

# US Sacrifices Gulf States for Empire | Evarist Bartolo

The US has turned its "protection promise" into a war trap. Not only is Washington deliberately throwing its Gulf allies under the bus to absorb Iran's firepower, but it is also intentionally wrecking their oil and gas industries. The US benefits hugely, as it remains one of the sole open producers and suppliers of oil and gas. In combination with the recent regime change operation in Venezuela, this power play guarantees the Petro-Dollar, which then also means the USD will keep its reserve currency status. What a power play, and what an incredible way of ruling not only over enemies but over allies at the same time. Conclusion: only a sovereign (neutral) foreign policy can guard one's economy and one's peace. Support us on substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> Shop and Donations: <https://neutralitystudies-shop.fourthwall.com>

## #Pascal

Welcome back, everybody, to Neutrality Studies. Today, once more, we're joined by our friend and colleague, Evarist Bartolo, former foreign minister of the beautiful island nation of Malta. Evarist, welcome back, and thank you very much for this conversation. Evarist, you actually told me that March, which we're in at the moment, is a month in Malta when you commemorate something important—the closure of the last foreign bases on the island. We'll talk about this in the context, of course, of the Iran war, but could you maybe give us a bit of background on why Malta hosted foreign bases in the first place, and how it was able to close them?

## #Evarist Bartolo

Yes, the end of March is important for us because on the 31st of March, 1979, the British left their naval and military bases, which they had maintained in Malta since 1800. But that wasn't the first time Malta served as a base for foreign powers that were competing with each other for dominance. They considered Malta to have a strategically important position just below Sicily. What interested them even more than the geographic location was the deep harbor with all-year good weather, which was obviously very, very important. That has been our blessing but also our curse, because of that deep harbor we've been dominated for thousands of years. So it's not just the British base—in our history, I think we've been invaded about 24 times.

And we've always been invaded, not because of something we did or because we, as natives, constituted a threat, but because the power that held Malta as a base was obviously a threat to other powers in the region. So for us, since 1979, we've, for the first time, not been serving as a military base. In our 8,500 years of history, it's only in the last eight minutes or so—if we were to compress our history into 24 hours—that we've been without military bases. What's interesting is

that in 1987 we managed to get a constitutional change, and both major parties in Malta committed themselves not to join any military alliance and not to allow our territory to serve as foreign military bases for other powers.

## **#Pascal**

This is very important. Malta is a neutral country. But, you know, under the current foreign policy thinking of much of the Western establishment, anyone would expect that by now you'd be overrun by military forces—either the Russians or the Chinese. I mean, you have no protection. Who protects Malta? Can you explain a little how the Maltese think about their security in their neighborhood?

## **#Evarist Bartolo**

The biggest problem, I would say, is the rhetoric, because there's this perception that if you don't have someone to protect you, you'll be invaded. But in fact, history shows that we've always been invaded because we served as a military base for others. On our own, we can't threaten anyone—and that's a good thing, because we don't constitute a threat. What's been very important for us is to deny ourselves as a military base to everyone and not to align with one bloc or another. What's interesting—and I find more people today ready to accept this argument—is what's happening now in the war against Iran, where military bases are not security umbrellas but actually lightning rods, magnets that attract missiles and war.

Instead of protecting you, you actually need to be protected from these military bases. So this is, I think, one of the unintended consequences of the war against Iran—it's making people worldwide reconsider. I don't think it's happening dramatically, but from what I follow, more people are now ready to accept that. You know, I also follow what's happening in Cyprus, for example, and more people there are ready to accept that having foreign military bases on your territory is not a security umbrella but actually a magnet that causes problems—not just militarily, but also politically and economically.

## **#Pascal**

A lightning rod is a very good way of putting it, because in a sense, what Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait are now getting is the blitz from the Iranians as retaliation against the U.S. and Israel. These Gulf states are not themselves attacking Iran, but because they host the bases of those who do, they automatically become targets. I mean, it's the most natural thing in the world, even if Donald Trump keeps claiming that nobody could have foreseen something like this happening. Do you think this situation is now going to make people in those places rethink their security strategy?

I mean, we've seen a lot of comments coming out of Saudi Arabia suggesting they're thinking of joining the war, instead of actually doing the opposite—saying, "no more bases" in Qatar, Kuwait, and so on. They're all condemning these actions against them. But don't you think that, behind the

scenes, some of these foreign policy people—especially the foreign ministers—must be realizing that the cause of their destruction now is actually that very, very mistaken foreign policy of thinking that by providing bases, you automatically get security? I think so.

