Fyodor Lukyanov: Russia Navigates Between Two World Orders

Fyodor Lukyanov is Chairman of the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy, a Research Professor at the Higher School of Economics, and Editor in Chief of the Russia in Global Affairs Journal. Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: https://glenndiesen.substack.com/ X/Twitter: https://x.com /Glenn_Diesen Patreon: https://www.patreon.com/glenndiesen Support the research by Prof. Glenn Diesen: PayPal: https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/glenndiesen Buy me a Coffee: buymeacoffee.com /gdieseng Go Fund Me: https://gofund.me/09ea012f Buy merchandise: https://diesen-shop. fourthwall.com/en-nok Books by Prof. Glenn Diesen: https://www.amazon.com/stores/author /B09FPQ4MDL

#Glenn

Welcome back, everyone. We are joined today by Fyodor Lukyanov, the chairman of Russia's Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, and also the editor-in-chief of the journal Russia in Global Affairs. Thank you for coming back on the program. Thank you, Glenn. You have a good finger on the pulse there in Moscow, and I wanted to ask you how you think the Kremlin might view the current state of the conflict, because we appear to be, you know, at a crossroads. That is, I think there is perhaps momentum for diplomacy, as well as a military option. The war is obviously not going well for Ukraine and NATO, which leaves them with the option of either seeking peace while making more concessions or escalating. I was just wondering, how do you think Russia is assessing this situation? I mean, what are the considerations, and what directions might they take?

#Fyodor Lukyanov

You know, first of all, there is, fortunately or unfortunately, no contradiction between a window for diplomacy and continued military activities, or maybe even military escalation. So that was pretty clear, if not from the very beginning, then for quite a long time: Russia sees warfare as part of its diplomatic leverage. At least since June 2024, so for two and a half years now, President Putin has stated what he has repeated many times since: that we have particular conditions for ending military hostilities and beginning the peace process. And those conditions have basically not changed since that time.

I mean the territorial integrity of Donbass, so Ukrainian forces should withdraw from the remaining part of Donbass, and a set of demands concerning Ukraine’s military capacity and its neutral, non-aligned status, security guarantees, and so on. And despite the fact that the situation has changed many times since then, in both directions—there were periods when Russia seemed to be in a slightly worse position, followed by phases when Ukraine was seen as the weaker side—this picture

of what Russia wants to achieve has never changed. And the culmination of this was Anchorage and the meeting with President Trump in August 2025.

It's not a coincidence that Russian diplomats and President Putin, particularly Minister Lavrov, constantly refer to that meeting. The Russian side calls the results agreements; the American side calls them understandings. But anyway, it outlined possible mutual concessions to end the military phase. And that has never been implemented because President Trump failed to achieve progress with the American allies. So, coming back to your question, I'm sorry for that long explanation. Now, basically nothing has changed. I mean, this combination of elements for the beginning of the peace process—not a peace settlement—is exactly the same.

Putin has said many times, I don't know, 10 times or more, that we have this set of ideas. You might accept it or not. If you don't accept it now, then next time the situation will be worse for you. And of course, Russia's hand will be even stronger, and Russia will demand more. So far, that's exactly the case. Each time a round of negotiations or diplomacy is restarted, or somebody tries to restart it, whether it's the American administration or the Russian side, it's always the same: the situation in Ukraine is much worse than it would have been if the Ukrainians had accepted the same package the last time.

And now, yes, of course, politically, we see a lot of changes. And by the way, what happened just now in the United States with the outcome of the midterm election might have a political and diplomatic impact on this. We will see whether President Trump, in this new situation of a significantly weakened presidency, will be able and willing to devote as much time to the Ukrainian issue as before. But despite this change in the political environment, I think Russia's course and its insistence remain the same, which means that Russia is not changing the basic combination of those demands. And that will remain.

#Glenn

But on the topic of the midterms now being over in the United States, obviously Trump, as you said, finds himself in a much weaker position. Do you see a window of opportunity closing in terms of finding some diplomatic path? I'm not saying that Trump has been a great peacemaker in any way, but the Democrats seem to be much more inclined towards devoting more resources to the war against Russia. And they might also have more power to disrupt any diplomatic settlement. So again, they lean more towards the European position. Do you think this is exaggerated?

