiness at the very heart of it. So... so you talk with yourself. And more than that, the coalition of the willing is actually saying the

very things that made Russia go to war in the first place—to prevent what’s now happening, which is Western troops in Ukraine.

## **#Pascal**

And it’s also a symptom, I think, of—let’s say—500 years, or at least 200 years, of complete and utter Western dominance over the entire globe, where the ends of wars were always negotiated among the victors, those who were clearly going to be the victors, right? Think of the Tehran Conference, and then later on the one—not Potsdam, but before that—on Crimea.

## **#Richard Sakwa**

Yalta. Potsdam. Yalta.

## **#Pascal**

I mean, the Yalta Conference—yeah, I think the Europeans still operate under that Yalta framework. It’s like, “We, the winners of the war, are going to divide and structure the world, and then we’ll show that to the defeated nations, and they’ll have to implement it because we can.” But it’s not working anymore. They still operate under that idea, but it’s not what’s actually happening. I interpret it a bit like that.

## **#Richard Sakwa**

It’s a bit like the Congress of Berlin, even—well, 1884, but also the one before, 1878—where they carved up the world, basically. Yes. No, you’re absolutely right. So it is... this is interesting. You know, I talk about this “political West” as a very specific formation, but of course, this political West has reproduced patterns of behavior from the imperial West for the last 500 years. But what makes it even worse, of course, is that since 1945, under the aegis of the United Nations and what I call the “charter international system,” we’ve had decolonization. We’re now in Malaysia—it became independent in 1957—and so, decolonization. And it’s interesting that in the political West today, we have this endless talk of decolonizing the curriculum.

I don’t know whether you’ve had this in Japan and all that, which has been a kind of echo. But in a strange sort of way, this “decolonizing the curriculum” has reinforced all sorts of patterns of authoritarianism and the destruction of individual free thought in the political West itself. So it becomes another disciplinary technique. Now, it’s a subject I don’t think we can get into here, but just to say that one thing I’m working on now is precisely this void—what I call, in the next book (which is called *\*Farewell to the West\**, by the way)—an attempt to disaggregate the collapse of this political West by putting it into the context of the other Wests. But there is a constitutive void.

In other words, the old social democracy is finished. The old-fashioned socialism, even our British old-fashioned—at its best, one-nation Tory conservatism—is exhausted. All the ideologies are exhausted. And instead, you have the so-called populism, which fills the vacuum along with other authoritarian techniques. So, as you just said, the solipsistic European Union is another symptom of this void. How come? You know, we might say, why is that? And the usual answer would be, “Oh, the very low quality of European leaders today.” And that’s undoubtedly true—exceptionally low, in fact—with the possible exception of Giorgia Meloni, who is actually quite smart and able to lead, and so on. But that’s not an adequate answer. It’s part of it, but not the whole. There’s something deeper going on.

## **#Pascal**

It kind of reminds me, you know, of a deflated balloon. The whole thing’s still there, but it’s empty now. And still, for some reason, the balloon believes it’s this huge thing when the air is long gone. But since we’re nearing the end—and I know I have to be mindful of your time—one more shout-out to your book, right? \*The Russo-Ukrainian War: Follies of Empire.\* Is there one more thing you’d like to point out that we haven’t discussed yet, something that’s in the book and that people should get the book for to go further into it?

## **#Richard Sakwa**

Well, I spent quite a lot of time discussing the various peace proposals and the pathways to peace that have emerged, and what sort of constitutive framework we could have for that. Of course, we can, at least, commend Donald Trump for trying to find a way to peace—which is astonishing, given that the European Union began, call me naive, as a peace project so that France and Germany could never go to war again. Then people ask me, well, why didn’t they do this with Russia after the end of the Cold War—to establish a similar dynamic to make sure that Russia and the West could never go to war again? And that’s exactly the issue we’re now trying to counteract.

So the Russo-Ukrainian war is really at the heart of all these endless debates about the fate of international politics today—the character of it. And then, at the end, well, how do we get to peace? We really do need to start thinking about a new politics of transcendence. By that I mean—it’s not my term—but simply the idea of how to overcome the logic of conflict, the solipsism. And who are the interests, the institutions, the agents of this? Not the European Union, sadly, clearly under Ursula von der Leyen. Is the European Union as a peace project salvageable? I’m not sure. But my bottom line is that ultimately the only institution in that framework is the Charter international system and the United Nations.

And that, of course, has now been totally marginalized by this war—marginalized by the Middle Eastern wars, discredited in part even. It’s not working. But there are, as John Maynard Keynes would say, no ideas lying out in the street to be picked up and run with. After the end of the Second

World War, there were. We could learn from the mistakes of the League of Nations to build the United Nations. Huge flaws in it, of course—the five permanent members, UN reform, and so on. I don't want to go on too long, but at the heart of the United Nations there are two types of comity—comity meaning powers coming together for the common good.

You have, of course, great power comity from Yalta and Potsdam—the five permanent members—but you also have a kind of federative or democratic comity. Today there are 193 members of the United Nations, and I'd like to see the General Assembly speak more. It's in the UN Charter—they could do it. But the West has been clever enough; they've now got Annalena Baerbock, the former German foreign minister and a virulent Russophobe, as chair of the United Nations General Assembly. When I saw that, I thought, well, the political West has subordinated the UN to itself. Now we need to push back. I keep urging my Chinese and other colleagues—India, Malaysia—to make it more autonomous. That's where we need to go.

## **#Pascal**

Yeah, and there are a lot of discussions to be had. I'll certainly also talk to my Chinese colleagues very soon about why they didn't veto the last resolution that came out of the Security Council condemning Iran. But that's, again, another discussion for another time. Everybody, when you watch this—the book *\*The Russo-Ukrainian War: Follies of Empire\** by Richard Sakwa will be available on March 24th, 2026. Please order yourself a copy; it's certainly worth the read. I'm Richard Sakwa. Thank you very much for your time today.

## **#Richard Sakwa**

Thank you very much. Bye-bye.