## **#Evarist Bartolo**

And it's very clear that even what's happening in Asia—let's focus a bit on South Korea, for example—where the base is supposed to be there to protect them from China. Whereas, in fact, if equipment is needed to protect the U.S. and Israel, you bring it over from South Korea. So it's very clear that these military bases—and let's remember, Pascal, that at the moment there are about 1,247 military bases around the world, over 800 of them, about 90%, belonging to the United States. And as the NATO Secretary General told us recently about NATO—and what he said about NATO applies also to military bases—it's not to defend the host countries where these bases are placed, but actually to project global military power.

Instead of protecting you, you get involved now in the global conflicts that a great power like the United States has. And it has, you know, very, very deep roots and painful consequences for the countries that are hosting them. And I can tell you, even from my personal experience, I know some of these—not just ministers, but even people at a higher level in the Gulf countries—how they talk publicly and then how they talk privately to you when you ask them these questions you've just asked. Do you think the bases are here to protect you, or are they actually becoming a danger and a big risk for you? And publicly, although even now they are careful about how they express themselves.

Publicly, they would say, "Oh, they're good. It's part of the security architecture in our region." But they know that privately it's actually there to control them rather than protect them, and that it exposes them to serious problems—even economically. And especially if you take countries like Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar, which are small, the consequences can be felt across the whole territory. It's not something that can exist as an enclave on its own. You know, and I can tell you, Pascal, even from our own historical experience, when Malta was serving as a military base for many years, all our territory was under the control of the War Department in Britain. It wasn't even under the Overseas Department.

So whatever civil infrastructure project needed to be done—building a road, extending the water connection, providing electricity, constructing something—you needed the go-ahead from the War Department. How did this affect the military interests of the UK in Malta? If it went against those interests—strategically or militarily—then that project simply wouldn't happen. It's no wonder that, in our case, the tourism industry and the services sector started developing only after we stopped being a military base, because finally there was space—not just physical and territorial space for these developments, but also, at last, decision-making space to act in the interest of our own people.

And I think this is something that needs to be explained over and over again, Pascal. You don't even have to be from the Global South to understand it. If we look at what happened 60 years ago—literally in March, 60 years ago—President Charles de Gaulle told the United States to close down its naval and military bases in France. And it wasn't only because he wanted to regain national sovereignty, which was very important, but because he felt it interfered with France's decision-making—not just militarily, but in terms of running the country in its own interest.

## **#Pascal**

Yeah, I mean, these military alliances—especially when they're so asymmetrical, right? Between a very large power and a very small one, like the large United States and the small UAE or Qatar, or the large UK and the small Malta—these are not really alliances. These are, of course, colonial relationships. And actually, in Malta's case, Malta was a colony of the UK, right? It later gained its independence. But why do you think this whole strategy is coming under stress now? I mean, the decolonial process, at least since 1945, was supposed—at least in theory—to move in that direction.

And we know that, let's say, in the UAE and other Gulf states, there was this idea of a quid pro quo, right? Security in exchange for bases, and basically submission to what this foreign power actually wants. We know the same logic applies in Japan, and this is not a secret, not a theory. I mean, the 1953 Security Treaty, which first established that the U.S. could open bases, and then the revision in 1960—the one still in force now—very clearly said, "OK, U.S., you get bases. In return, we get security." And we don't.

The Japanese, I mean, get security, and they can then focus on economic development instead of military development, which served both sides. And that was it—it actually worked well, at least for Japan and arguably also for the Gulf states for a while. But now it's become a liability, and I'm absolutely sure it will become a liability for Japan as well. It will become a liability for the Philippines. Do you think that what's currently happening will serve as a signal to these other states to look again at the strategy, or will it just entrench the idea that we need even more U.S. bases to deter the other side?

## **#Evarist Bartolo**

No, I think deep questions are being asked, and they'll only increase—for at least three reasons: militarily, politically, and economically. Something that's happening, which I find very interesting and, as far as I know, hasn't really been pointed out yet, is that the missile and drone technology Iran has developed is actually making these bases obsolete. Right? Because they're like anchored aircraft carriers on land. And we know the U.S. keeps its aircraft carriers and its Navy far away from Iran because of that missile and drone technology. Now, this is very interesting because I think it's a new development.

