Iran & Ukraine Showdown Coming | Alastair Crooke

Former British diplomat Alastair Crooke joins Pascal to examine negotiations over Ukraine and the emerging debate about Eurasian security. Crooke argues that Europe misunderstands Russia's red lines and risks dangerous escalation. They discuss Iran, Israeli domestic politics, American power structures, and China's response to technological containment. The conversation connects regional conflicts with competition over the international order, while exploring economic fragility and the limits of prediction. Crooke also explains where viewers can find his analysis through Conflicts Forum' s Substack. Alastair's Links: Conflicts Forum Substack: https://conflictsforum.substack.com/ Neutrality Studies Links: Neutrality Studies Substack: https://pascallottaz.substack.com Support Neutrality Studies: https://neutralitystudies.com/donate Neutrality Studies shop: https://neutralitystudies.com/shop Time Stamps 00:00 Alastair Crooke: Ukraine talks and Russia's red lines 11:13 From Ukraine to Eurasian security 20:53 Europe's strategic gamble and escalation risks 26:47 Why European diplomacy struggles 30:12 Israel's political crisis and the risk of war with Iran 42:29 Power structures behind American foreign policy 47:31 Russia, China and the contest over the international order 57:55 The economic risks and an uncertain outlook

#Pascal

Welcome back, everybody, to Neutrality Studies. Joining us today for the very first time is the wonderful former British diplomat and now great geopolitical analyst, Alastair Crooke. Alastair, welcome.

#Alastair Crooke

Thank you very much. It's a pleasure to join you.

#Pascal

It's great being in touch with you for the very first time. I've been watching a lot of your interviews and analysis on various channels, so it's a great privilege to actually ask you my questions myself for the first time. The first question I would like to start with, because it just happened, is about the negotiations on the Ukraine war, which took place, of all places, in Abu Dhabi. We had two days of negotiations between Russia, Ukraine, and the United States. The Europeans were in the hotel, but they were not allowed to get into the room. Can I get your reading on what that was about and how it actually went? Yes.

#Alastair Crooke

Well, first of all, I would say that this constituted a huge shift, although the roots of what happened in Abu Dhabi go back to 2008, when Putin first raised it, and then it was put in writing in 2021. But what has happened has clearly had the support of the whole national security apparatus, because they had the negotiators at the meeting, and everyone was allowed to make their point about where things stood. And so, what Putin has tried to do—and when I say Putin, I just want to make it clear that this is not just his perspective, but one that was fully endorsed by the collective security establishment in Moscow.

And what came out of this was, you know, the drawing of a very bright red line right across the issue. And he said clearly that the main issue was to be the security architecture. Originally, we talked about the security architecture of Europe. But actually, they didn't say that. And Lavrov emphasized that it was no longer the security architecture of Europe, but of Eurasia. So, extending it in one direction towards Iran, where Putin had just had a long discussion with Mohsen Rezaei a few days ago, and then also to China and to, if you like, that part of Asia that we generally seem to pay little attention to. And there is a security apparatus already there, although people forget that quite often.

The Russians do have a security apparatus. But he said, "I want to get back to the root causes of this disagreement." And the root causes of this disagreement really lie with the reunification of Germany, the reuniting of the two parts of Germany. That was really the root of it. Because at the end of that war, Russia was given assurances that NATO would not just go on expanding beyond the borders of a united Germany. And they were given those assurances, but, as is sadly so common today, they were verbal assurances and have therefore been completely forgotten, erased, and denied. So he's now going back to that.

But he's saying very clearly that the root of this problem is that NATO has just gone on and on and on, closer and closer to our borders, and not only by being physically there, but by putting missiles in Poland and Romania. And if you recall, in the talks with Biden in Geneva some two years ago, he asked, "Are you going to put missiles into Ukraine?" And of course, Biden said, "No, that's not my intention." And then, a day later, Blinken told Lavrov very clearly, "You've been misled. That is precisely our intention: to put missiles in Ukraine. Now, we won't negotiate the principle, but we will talk to you only about the number of missiles." That's what he said. But those missiles, what is their flight time from Ukraine to Moscow?