#Fyodor Lukyanov

It's probably not exaggerated, but everything I hear from my colleagues who are specialists in the U. S. political system suggests that foreign policy is primarily the domain of the presidency. And Trump will be significantly weakened in the whole area of domestic decision-making. Certainly, he will face a storm of accusations and inquiries launched by Democrats to take revenge for the period when

Trump was all-powerful and behaved in a very particular way, including toward Democrats. But in terms of foreign policy, it will actually depend not so much on Democrats, in my understanding, but on Trump himself.

Whether he will be able to stay focused on foreign issues and, in our case, on the Ukrainian issue remains to be seen, because he might become deeply consumed by the domestic struggle. And we know him quite well now. He might enjoy it. He is a very special person. He might feel, paradoxically, pretty comfortable fighting and shouting and all this. And whether he will reserve time and energy for Ukraine remains to be seen. I guess, yes, he will continue. He will keep trying. He will certainly be forcefully pushed to do something with Iran, because Ukraine is an important issue for some Democrats. But Iran and this unfinished business, without any clear prospect of finishing it, is, of course, very important for everyone—both Democrats and Republicans in the U.S. Congress, and the U.S. public.

So, to make a long story short, I would guess that President Trump will continue to try to pay attention. But in general, what is probably important is that he will be perceived, particularly in Europe and in Ukraine, by the way, as very much a lame duck. And a lot of the things he tried to do vis-à-vis Ukraine were based on his very powerful authority, so to speak: "The United States is behind me, and you bastards should do what I say." I exaggerate a little bit, but basically, that's how he tried to behave. Now it will be easier for his opponents in Europe and in Ukraine, who, frankly, were pretty skillful at avoiding and evading what Trump was trying to impose on them even before. But now they will be encouraged, for sure, to keep doing what they want.

#Glenn

I did want to ask, though, how you view the possibility of restoring some diplomacy between Russia and the Europeans. And please correct me if I'm wrong, but I get the impression that Russia would like to restore diplomacy, especially for the purpose of discussing the European security architecture. But there's more reluctance to include the Europeans in talks about ending the Ukraine war because, a bit like Washington, they view the Europeans as spoilers who will not be able to contribute constructively. But then we end up in a weird situation where the Europeans only want to discuss the conflict in terms of Ukraine and Russia, while the Russians only want to discuss, I guess, the underlying issue of the European security architecture, in which Ukraine is more of a symptom than a cause. So do you see any formula here for restoring diplomacy between the Russian Federation and the other Europeans?

#Fyodor Lukyanov

Not so much. Of course, there's the general situation, in particular the severe crisis inside Ukraine. We see that winter is looming, and the domestic situation there is far from great. And Russia keeps going. Russia continues to strike the whole infrastructure very hard. And we hear a different tone even from Zelensky, compared to what we heard from him before. It does not mean much because

Zelensky can say whatever he wants and then back away from that and say exactly the opposite, but still. But in the case of relations between Russia and Europe, it looks pretty hopeless at this point.

We saw the reaction in Europe to a very modest attempt by the Norwegian prime minister and the Finnish president just to talk. You know, that conversation they had with Putin did not bring anything new. Basically, both sides expressed their previous views. The difference was that they did it directly, and they did not shout at each other as we have been doing for quite a long while. And even this attempt was met in Europe with extreme suspicion, to put it mildly, or even something worse. Which means that it doesn't look like Europe is prepared for anything serious. Europe is not ready to change its basic approach, and the basic approach has always been that Russia cannot get anything out of this war. Russia should be punished.

Okay, we don't hear about strategic defeat anymore. But the idea that Russia, as an aggressor, should be the side that cannot get any benefit from this—that's still there. And the second reason, which is maybe connected to the first one, is that, institutionally, Europe is unable to organize anything like a fruitful or even productive discussion. In the case of the United States, we also have some doubts about the model chosen by President Trump, with special envoys whose responsibilities and powers are actually unclear. It's not institutionally endorsed. But still, these are people who enjoy the president's personal trust, and they have demonstrated that at least they can organize this channel and this track. In the case of Europe, we don't see it.

And even if the European institutions would like to engage in talks, I don't think they will be able to produce a consolidated and solid mandate from all countries. In the case of Norway and Finland, it was quite remarkable to us that both leaders emphasized that they called Putin in their national capacities. This is the first time in I don't know how long that anybody from Europe suddenly wanted to underline that it's not a European call, it's a national call. It's something new. Maybe that's a reflection of those two gentlemen's belief that, as representatives of Europe, they will not achieve anything because Europe will immediately rebuff them and, so to say, cancel out any results of this conversation.