And I'm sure that even militarily, even those who are in favor of war and those who make money from war, will have to rethink the presence of military bases for the very simple reason that they've now become very vulnerable to drones and missile technology—both hypersonic and ballistic. It's cheaper to attack military bases than to defend them. What's interesting now is that the drones and missiles Iran is using, at a much lower cost than what the U.S. spends, actually make it—let me repeat—cheaper to attack these bases, which are now more vulnerable, than to defend them.

You take away the radar system. As I said, they're like navies berthed in a port, which makes them very vulnerable. This is interesting, Pascal, because it makes me think of a very important essay written by George Orwell, which probably isn't very well known. It was published in October 1945 and is called *\*The Atom Bomb and You\**. He makes this reflection, which I think is really worth thinking about—that the history of civilization, unfortunately, is the history of the development of armaments, the history of the development of weapons.

And he says that when weapons are very expensive to produce, they also produce despotic systems. When you have cheaper weapons that can take on established powers, they serve, in his beautiful phrase, as giving claws to the weak—that the weak have a way of striking back. And I'm seeing that this is happening in the Gulf. So it's easier today, even in Cyprus, to show that military bases don't protect you but make you very vulnerable, and you have to pay the price. And in this case, it's interesting that before the war against Iran, President Trump was actually telling the Gulf countries, "Listen, these bases are not charitable institutions; you must pay for them."

So now imagine going to them and saying, after you've involved them in a war they didn't want, that not only are they suffering the consequences, but now they have to pay for these bases—which are actually a threat not only to their sovereignty, but to their security and prosperity. I think, worldwide, this is going to be a strong argument for rethinking military bases. Also, the economic reality is very important. Let's keep in mind that the British Empire had to withdraw from many of its military bases, eventually even including Malta.

Because they couldn't afford them anymore. Now, how long is the United States going to keep spending at least \$80 billion a year to maintain these bases? I'm not talking about the war effort or how much the war in Iran is costing. I mean the amount of money being spent by a country that has over \$39 trillion in debt—and a deficit of around 6%. How long can the United States afford to keep these military bases? So I think the pressure will be on. It won't happen overnight, but I think the pressure will build for a rethinking and reevaluation of military bases worldwide.

## **#Pascal**

You know, we've seen this over centuries, especially in European naval warfare, time and again. And exactly the thing that's happening right now—and the thinking behind which Malta actually tried to chase away the UK and close all bases—is the reason why, in international law, we have an entire body of law called the law of neutrality. It says precisely that if you want to claim neutrality, you

cannot aid one of the militaries, you cannot host it, you cannot have bases, and even your telecommunication infrastructure, according to the Hague Conventions, cannot be used by them. Because if you open it to one of the two parties, naturally the other one will shoot at you. Naturally.

And actually, this logic is so well understood that it's even encoded in the Hague Conventions, because it's so blatantly obvious, right, that that's what's happening. But for some reason, we managed, over the course of the Cold War and then into the thirty years of unipolarity, to overwrite that with a logic that's just not right, that just doesn't work—the idea that these bases somehow produce so much security. And the points you just raised are very, very important. My question to you, also as somebody who worked with people from the Gulf and as a policy professional, as a foreign minister: how long do you think it will take until the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, maybe even Saudi Arabia, start—behind the scenes—talking to the Iranians? Because we've seen this before.

Some people argue that the proxy states—the U.S. proxies—are just vassals. Yes and no, because we know from the Vietnam War that President Diem of South Vietnam actually had secret negotiations with Ho Chi Minh in the North and was trying to create some form of South Vietnamese neutrality, some kind of framework to allow the fighting to end. That was one of the reasons the United States signed off on his assassination by his own generals. So we know that, at some point, the proxies will try to figure something out. I just wonder if you have a hunch about whether the Gulf states might already be trying to signal to Iran that they'd be willing to change this relationship if the fighting just stopped. How do you see it?

## **#Evarist Bartolo**

I have no doubt that talks are going on behind the scenes informally, but it varies from country to country. You can't say this about all of them, because the Gulf states each have different relations with Iran. It's one thing to talk about Oman, for example—I have no doubt that contacts are happening there. I don't have any doubt, though I don't have any proof, that talks are going on between Qatar and Iran. They have very good relations. Not all of them are public, and not all of them are talked about. Even Kuwait is different. When it comes to the Emirates, I'd say it's another case, and to a certain extent, the same goes for Saudi Arabia.