Three to four minutes? Yes. I mean, it's impossible, you know. How, in three to four minutes, is Russia supposed to determine whether a Tomahawk missile is carrying a nuclear warhead or not? I mean, it's ridiculous. They have to assume that it's nuclear, and they therefore have to trigger their strategic response, which we know about and which is set out very clearly: to go to full nuclear war if they believe that a missile is being fired deep into the homeland in that way. So, in the talks this time, it was agreed—and Lavrov said this very clearly—you know, unless we talk and have an agreement in writing on the security architecture of Europe, well, then there's nothing to discuss.

You know, territory, all of this, we're not going to discuss it. So this is what they have said. Now, I think this has come as a shock both to the Americans and particularly to the Europeans, who still believe that if only more pressure is applied, Putin is about to agree to a ceasefire. Well, it was explicit. Lavrov said this explicitly. He wasn't at the talks, but he gave a separate press conference. And he was very explicit. He said that we're not going to talk about a ceasefire at all, or any form of ceasefire, until you accept that the only item to discuss is the architecture of Eurasia. And, of course, I just think that Kushner and Witkoff probably didn't do enough of their homework on this.

They're still, you know, clutching at General Kellogg's idea that, you know, all we have to do is agree to a ceasefire along the contact line, just as we did in Korea, and that would be fine. Of course, you know, all those years later, nothing has been resolved and nothing has changed in Korea. The contact line is still the contact line. So Russia is not prepared to do that. So that's what it said. And I think then it was announced that Witkoff and Kushner were going to fly straight back to Moscow. I think there was a sort of shrug from the Russians, and they said, "Oh, God, back we go again." They're off to talk to Mr. Putin. I don't know what they're going to ask exactly, but I suspect what they're going to ask is that the Europeans be allowed to join in the next round of discussions.

I'm sure the Europeans have been sitting on the outside of these talks, and the Russians have said, "This is a trilateral talk. I mean, why should we invite them into these talks?" You know, the Europeans have not issued a single proposal. There is no substantive proposal from the Europeans. Their only proposal is a ceasefire on the lines of contact and then a force, a European NATO force, that will go in. And indeed, they provocatively even announced that that was going to happen in the middle of the talks. They said that this European support force is now going to be based inside Ukraine, doing training and support with the Ukrainian military, training them and assisting them with the conflict with Russia.

And they announced that in the middle of the talks. The negotiators didn't announce it. I mean the people on the outside, the Europeans. It was announced by the Commission, and they said specifically that this was the case. So, is there anything good that has come out of this? Yes, I think so. I mean, for the first time, it seems that this basic impasse that has been running for some years, since 2022, is on the table. And it has been said to the Americans, "This is it. This is the red line." By the way, it's the same red line as the Iranians have, in effect. This is the red line. Unless you're willing to discuss this, there's nothing to talk about.

#Pascal

Hey guys, autumn spirit is here, and we've launched our new merch. For instance, the monster from our Kill Symposium has arrived on T-shirts, tumblers, and magnets. The little fella is really cute. Check it out. Any purchase directly helps us keep the lights on. So thanks a lot, and see you soon. And we should discuss exactly that, because the fascinating thing is that the red line is still the same as it was in December 2021, when Russia sent over these two draft treaties to Brussels and to Washington. It's the same one as it was in April 2022. I mean, the big red line, the bright red line, is

that whatever is left of Ukraine must be neutral. Vladimir Putin said again on October 1st this year that this is still one of the Russians' goals and that, you know, the proxy war has failed.

I think that, to me, the Russians are somehow trying to get to the point where the Americans understand that it has failed. And the Iranians, in a sense, are trying to do the same thing. There, it's not a proxy war. It's a direct war. It's like, guys, you've run into a wall that you can't overcome, and now we need to find a way to deal with it. And the Russians are talking about, as you point out, a Eurasian security architecture. And this is where I would like to know from you: how do you think the Russians are now trying to link all of that? What does it have to do with Iran and Israel? And, you know, what's the development there? Is this like the linking, the joining of these theaters, not in order to expand the war, but in order to create a structure that would actually rescue everybody on the continent?