#Glenn

Yeah, no, I didn't expect the outreach from the Finns and the Norwegians to achieve much, but nonetheless, I thought it was positive that at least it seemed like one step towards decriminalizing diplomacy. If it becomes possible to talk again, at least that would be something. But as you suggested, I think the reactions were predictable, which is also why they may have emphasized that they only spoke for their own countries. But regarding the poor conditions for diplomacy, it does appear that, you know, the wars with Iran and Russia have exacerbated an economic and political crisis in Europe, but also a geopolitical crisis in the US. I mean, the whole effort of adjusting to a multipolar distribution of power—all of this has, I would argue, fueled a political crisis of legitimacy,

not just in Europe but in the United States as well. I was wondering, how do you see this crisis? Because it can't really be denied anymore. And I'm looking for precedents, but have we seen this before?

#Fyodor Lukyanov

It's a good question whether we've seen it before. Normally, I try to disregard panicked statements about anything that's happening: "Look, it's something unprecedented." If we look back a little, history was less nice than we sometimes imagine today. And now, for example, many people are nostalgic about the Cold War, saying that it was a period of mutual respect and more or less well-structured relationships and diplomacy. I think we overestimate it a little bit. If we study the real Cold War, it wasn't nice at all. But, of course, the level of anarchy in different approaches is probably like that in periods we don't remember ourselves. Because, yes, indeed, all of us—you, me, and most people living on Earth now—have got used to political systems that have been pretty well regulated, not ideally, but well regulated, since the Second World War.

Now it's over. It's totally over. And we need to find new ways, first of all, to increase trust and confidence between actors, which at this point are absolutely absent. And I think the biggest problem between Russia and Europe is that trust is below zero, significantly below zero. And there is absolutely no attempt to understand the logic of the other side. It's not happening on the European side. I must say it's not happening so much on the Russian side either. And that brings us into a spiral of fears, where each move by the other side is perceived not as a reason why we need to engage in talks, but as a reason why we need to be even more prepared for a possible collision.

And, for example, look at what is happening in Poland these days. There is a typical domestic crisis in Poland, which is not new. This is between two major political forces there. We know what both of them stand for, and it's absolutely not surprising. But suddenly, the liberal side, the government, Prime Minister Tusk, starts to emphasize that this is mostly about Russia, which, again, is absurd because we've known about this internal conflict in Poland for years, if not decades. And in such a situation, when each power, each actor, first of all tries to use this fear to address domestic problems, which are numerous everywhere, there is absolutely no way out.

#Glenn

Well, trying to frame domestic issues through the foreign policy lens is nothing new. We saw it in Russiagate. We saw it in the Brexit referendum. In German politics, of course, there have been attempts to criminalize the AfD by referring to them as simply being stooges of the Kremlin. So it's not a new thing. But I was wondering, though, in terms of finding a formula for peace, it doesn't seem like we have to reinvent the wheel. That is, if we go back to the Helsinki Accords and then the Charter of Paris for a New Europe, we had some common principles, but there seemed to be a bit of a contradiction within these agreements.

That is, they had two key principles. One was that of indivisible security: one country should not enhance its security at the expense of another. And then there was also this component that countries should be free to choose their own foreign policy or security arrangements. And it seems that the NATO countries and Russia each focus on a different principle. That is, Russia is focusing on indivisible security: you can't expand NATO. And NATO is arguing, well, look at this component: countries should be free to choose. How do you think this could be resolved?

#Fyodor Lukyanov

I'm afraid those models, both of which basically belong to the Cold War, are not relevant at all anymore. As I mentioned earlier, the Cold War was a very special, in a way unique, period of international relations. It was relatively well-structured and well-organized. There is an interesting debate now among historians and foreign policy specialists in Russia about the Helsinki Accords, because the traditional view in the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and in the Russian Federation after the Cold War, was to praise this agreement as an example of how two fiercely competing blocs could reach a mutually acceptable agreement.

But at the same time, other people argued that the Helsinki Accords were actually the first step taken by the Soviet leadership towards future degradation and collapse. First of all, the Soviet Union started to emphasize the status quo. I mean, it tried to preserve what had been achieved during the Second World War, rather than trying to look creatively at the European situation. That was one thing. And the moment you start to work on preservation, then probably you should expect somebody to come and change it. And secondly, of course—and this is a profound thing for the whole liberal period of the Soviet Union—there was the idea that values should matter: the so-called third basket, that human rights and democracy should be respected by all signatories.