Something I used to find very interesting was when I'd ask them, confidentially and privately, talking to my colleagues: "So, how are you managing your relations with the U.S., with China, with Russia at the same time? Do you feel pressure to really align yourself completely with one power against another?" At that point, it was still possible for them to have good economic relations with China while maintaining what was called a security arrangement with the United States. And they used to tell me, "Listen, we need to sell our oil. We need to sell our LNG. We need to import things."

And the U.S. obviously cannot satisfy all these different needs. It was possible before, but now I think this is becoming even more possible in a multipolar world. So that's another political reason why I think the pressure to change the model of military bases and the military network will grow. I

believe there will be fewer military bases in the future, even in the Gulf. That doesn't necessarily mean a great power like the United States won't still try to exercise control in the area—it just would do it in a different way. Obviously, when it comes to the Emirates, it's different, Pascal. The relationship between the Emirates and Israel is symbiotic; it goes far beyond the Abraham Accords.

## **#Evarist Bartolo**

If you looked at the shares that companies in the Emirates hold in Israel's military-industrial complex, you'd be shocked.

## **#Pascal**

Really? I thought they were, like, okay—not on the level of Qatar, obviously—but they were highly critical of Israel.

## **#Evarist Bartolo**

No, no, no. The interests are actually embedded. And if you were to visit the armaments fair that was held in February this year in the Emirates, you wouldn't know whether it was in Tel Aviv or in Dubai. They are so close. And they invest—they invest in the companies, in the war, in Israel's military-industrial complex. So, no, no, no. That's different. That's why I said it wouldn't apply to everyone.

When it comes to Saudi, it's a bit more complex. But I also think that's why the relationship China tried to build between Iran and Saudi Arabia faced people who wanted to disrupt it. Something I noticed—recently I participated in a very interesting discussion called "Multipolarity in the Gulf Region," just weeks before all this happened—is that some people in the area feel resentful toward China because it's not behaving like the United States. They want China to come in, act like the U.S., fight the U.S., and build the same kind of relationships with the different countries in the Gulf—like a superpower dictating to lesser powers what to do. But China won't do that.

## **#Pascal**

Which side said that? Was that somebody from the region, or were these people from the region? That sounds like something very European, I could imagine.

## **#Evarist Bartolo**

Yes, but from the region—diplomats from the region—who were actually telling the Chinese. There were some very top diplomats from China taking part, and they were being told, "You're so quiet, you're so withdrawn. Why aren't you like the United States?" And I had to come in and say, "Listen, please, I think one United States is enough. We don't need more United States with different

names." It was quite painful for the Chinese to explain that they do not want to be like the United States—that they want, yes, to build relations, commercial and trade relations, but they will not come in to tell others, "Do this, do that," or say, "You're either with us or against us."

## **#Pascal**

I had a very interesting conversation at the beginning of the week with Sheng Zeng. He's a young Chinese scholar and a Middle East–West Asia expert studying China's relationships in the region. He explained to me, "Look, China actually has a good relationship with Iran. I mean, it's not perfect, but it's improving. And it also has a good relationship with the Gulf states. It wants to maintain good relations with both because oil imports are quite important, and so are the trade relationships."

And China has, as he explained it, kind of a Deng-ish side—Deng Xiaoping, a more trade-related side. You know, "hide your strength and bide your time." And then there's the other one, the more Maoist, more pro-revolutionary and pro-interventionist side. But they're condemned to coexist. It's just that China cannot be convinced—well, the system cannot be convinced—to actually become a United States. So that's out of the question. In this sense, my view has come...

## **#Evarist Bartolo**

I personally think—and I don't know whether I overdo this point—but from history, even if you look at colonialism, when the West moved into Latin America and other regions, 300 years earlier there were Chinese explorers doing something similar, heading east and coming toward Africa. They never traveled with an army. They didn't travel with weapons. They traveled for trade. And wherever they settled or touched base, it was to carry out trade. I think it's part of their civilization—that this is how they want to engage with the rest of the world: through trade, not domination.

I definitely don't agree with dividing the world into angels and devils. We're all human beings, we all have our interests, and we all try to do what's best for ourselves. But I do believe there's a kind of culture of dominance in the West that we don't find in other civilizations. And I really hope—and actually, in one of the discussions I had in Shanghai, when I was invited to address a meeting of the Shanghai CSO—I said, "Please read \*Animal Farm\*. At the end, when the pigs overthrow the human beings, at one point you can't tell who are the pigs and who are the human beings." And I said, "Please, do not become like those who are dominating the world."