#Alastair Crooke

Precisely. I mean, I think it's quite an ambitious idea, and it hasn't been elaborated fully, or at least we're not in the picture on how it's been elaborated. But undoubtedly, that was a discussion that took place between Rezaei and Putin. It was a three-hour discussion, preceded by a long telephone call, and Putin sent a plane to bring him. And I think that it is another shift in another important way. The idea that the Americans and the Europeans have had is that the process of negotiating with countries such as Russia and Iran is simply about pressure. And if those countries say they'll negotiate, that means they're ready to make concessions. So then the Americans and the Europeans redouble the pressure, asking for more concessions.

And they've just said, "No, no, no, we're not." And Iran says much the same thing: "No, we will not move unless you agree to accept and implement the seven preconditions in advance." So there is, if you like, an expansion—an expansion, of course, which would include what's happening with the Houthis in Yemen, and it would include Iraq. I mean, the security structure is unstable in Iraq. It's been unstable since the war. You have the strange anomaly that, you know, all the money is completely controlled by the Americans. All their revenues, everything, goes into the Federal Reserve. And yet it is a majority-Shia country. And so, you know, as part of the American security apparatus, they say all the borders have to be shut.

#Alastair Crooke

Oh, maybe one or two will be allowed to stay open.

#Alastair Crooke

But we're going to shut all of the borders. I mean, these are families, you know; they're all interconnected. And recall that when the supreme leader of Iran was assassinated and his funeral was held, I mean, when the procession went to Iraq, millions turned out. Karbala and Najaf—I

mean, huge support. So to think that just because you've installed a sort of puppet government in Iraq, this solves the matter—it doesn't, because they are completely beholden to the United States. They cannot spend any money without the approval of the United States.

So, you know, the architecture extends into Azerbaijan and the corridor the Americans are trying to open through the Caucasus, through American involvement in Turkmenistan and other places. So, I mean, it's a real issue. And I remember listening to Putin at some length talking about, you know, the treaty on missiles. That treaty on missiles, you know, has expired. It's a very dangerous element: there is no clear understanding on medium-range, intermediate-range, or intercontinental missiles. And so this is what's being said to the Europeans and the Americans. And, of course, the Europeans are in complete confusion. I mean, it's really extraordinary to see.

I mean, quite apart from the fact that, you know, someone was joking—I think it was Medinsky—saying, well, it would help a little bit if they actually chose someone to represent Europe with a single mandate. And that's a long way off, as far as one can see at the moment. But apart from that, I mean, they have had no proposition on the table. Their ambition is simply to leave things as they are. And as Putin and the Russians have said very clearly, that architecture is a failed architecture: the security architecture that Europe has envisaged, which is NATO, NATO, NATO everywhere, and no say for Russia over it. "You have absolutely no say in where we put NATO and what NATO does. We can do what we like." And now they've started, if you like, on an assistance program of putting troops into Russia.

But the great danger is that the Europeans, obsessed as they are with the idea that they have to force Putin into a ceasefire, will overreach with their missile program into Russia. Missiles that are constructed and paid for in Britain, France, and Germany are being sent to the Ukrainians in knockdown kits, and they just have to screw them together, basically, and fire them into Russia, which is what they've been doing, attacking the oil refineries—but more than the oil refineries. At times over the summer, as you recall, they were attacking holiday resorts and the beaches on the Black Sea and in Sochi. So, I mean, Russia is not going to continue to allow that to happen. And the Europeans don't seem to understand that. Or if they do, they ignore it.

#Pascal

Yeah, but the insane part of all of this is that the Europeans take the fact that the Russians haven't struck back at them as proof that Russia is a paper tiger, or whatever you want to call it. They've been salami-slicing their way into firing into Russia. And Vladimir Putin is not willing to actually escalate and give the Europeans what they want, which is a Russian first strike against them. That would give the Europeans exactly the kind of justification they need to tell their populations, "Well, now we're in an all-out war against Russia." The Russians, at this point, even in 2026, still want to avoid an all-out war with NATO, with Europe.