It sounded great, but of course it started a process that then contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union and produced the post-Cold War liberal universalization, liberal globalization based not just on economic but also on political unity. And that was actually the key reason why NATO expansion, which was bad enough from the point of view of geopolitics and the balance of forces, was even worse: NATO enlargement brought with it a certain political and social model that all countries outside NATO had to adopt. And Russia, which never aspired to join NATO, was seen as another post-communist country that, of course, should aspire to adopt this model as well.

And that created the biggest mess. So, coming back to your question, why do I believe that it's impossible? Because now we are in a world that is not just multipolar, but multicultural and based on multiple value systems. And the basic assumption should be that security—divisible or indivisible, we can argue about that—should be taken seriously as a central part of that. And all the rest, including how different countries should be organized, should be put aside, because in the previous model, it was all put together.

#Glenn

Well, I guess that was another contradiction, though. From the Helsinki Accords to the Charter of Paris, we had the concept of sovereign equality. Each state had the same sovereignty. But that can only be sustained if you recognize the Westphalian principle of cultural distinctiveness. Once you begin to embrace the concept of universal values, be they liberal values, as the foundation, you divide the world into civilizational teachers and civilizational students, and you can't have sovereign equality.

But on the topic of becoming multipolar, or already having become multipolar or multicultural, with many different civilizations—as we often hear from Xi Jinping, one civilization shouldn't teach another one or dictate to it how to develop—we're seeing a different formula for globalization. Countries are still very much interconnected and are getting more connected, but their societies seem to be pushing to preserve distinctive identities and very unique political arrangements. How do you see this new formula for globalization? Because that impacts, of course, the question of war and peace.

#Fyodor Lukyanov

I think that we live in a pretty unique international environment because a fragmented world with very different cultural, political, and ideological systems is nothing new. Mankind lived in this situation for most of its history—in the 19th century, in the 17th century, or in the 20th century. Another model is liberal globalization, which we remember very well because it was quite recent. Whether it was good or bad, we can discuss, but it was a more or less centralized system based on the assumption that there were common rules and common principles for everything from the economy to politics.

So we know those two models. But what we have now is a mixture. On the one hand, there's a very fragmented world with sharply increasing competition on different levels. At the same time, everybody is interconnected, as you said, and this connectivity is not just increasing as well; it's a necessity. Without connectivity, without working together, no one can develop. And how to reconcile the two—that's the question no one knows how to answer, because this is a new situation. We've never lived in a system like this: highly conflictual, but inseparably interconnected.

And I think that we will need some time to understand that we cannot, so to say, go back to one of the more traditional systems, be it a conflictual, fragmented world or just a globalized world. We will have both. And I don't know how it should be organized, so I cannot answer how this new model of globalization can work. What I see, and what all of us see, is that despite those conflicts, which are sometimes extremely severe and bloody, like the Ukrainian war or the situation in the Middle East and so on, and despite heavy, massive political interference in the economy, economic interdependence still survives. Market principles are being destroyed on many occasions. But still, we see that the economic world finds ways to survive without falling apart.

You know, the most fantastic example of the absurdity, but also maybe a certain kind of rationality, of the current system was the situation in March this year. If you remember, when the United States launched an aggression against Iran, Trump proclaimed that Iranian civilization had to be destroyed. At the same time, the U.S. Treasury temporarily lifted sanctions on Iranian oil because Iranian oil was needed on the world market, and the Americans wanted to keep prices down. That's something absolutely absurd, but it happened. So I think we will see much more of that in the future. But maybe because I'm old enough to have started my studies in the Soviet Union and studied Marxism, I believe more in economics than in politics here.

#Glenn

Yeah, no, it seems to find a way more easily. What you're saying reminds me of that famous quote by Gramsci. Well, you know, we all know it's paraphrased. He argued in the late 1920s, early 1930s, that the old world was dying, the new one hadn't yet been born, and it's in between these two orders that all this chaos emerges. It appears that's the situation we're in at the moment, where we have to adjust to a new reality. But just as a last question, how do you see things in this new world? Because we're neither here nor there. We're in this middle ground.