You know, they have a different presence. I don't think they needed my words, but I think it is different. And it's interesting to see how these different countries will now develop their relations with India, with Russia, with China, with Brazil—and, of course, a new kind of relationship with Iran. These countries make it a point. It's not that they want to be against any other country. They would like—I'm sure of what I'm telling you—they would like to have relations with as many different countries as possible, and with as many different powers as possible. It's the United States that imposes on them what to do, who to align with, and who to follow—which is itself.

## **#Pascal**

You know, the biggest threat to these—especially island nations, though we can count the Gulf states as island nations too, because they're basically surrounded either by water or by sand—actually comes from the strongest side in any kind of great power rivalry. Yeah. There's this very, very telling precedent in the Peloponnesian War, actually. You know, the famous dictum: "The strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must." That's from the Melian Dialogue—the story of Melos, that island where the Athenians went and told them, "You either join the war with us against Sparta, or we're going to kill you."

And then they rejected it and said, no, we don't want to. They actually gave a beautiful definition of neutrality: wouldn't it be better if we were friends to you and foes to none? The Athenians rejected that. They said, no—either you're our ally and go to war with us against Sparta, or you die. And then, of course, they came back and killed them. But the Melians said, no, we want to have the right not to be an enemy to anyone. So, do you think there might be a threat to any nation that tries to wiggle free of this alliance obligation—to go to war with or for the United States—that they would come under threat from the United States if they tried to do so?

## **#Evarist Bartolo**

They always try to keep you within their sphere—not just a sphere of influence, but a sphere of control. And it's interesting that even if we look at what happened after the creation of first NATO and then the Warsaw Pact, those alliances, rather than serving against each other or checking each other, were actually serving to control the members of their blocs. That's why, for example, de Gaulle felt he had to tell NATO and the United States to get out of France—because he wanted France to have room to maneuver and to be in charge of its own destiny and decision-making process. Look at Italy.

I'm sure—and I can tell you from personal experience—would you believe that Italy would have been happy to be a neutral country and not part of NATO? But they were locked into the bloc. I'm sure that's one of the reasons why politicians in Italy—left, right, even center-left and center-right—helped Malta to become neutral, because we were a bit like their superego. They loved what we were doing because they wanted to do it themselves: to have a kind of relationship with the Arab world, with the Mediterranean, with Africa, trying to be friends with everyone instead of being locked into one bloc. But the Americans wouldn't allow them to do that, and that's why they meddled a lot—really a lot—in Italian politics.

I would say even to the extent of taking out people like Moro, who wanted Italy to have more of a presence—not the presence of a vassal, not the role of a vassal, but the role of a sovereign country. Again, it wasn't about being against the United States, but about wanting good relations at that time with the Soviet Union, with China, with Africa, with the Arab world. But yes, they didn't like that. Now, if you look at the Soviet Union, the same thing was happening with Hungary, with Prague—you

know, you invade them to make sure you discipline them and keep them in the bloc. So yes, great powers will do all they can to keep you under their control.

## **#Pascal**

Yeah, but the observation you made about the costs of these bases is actually something that might change this calculus. Obviously not in Europe. I mean, I'm pretty sure the U.S. is willing to go a very, very long way, including using violence, against the greatest threat to NATO—which is not Russia. Russia is actually very convenient in the narrative. The greatest threat is neutralism. If somebody suddenly gets the idea, "Hey, how about I just leave the bloc—not join Russia, but just leave the bloc?" that would be devastating for anyone who seriously tried to do that from the side of NATO, of course, just as it was devastating for Imre Nagy when he tried to take Hungary out of the Warsaw Pact.

But in any event, do you think that now, when it comes to the base question, maybe the U.S. itself will rethink how valuable they are? Then again, I mean, they're valuable in terms of being able to drag another nation into a war. For Japan, if the United States seriously wanted to fight a war with China, all they'd need to do is make sure China somehow attacks a U.S. base on Okinawa. And almost naturally, Japan would have to join the war because it's an attack on their territory. So, in terms of power politics, the bases will continue to serve a function, won't they?

## **#Evarist Bartolo**

But I think the biggest problem isn't the people in the military or those who draw up strategies for their countries—whether it's the United States, China, or Russia. In the case of the United States, the biggest problem, I think, is the AI military-industrial complex, because hardwired into its model is the need to sell as many products as possible, even if they don't make sense. I think that's the biggest problem the United States faces. We've seen, even in the case of the Iran war, people in the military actually telling the president and the U.S. security establishment, "This war doesn't make sense." But if the interests of the military-industrial complex prevail...