And the fact that they do not agree to a ceasefire is actually a way for the Russians to save the lives of the 2,000 or so NATO troops, because if they moved in, well, the Russians have said, "We would have to strike at them," right? So it's a really bizarre kind of deadlock that the Europeans keep adding to. But what is your assessment of the Americans? How long will they go along with that? Because, yes, on the one hand, it is a U.S. proxy war. And it was definitely all the Nulands and so on who fired this up. But on the other hand, my assessment now is that after four and a half, almost five years, the Americans are pretty annoyed, not just with the Russians winning, but with the Europeans being basically useless at this point and actually a dead weight on them. Or how do you see that?

#Alastair Crooke

I think Europe has greatly miscalculated, first of all, when it comes to both the Russians and the United States. I think you hinted at it. But the key thing is that the United States has really handed Ukraine over to Europe, and Europe has become a proxy for the American war in Ukraine. They are just proxies. They're expendable proxies, like all American proxies are expendable. I sincerely doubt that if there were an incident—let's leave the nuclear ones aside for the moment—but if there were something like a Russian attack on a NATO country, I don't think the Americans would see this as an Article 5 situation. They would have consultations, which are required under Article 5, but nothing more than that. But I don't think that, you know, the Europeans think that this would be nirvana.

And then suddenly the Americans would come in, and it would be all-out war, and Russia would be crushed. And I think that is a basic strategic calculation. They don't understand that there's been a shift, that America has understood that it cannot and does not have the ability to wage a war with the big strategic powers, i.e., China or Russia, possibly even Iran. But, I mean, they do not want to be in a sort of vertical escalation structure. So they will have passed this over to the Europeans. And in a sense, they're really implying, "Look, Europeans, if you really want to get involved in a tactical nuclear weapons exchange with Russia, that's fine, but we're not going to put an American city on the table for this."

You can suffer your own damage. Now, I think this is understood in Russia quite well. I was there quite recently, and I think they understand that that is the case. So the other argument going on in Russia is really about how to restore a certain degree of fear in the Europeans, because they've become blasé about it. You know, "Oh, Putin is just not serious. He'll never use a nuclear weapon." Well, Putin is a cautious person. But others, as you know, have been arguing strongly for learning the lessons from Iran and striking at vulnerable Western targets, near or further away. And the history is that the West backs off when it's attacked at those vulnerable targets.

So, I mean, you know, if it continues, I don't think we should rule out the possibility that Russia might use an Oreshnik or another conventional missile against some target or other. It may not actually be geographically in Europe, but it could be, if you like, a European asset elsewhere in the

area, as a warning shot. But if not, I mean, the Europeans are inviting mayhem because they could easily get this escalated. I mean, particularly with Kaliningrad, where the Europeans keep trying to put pressure on Russia, threatening a blockade of Kaliningrad and running exercises that are explicitly said to be rehearsing a NATO takeover of the Kaliningrad Peninsula.

That's that small element to the side. And the Russians have said, and Putin has said explicitly, "We will defend Kaliningrad, even to the point of using a nuclear weapon if that is required, because Kaliningrad is Russia. It is part of Russia, and that is our protocol. If you attack Kaliningrad, I do not say that that will be the first choice, but I tell you we will use everything at our disposal, up to and including nuclear weapons." The Europeans don't seem to hear. I don't know what's happened. They've got their hearing aids switched off or something, but they don't seem to hear these comments.

#Pascal

It's lunacy, in my view, because it's so utterly reckless and dangerous. But that's where the Europeans currently are because of this mass psychosis or mass formation event that they're going through. They're willing to take these risks because they don't believe it. I don't think they have the mental capacity or the institutional capacity to actually make a proper assessment of what the Russians are about and what they're doing, because they've spent so long talking themselves into a completely wrong picture of the Russians.

#Alastair Crooke

Well, let me ask you the question then, because I spent some years in the European Union working for the High Representative at that time, and there were 12 member states. And, you know, I was lent to the EU by the government to try and see if it was possible to have a European foreign policy. And Solana was very expert at sort of making bricks out of straw. He had hardly anything in terms of a mandate. And then, of course, there was the Iraq War, and then there was the expansion of Europe to the east, pushed first of all through NATO and then, after NATO, into Europe.