If you look at the possibility of the United States and Russia fundamentally changing their relations, I mean, many people were quite optimistic at the beginning of last year, but for good reasons, pessimism has set in. But at the same time, while it might look like that window of opportunity between the U.S. and Russia might be closing, you also see that the U.S. and EU are not just drifting apart, but essentially the old status quo, the old models, are starting to fade away, which means something else has to take their place. So now we hear Xi, Putin, and Trump might have a meeting later this month. Do you see any possibilities for, I guess, rethinking relations between not just the U. S. and Russia, but, you know, at least the three great powers?

#Fyodor Lukyanov

You know, I'm pretty skeptical about the possibility of revolutionary change in the relationship between Russia and the United States. In this particular case, those expectations and hopes that some people here had last year when Trump came were connected to his personality, because we know that Mr. Trump is highly motivated by profit, by the potential, hypothetical economic gains for himself, for the United States, for, I don't know, the American people, whatever. And unfortunately, in the case of Russia and the U.S., there is actually not so much. There are certain areas, first of all energy, where we can cooperate.

But in general, Russia has never been a big trading partner or economic partner for the United States. And the United States, including Trump, did not see many concrete, specific gains that could be drawn from this relationship. From my point of view, what is more encouraging is not the prospect of a new relationship between Russia and the United States. It's the prospect of the transformation of the United States itself, as a country, as a political entity. Now, of course, Trump

will be beaten and criticized very, very cruelly. But if we look at the new people coming up on the Democratic side, this election brought a couple of pretty new, unusual faces to higher positions.

They have diametrically opposed views, but where they are compatible, where they are actually in line with Trump, is that we need to deal with the United States, with the American people's needs, not with anything connected to the outside world. And I think that is more important in the medium and long term than any particular relationship, be it the relationship between the U.S. and Russia, the U.S. and China, the U.S. and the EU, and so on. I mean a re-evaluation of U.S. political identity, which will become much more selfish and much less inclined to preserve alliances that cannot change. Again, whether it's a Republican president after Trump or a Democratic president, it doesn't matter. Trump's transactionalism has been criticized very heavily.

But in fact, we see that this is a global trend. Everybody tries to be transactional because of the need to use every opportunity for development. Whether it's a big country or a small country, it doesn't matter. Again, I don't expect any breakthrough between us and the Americans. But what is important for Russia is to see the U.S. transformed from a highly ideological power into a more or less normal power. Of course, with such a mindset, Americans will continue to try to dictate to everybody. No doubt about that. But when you dictate based on your pragmatic interests, there's at least some ground for negotiations and bargaining, compared to dictating based on ideological mantras.

#Glenn

Sorry, let me just squeeze in one last question. Last, last question. Regarding the war in Ukraine, it's obviously not very stable anymore—not just the front lines, but also the situation in the Ukrainian rear, with the Russian attacks. And again, the diplomatic initiatives, or the revived desire to find a political solution, appear to have some roots in this: things are going very badly very quickly. How do you assess Russia's strategy moving forward? Because we see a heightened focus on not just energy, but logistics more broadly. I was just wondering what your thoughts were on this.

#Fyodor Lukyanov

You know, the general situation is awful, of course. I understand the military logic. There’s no other option in the current situation, since diplomacy has stalled and Ukrainians refuse any diplomatic opportunities and so on. But in general, of course, there’s nothing to be proud of. The war as it is now—and I must underline this, and you know it very well—until last summer, Russia never used this way of warfare because President Putin, from the beginning, was very clear about whom we were fighting: not the Ukrainian people, not the Ukrainian civilian population, not Ukrainian cities, but the military forces.

But since the Ukrainian side started to heavily attack infrastructure in Russia, the war has escalated to a different level. I guess this winter will be decisive, of course. It will be very difficult for Ukraine.

It will be quite difficult for Russia as well, because we see that the Ukrainians are able to deliver pretty damaging strikes. And I don't believe that their ability to do so has been exhausted. It's still there. So, unfortunately, we will need to see more destruction before common sense prevails, particularly on the Ukrainian side. Unfortunately, Zelensky is in a situation where he cannot take any step back.

He understands that his fate is connected to continued war, to eternal war, actually, protracted war. That's a very bad thing. And coming back to the midterm election, the bad element of it is that, most likely, Trump will be much more occupied with domestic issues, as we discussed. And as we saw until recently, the only way to at least try to push Zelensky towards more reasonable behavior was personal pressure from the United States, from Trump and his close circle. Maybe they will do something else, which means that, unfortunately, this stage of the war will be protracted.