And I'm sure they'll try to keep as many bases as possible around the world, even if they don't make sense. For example, we've heard discussions about this: does it make sense to have an aircraft carrier today? Does it make sense to have these big naval ships that have become so vulnerable to new drone and missile technology—both marine and airborne drones? So even if military technology should make the establishment in the U.S. rethink the trillions it's spending, whether it's spending them wisely and to what extent it makes sense, we'll still see the same kind of pressure to stick with the existing model for a long time.

Even if it doesn't make sense—even if these bases don't make sense, even militarily—they'll try to keep them. What I think will happen is that they'll also try to change the model of engagement and how to keep control. Because I can tell you, Pascal, at the same time that in Malta we'll be

commemorating the closure of the UK base, there have been a lot of efforts from NATO, and especially from the U.S., to keep Malta under control and to engage our little, our small army and the security apparatus we have—for example, by selling their software or involving us in training programs. That's also a soft way, a soft approach, but it still keeps you under control.

## **#Pascal**

There are different forms of controlling countries. Of course, of course. And it's very—it's actually extremely sophisticated. I mean, the one thing we cannot accuse the United States of is being stupid about the way they approach their global dominance. I mean, even neutral Switzerland—how neutral it still is, even in the political sense, is debatable—but at least on paper we are. They're happy to buy F-35s from the United States, which, as we know, is no secret. It's clearly communicated: if the U.S. disagrees with Switzerland's army using the F-35, they won't be able to fly. We bought a car where the keys to the car are actually in Washington. The keys are not with us.

## **#Evarist Bartolo**

Again, that was it. Again, Pascal, this is why de Gaulle wanted the keys in Paris, you know, and not in Washington. What's important—what I think is important in this area, Pascal—is to discuss the use of economic coercion. Because I know personally how the U.S. uses its heavy hand in countries like Malta, even Switzerland. I was told, regarding the Ukraine war, that the discussions behind the scenes with the Swiss authorities were not about security. They were about: “We will hurt your financial services. We will hurt your banking system if you do not follow our line.” So there again, we need to have changes in the dominance of the dollar, in the dominance of financial institutions. And if a multipolar world also means that there will be different institutions to manage the international financial system, and if the economic coercion of the United States is weakened, then we can see a bit more freedom of maneuver for small and medium countries to manage their own destinies and not be controlled by greater powers.

## **#Pascal**

How did Malta do it? How did Malta wiggle itself out of the tight embrace of the UK and, by extension, the whole NATO sphere? How did that happen—um, how did it succeed?

## **#Evarist Bartolo**

Well, historically, we have to pay tribute to a figure like Dom Mintoff. Dom Mintoff, who was prime minister for many years—he was our Lee Kuan Yew, Pascal. He was a statesman, he loved Malta, and he was, you know, “Malta first, Malta first and foremost.” That was his slogan. He was a very hard bargainer—very, very tough, very difficult to negotiate with—and he always kept the upper hand with the powers he was dealing with. In this case, it was the UK, NATO, and the US. Even if you look at the classified documents, you can see how Nixon and Kissinger were worried that Malta

would fall under the sphere of influence not of the Soviet Union—although that's what was said publicly—but of Libya.

They were very worried that Gaddafi would manage to draw in Malta, and that Malta would become an important outpost for him if he wanted to hurt Europe. That's what they used to say. Mintoff knew they were worried about this, and he used the Gaddafi card, I think, quite deftly. For example, I'll tell you an anecdote that's not widely known. While he was negotiating with the UK—it's interesting, because NATO was in Malta without any formal agreement and without paying to be there—they used to say, "The UK is in NATO, so if Malta is part of the UK, we have every right to be here and we don't need to pay." When Mintoff came to power in '71, he said, "No, this has to change."

You have to pay. Let's have a new defense agreement—it will be for seven years. In fact, it was reached in March '72, so that by March '79 you would leave the country, and we promised that we would not allow anyone to replace you. While he was discussing this in London, he used to send his deputy prime minister to Tripoli in the evening. They would have chats over the phone in Maltese, knowing full well that MI6 would be listening in. From Tripoli, the deputy prime minister would keep telling him, "Don't waste time negotiating with the British on these things—Gaddafi is willing to give you everything."