And I remember him saying to me at that point that he thought, you know, Europe was unworkable. How many people are coming to this summit that is being planned? How many delegations are coming to Dublin in the coming days? Fifty national delegations. Do you think anything can get done with 50 delegations meeting together? And probably next week there will be another meeting of 50 delegations discussing something else. And a few days after that, another one. The meetings just go on.

So I think the Russians see this, and I think the Americans are in despair about that too because, for different reasons, they would like to see at least some sort of agreement with Russia emerge because of the midterm elections. And, you know, Trump wants some sort of win to set against the debacle of the midterms. So he would like something. But on the other hand, of course, the

strongest, if you like, anti-Russian sentiment is not so much within the Republican Party, but has always historically been within the Democratic Party. So he hasn't got long. On the third of June, the new Congress assembles. So then he's only got Iran to look to, and that is not promising either.

#Pascal

No, and I think the closest thing I can think of is just a deadlock. It's getting closer and closer to a deadlock where these different actors cannot move. And I know there's this prevalent propensity to think of these wars as U.S.-instigated—and they are U.S.-instigated. I mean, the U.S. is pivotal in this. But look at the way things are developing and the way U.S. hegemonic power is now ramming into all of these walls, including, actually, a European wall. You know, yes, the Europeans are proxies. However, they're also able to really spoil peace processes, which they're doing—even the ones that the White House is actually interested in having, right? It's really great. They're determined.

#Alastair Crooke

The only thing they do is act as spoilers. But let me put a question to you in response to your saying it's all deadlocked. No, it's not deadlocked, actually, because we follow this regularly. You can see it if you follow our Substack, the Conflicts Forum Substack. Every few days, we do a survey of the Hebrew press on what's going on in Israel. And what is clear at the moment is that Netanyahu is a caretaker prime minister because the president has given Eisenkot the task of trying to form a government. And he has until the 20th of December, at the latest, to see if he can do it.

But if you look at the situation, there are profound differences between the parties that he is trying to put together. At the same time, every day Netanyahu is calling up people around Trump, saying, "You must come back and finish the job in Iran. You've got to come back," because Netanyahu is desperate at the moment, and he knows the only way he can be assured of a unity government is if the war resumes in Iran. Then he can get a unity government, and he won't be dismissed as prime minister or have to go to jail. As one commentator said, "You cannot imagine how Netanyahu's life will change if he is not prime minister."

And, you know, in a psychological way as well as a physical way. So there are deep divisions. I mean, there are the Orthodox, and then there is also the Shas group, who always sort of hover between these groups. And so far, Eisenkot has this large number of 19 Arab votes. That was the only surprise in the election. Some of the Arab parties are willing to do a little bit of business with Eisenkot, but if he does business with them, then the Orthodox say, "Well, we won't have anything to do with that." And Lieberman says very clearly, "I won't join any government which has got these Islamist terrorists in it."

So what I'm saying, just to be very clear, is that there is a real prospect—I'm not saying it's definite—that Netanyahu will succeed in sabotaging Eisenkot's attempt to form a government. And so he will

be prime minister. And what will he do? He will again try—and he's very good at these things—to find a pretext for pulling Trump into a war on Iran. And despite the fact that Trump keeps saying now, "No, there's no need. I've done it all," we all know that, you know, he really doesn't believe that. He's always been anti-Iran.

I mean, I remember him writing 20 years ago, saying, "Why don't we just take Kharg Island? That would fix the Iranians." So that was even before he was a presidential candidate. He's had this obsession. But what is changing now is that I think he's getting a very clear message from, if you like, the deep power structures—the pro-Israeli big donors and those who are mostly much more pro-Netanyahu than they are pro-Eisenkot, incidentally. These donors and that deep power structure are not changing their position. The White House is telling Eisenkot, "Get on, get a government as quickly as you can. It's important." But above him—and I think the litmus test is to look at what Marco Rubio is saying.

I mean, you know, this is a good litmus test of the maneuvering behind the scenes, because he says, "Look, there's no diplomatic initiative by Iran. It's all nonsense. These things don't make sense, and they're not convincing, and some of them are really quite bizarre," or whatever he calls it. But he used that sort of language, you know, dismissing it out of hand. I think one has to listen to these sorts of points. They're quite important. And then you see, at the same time, two things that are changing. This is where I'm talking about the changes taking place: things are moving, and we have to put them all together. You see two things moving. One is what we saw with the CIA and with Trump, when Trump said, you know, "Stop attacking Russian troops," and the CIA goes on.

They're still doing it today. It's called CONOP, you know, where you use existing authorities to maneuver your way around an executive decision and continue the war, saying, "Well, it was all self-defense." And of course, what do we see in Hormuz every day? CENTCOM, which fancies itself as a sort of military CIA in waiting—particularly Brad Cooper—is sitting there attacking Iranian ships in Hormuz. And so far, the Iranians have been really quite restrained about this. CENTCOM has been attacking some of their missile sites along Hormuz and on Qeshm Island. Not so much Kharg, but mostly Qeshm and even up to Hormuz. And they're doing that also because this is another CONOP operation. They're maneuvering toward the incident that will pull Trump into the war, because that's what Netanyahu wants.

#Pascal

This is maybe a question of intentionality, though I'm not sure if it really matters or not. Because Larry Johnson told me that, look, if the United States president wants to seriously direct the CIA to do something or not to do something, he has to issue a presidential finding. That's the main guideline for what the CIA has to do. The CIA can still get around it, especially when it comes to spying and stuff, by working through MI6 and whatnot to circumvent it. But the fact that this presidential finding hasn't been issued should tell us that either Trump doesn't know, nobody tells him, or, you know, it's political theater, right?

#Alastair Crooke

You know, that's what I wrote about. Larry was taking up the point that I was making: if he really wanted to do so, he could issue a new presidential finding. It would be complicated because there are lots of presidential findings going back a long way that authorize activities against Russia, Russian institutions or people, or Russia in Syria, or wherever it is. And the CIA knows how to sort of, you know, maneuver within these things to pursue its policy. And the answer to your question was that he hasn't done it. And the attacks go on. So who's in charge? I mean, you know, is it CENTCOM? Is it the CIA? Or some power structure that is keeping these two together?

And therefore, when you see Marco Rubio suddenly saying, "Oh, Iran, you know, it's got no case at all. Its diplomatic proposals are nonsense. They are really, you know, unimaginable," you can start to see some of the people moving towards a different power structure than the president, because the president is losing control. I mean, he's lost his power in Congress, but even his own party is starting to move against him on Russia and things like that. So you have this, and you have other little incidents taking place. You know, everyone's making a big fuss about what's happened to NVIDIA's CEO and, you know, the spy allegations, which are nonsense, really.

I mean, you know, that China was getting NVIDIA chips. Don't they know China has actually blocked people from buying NVIDIA chips? I mean, it did that some two years ago. So it's obviously not about that. What's important about it is that Huang is a favorite of Trump. He's at odds with the main AI firms because they favor a sort of closed, monopolistic AI. He's at odds with the security institutions—again, a powerful element of that superstructure of power—which would really like to make the whole of AI a security item. You know, something legally protected and secured so that you cannot give chips or compute to China—really, to sort of put a fence around it.

And, of course, Huang has Trump's support, and Trump agrees with the policy. Trump has said, you know, "I think this is a good idea. I'm with him. I'm with Jensen Huang." And what happens? Come on. Do you imagine that intelligence about a spy operation against NVIDIA just appears across the mainstream media, not on some obscure little site on the Internet? When it goes, wow, right across the board, you know who's behind it. I mean, they have tools to go against the president if they want. And they have—you know, what was it some congressman once said? There are six ways from Sunday for them to go against a presidential instruction. It's pretty clear that this was a little warning to Trump because Huang was Trump's man.