"Don't waste time." So Mintoff would go back and listen. And when I tell you this, the deputy prime minister hadn't discussed anything with Gaddafi—it was all bluff. In the morning, he'd go there smiling, trying to drive a hard bargain. From the British side, they'd say, "But you have something up your sleeve. Why are you pushing us to the brink? We're sure Gaddafi is ready to give you money." And they would say, "No, no, no, no, no." So he kept them guessing, and because of that, he drove a hard bargain. What was very interesting was that once the negotiation was completed, and he managed to get a much better agreement—one that said they would leave by 1979—he was off to Beijing, at that time Peking.

And that took them completely by surprise, because not even their intelligence people realized that he was making plans to go to China after the agreement was reached. He didn't go to Moscow—obviously, he didn't want Malta to fall under the Soviet sphere of influence. But he went to China, and China was ready to help. He saw that China could help, even though this was in the early '70s, when China was not yet the power it has become today. He knew China would be able to help, and China had no fleet to come to Malta and invade it. So this was his way of bargaining with different powers to get the best for Malta. I think it was a masterly, very strategic approach. Unfortunately, such leaders are in short supply.

## **#Pascal**

Extremely short supply these days. If we could talk about this period—I mean, I would say Finland had a very similar one. Yes. With... what's his name? The Finnish leader. Kekkonen. Urho Kekkonen.

Yes, yes. Urho Kekkonen was doing a very similar thing with the Soviets. He had a lot of fun, you know. He had a lot of fun in Sweden.

## **#Evarist Bartolo**

He had Brandt as well, you know. Yeah. And even in Italy, you had people like Moro, who had a different approach.

## **#Pascal**

The point is that over the last 50 years, I'd say the US has fostered all kinds of think tanks and foreign policy schools and whatnot, and the WEF—they've managed to breed out that kind of, you know, even left-wing sovereignist tendency, that way of thinking about what's good for the nation. So we don't have that anymore. But my question is, wouldn't what's currently happening encourage some of that thinking to come back? Let's take the example of Cyprus.

Cyprus's bigger problem is that it's still a divided island between two NATO allies—basically the Greek side and the Turkish side. And then, just to add more complications, there are UK bases over there, used by NATO and, by extension, by the United States. They're in direct proximity to Israel, Gaza, and therefore the entire Middle East—and they were struck by bombs. Don't you think this will somehow drive home the point to these European outposts that, oh, we might have a bigger problem than we thought?

## **#Evarist Bartolo**

Yes, because when the treaty to give Cyprus independence was negotiated in 1960, the condition for granting independence was that at Akrotiri and Dhekelia they would have sovereign bases—practically the size of Malta, about 99 square miles. That area isn't territory of Cyprus but actually sovereign territory of the UK, not, obviously, of Cyprus. Those bases have been used by the UK and the US, and also for the genocidal war in Gaza. Israel is very influential on the Cypriot side of the republic. The drone attack has reignited discussion in Cyprus about the future of these bases.

I don't know how much it will feature in the coming elections. In a few weeks' time, they'll have elections over there. The Cypriot president, Christodoulides, has said everything is on the table—we will discuss the future of our bases. I don't think he's the type of leader who would want the UK to leave. He's very close to Israel, very close to the EU leadership. So I don't see him as the kind of leader who would want to take Cyprus away from here. Obviously, the situation is complicated by the fact that it's still divided, and you have Turkish bases on one side and UK bases on the other.

But it's so sad because, again, Cyprus is not in a position to have a sovereign political decision-making process, since it's still occupied on both sides by foreign military bases. And, as I said, that has implications for them that go beyond the military sphere. Um, let's see whether there will be

enough momentum to put that discussion on the table. At one point, they were moving in the direction of getting the bases out of there, but then, you know, the coup d'état was not just a Greek matter—Britain also wanted Cyprus to remain subordinate to it.

And they had a leader who was a visionary and, you know, a strategic leader in Makarios—Archbishop Makarios—who actually had to flee for his life. He came to Malta on his way out. And he never gave up, because his dream was to have a neutral Cyprus. But he was in the way. What we've seen, I think, in the last eight years was, yes, a decolonization process, but at the same time a recolonization process in a different form. We've seen thousands of bases closed down with the decline of the European empires, but then new bases coming up with the new empire. So you had these two forces—decolonization and recolonization. So, you know, history is not linear. And we know that change is difficult, but change happens as well.