#Pascal

You know, we have tools. But where this leaves us is actually to say, look, the United States is not the only great power, but it is probably the one with still the largest force. Who's the captain of the ship? The answer is, there ain't no captain, right? There are a lot of interest groups. And this leads the Russians to conclude publicly that the United States is incapable of making agreements.

#Alastair Crooke

However, no, no, no, no. There is. I mean, this is something that has been a source of great discussion in the United States. And Tucker Carlson and others have always said, you know—and it goes back a long way—it was Benjamin Disraeli in the 1850s who said—he was prime minister of Britain at the time—"Anyone who thinks that, you know, the government is in charge here, I have to tell you that behind the scenes, it's a quite different structure that is actually making the decisions." I mean, he said that, and he said it several times in Parliament, and he outlined what he was talking about.

And he talked about, you know, the structures. And then it turned into, of course, the Round Table organization, which organized and financed the war in South Africa and then financed various other wars, including the war against Russia by Japan. That was financed by the wealthy banking class in London. And there was even the founding of Israel, the Balfour Declaration. Balfour didn't write it. It was written by the Round Table, by Lord Milner and the groups around him. Come on, you know. This is well known, and that's what Tucker is referring to.

That's what the other people are referring to. They know that there is a powerful structure, and some of them are the donors, the big donors who have financed Trump to come into this position because they thought he would be good for Israel and that he would attack and destroy Iran. Because they want Iran destroyed, not a deal, a nuclear deal. They want it destroyed. And they've said this very clearly. And what is seemingly happening at the moment is that this structure, this overarching structure, is turning against Trump. I think the signs are pretty evident that it's beginning to turn against Trump.

#Pascal

Now, will he be able to resist it?

#Alastair Crooke

Well, so far, he hasn't done much to resist it. Whenever it's gone on, he's gone back. Will he go back and get into another conflict with Iran? Well, let's see what happens in Israel. Let's see if Eisenhower fails to form a government and Netanyahu announces he's going to form a unity government with all the parties, which has happened before. It happened during COVID. It happened after the 7th of October. If he tries to do that, then he will trap Trump by launching an Israeli attack on Iran designed to produce a disproportionate Iranian response and pull the U.S. into a war with Iran. And I'm sure this is why Rezaei spent a long time with Putin and the military. And who was in the talks besides Ushakov, who's in all of these? It was the head of military intelligence.

And, you know, they are looking at how this war is going to expand. And I should add, because I've had a long association with Iran, my feeling is that Iran actually believes a war is pretty much

inevitable. And, in a sense, it has to happen because of the nature of the war that has existed for 70 years or so. Simply going back to ceasefire, sanctions, ceasefire, sanctions, another little war here, is no longer acceptable. They want to resolve this. And that means resolving it probably in a kinetic way that produces a clear outcome, one way or the other, you know? And there is quite a strong view within Iran that there needs to be another round. They keep calling it, "We need Iran War 3.0," so a showdown war. And where do you think the Russians and the Chinese are on that one? Because, on the one hand…

#Pascal

Well, I mean, breaking the U.S. stranglehold on all of these conflict theaters is something in their favor. But especially among the Chinese, there's a large faction, the trading faction, the ones who actually know and have a good relationship with the Gulf states as well—with Iran too, but with the Gulf states and with Saudi Arabia and so on—that would not be at all in favor of that. Where is that dynamic going?

#Alastair Crooke

I don't know. I don't know that that's necessarily correct. I mean, it's partly correct. I agree. But first of all, I think, you know, you only have to listen to what Putin said after the meeting—or before the meeting—with Rezaei. And he promised—I mean, it was not assistance. This is the importance of that meeting: he made Iran a full partner in the project of establishing a Eurasian security architecture. Iran, a full partner.

I don't mean there's a full defense agreement, but there's everything short of it. And they are helping Iran, and they are intent on helping Iran in this conflict. Yes, Russia makes gestures about saying, "We'd help dilute the uranium," but I don't think Russia expects it. I think their advice, from what I hear from inside Iran, really is, you know, with Trump now in his frame of mind, he's angry and he's unpredictable, and, you know, deterrence is unlikely to work with Trump. He'll either do it or he won't.