## **#Pascal**

Yeah, and you know, the more it changes, the more it stays the same, right? And of course, we understand that the United States had a huge interest in closing down the UK bases all around the world, and then coming in to make basing agreements with the states that had just kicked out the UK, right? Or to do cooperation. But it was important to replace that previous, you know... What's amazing, Pascal, is if you look at the...

## **#Evarist Bartolo**

There are about twenty or so countries in the world that have bases in other countries. Obviously, as I said, the U.S. has about 90% of them. The second country, in terms of footprint, that still has a lot of presence is the U.K. And then, only after that, you have China—sorry, not even China, you have Russia. Russia, then France, then Turkey. Even Turkey has quite a strong presence. And then China has practically one base in Djibouti, which is interesting because of what Djibouti has done. Instead of telling everyone to get out, Djibouti has told them, "Come in." So I think there's the U.S., there's France, there's China, there's Italy. That's interesting as well—it's a different model.

## **#Pascal**

That's what happened during the spy war in the Second World War. Neutral Switzerland and Sweden didn't tell everyone, "Get rid of your spies, take them out." They said, "You want to have your spies here at your embassies? Sure, anyone can come. Visas will be granted—just give visas to everybody." And we know they're spying. Obviously they are, which is actually a good thing. That's very important information sharing, actually, on different levels.

## **#Evarist Bartolo**

Jaishankar, the Indian foreign minister, calls that multi-alignment. It's not the non-alignment model, but it's about aligning yourself to have as many different friends and good relations as possible.

## **#Pascal**

But successful multi-alignment also demands that you're able to say not only yes to everybody, but also no to everybody. And it might push you over the brink. I mean, you need to be able to do both. You know, there's just one more thing—I wonder how long it will take until this lesson is learned in a large part of the world, because the greatest crime, I would say, that we've seen in European politics is making Ukrainian neutrality impossible. In 2014, it was not a pro-Russian Ukrainian president who was chased away.

It was a pro-neutralist president. And you made it impossible for Ukraine to actually have functioning neutrality. And so it became the battleground, the battlefield. Now we're seeing the same thing repeating in the Middle East, just with a different configuration. But you see it time and again—how you make it impossible for these smaller, non-vassal states to keep a balance, right? To function as buffers. I wonder how long it will take until this sinks in across a lot of capitals.

## **#Evarist Bartolo**

Unfortunately, Pascal, vision, leadership, and even historical experience are not inherited automatically. Every generation has to learn at its own expense. And unfortunately, I think the new generations—even the ones I see in Europe—have not learned the historical lessons of the past. Also, because I think, sadly, they don't even know their own history. They don't even know their own past. So how can you learn from the past if you don't know your past? And I'm talking even about ministers and prime ministers who are in important positions of power and decision-making, and they don't know the history of their own country. So they haven't learned from it.

## **#Pascal**

Yeah, it's quite a fantastic moment, you know, when a country run by a real estate magnate kills the philosopher-leader of another country. And, you know, the West right now is in such an infantile state that even its leadership is infantile. And still, the system itself manages to be big enough to create all that death and destruction.

## **#Evarist Bartolo**

What I find terrifying, Pascal—and I don't think I'm exaggerating when I say this—is that it's as if we're back in the age of piracy. If you study the 16th and 17th centuries, before the Treaty of Westphalia and the establishment of some kind of international law to regulate relations between countries, when pirates reigned supreme and "might is right" ruled the seas, it's terrifying how many

similarities we have today. You go in, take the leader of another country, take him away. You say, "Oh, Cuba? I'll decide what I'm going to do with Cuba, I'll take it over." There's Nicaragua, there are other countries I'll dispose of as I want to. I mean, this is frightening. It's taking us back.

## **#Pascal**

The mind-boggling thing to me is that it's still possible to present this to the Western public as just part of the so-called rules-based international order.

## **#Evarist Bartolo**

I mean, there are still enough people who believe this.

## **#Pascal**

I think there are fewer of them now, but there are still enough who actually go, "No, overall, we're still the good guys."

## **#Evarist Bartolo**

How long do you still believe that?

## **#Pascal**

Well, my friend, thank you very much, Evrys. That was a very good discussion and very important observations about these states. So, if people want to follow you, they can find you in the Times of Malta, right? That's where you write. Yes, yes. And as I told you last time, I hope that by the time we meet again, I'll have my own Substack as well. Looking forward to that. And we'll certainly make an episode once the first article is out so I can send people over there. Until then, Evrys Partolov, thank you very much. Thank you. All the best.