#Pascal

It'll probably depend on how he feels one morning. He'll wake up and say, "Yeah, I'm going to do it."

#Alastair Crooke

"And I'll drop a nuclear weapon on Pickaxe Mountain. And then it's all over, and I can declare a victory," or something like this. So the nuclear issues and things were discussed, I believe, in Russia. With China, I mean, okay, let me go back to what I said to you: reading the signs, reading the signs of what happened with NVIDIA and Huang, okay? So the Chinese know that the mainstream AI industry wants to create a monopoly for America and to disrupt Chinese AI, if you like, or to set it

back to make sure they don't overtake the Americans in this field. So suddenly the spy story comes out, and NVIDIA is at the center of it. It's aimed at those who believe in open AI, which is the Chinese model, in favor of the closed AI attempt to create a monopoly on computing power within the United States. So what are the Chinese reading? How do they read it?

Just as a misguided spy story? Or do they say, "This sounds like there are forces within Washington that are moving back towards a trade war—or a tech war, if you prefer—against China, restricting certain things to China, putting illegal constraints on what can be done with China in the technical sphere"? So are we going back to a tech war? I don't think they have an answer. I don't have an answer. But they will be looking at this quite carefully. So, you know, I don't think they're in the sort of phase of wanting to help Trump out with Iran. I mean, at all. And Russia certainly isn't. It has a big project, and it has bright red lines under that project. Now, that's: "We are going to change the geopolitical architecture of Russia." And Iran is going to change the geopolitical architecture of the Gulf region.

#Pascal

What other element is there to this? Because before we started, you said there are things moving on the Arabian Peninsula as well, and we haven't even touched on Ansar Allah yet. What other moving parts are there that you keep your eye on in order to understand this new strategy? And I agree, it's not just the European security structure they're aiming for. It's Eurasian. And I would interpret "security structure" or "security architecture" as their way of saying "the new order," actually.

#Alastair Crooke

The new order, because they are civilizational states, would be against cultural domination. It's not just about military bases. It's about, if you like, cultural domination as manifested in certain Gulf states that are oriented towards AI and data centers and security structures. So it's bigger than that. I'm not saying that it's anti-Western, but it is saying, "No, we reject the idea, as set out by Rubio again, that the West must lead the world, that the West is going to be the leader, and that its civilization is the most powerful and was the most powerful, and therefore has a right to dominate." And that is rejected utterly by most of the world. Now, if you move out of the European sphere, they won't have it.

So they will push it. They will push against us quite strongly. You know, China and Russia understand this is the big war. This is the big war of the civilizational states against the attempt by the West to establish its sovereignty—a sovereigntist approach, a dominating approach. The Chinese understand all of these things that are going on, you know, what's happening apart from the chips. I mean, the attempt by the United States to control all the choke points of the world, the seaways, and the means to squeeze China's energy supply. And by squeezing its energy supply, if you like, to contain China's growth, because they want to have leverage to tell the Chinese, "You're not allowed to export so much."

“You've got to increase your domestic market and focus on that to leave space for the United States to come into the export markets. But at the moment, we can't get into them because you're too competitive, and you've got to be less competitive.” I think you work mostly in Japan. That, after all, is what the CIA told the Japanese at one stage. You know, “Stop being so competitive. You know, we don't like it. We want you to have free markets, and free markets open to American economic interests.” So, you know, I think China and Russia are at one. China is different from Russia, of course.

And trade and business play a very important role in China, more so than in Russia now. But they understand that the aim of this power structure is to destroy Russia and take its resources. They understand that this means they're ultimately next in line, and they can't simply assume there's a basis for coming to some sort of modus vivendi with the United States. I mean, I think they thought there was, you know, after the trade war that started with—what was it?—Liberation Day, and the tariffs and things that Trump was imposing.

Now, of course, I mean, the China hawks—you know, again, go back to NVIDIA—would like all the restrictions put in place. As I say, they would like AI to become a security structure, a security monopoly of the United States. And where do they reside? They reside in the democratic elements of Congress, in both parties. They're very strong. Marco Rubio is a China hawk as well. So, I mean, you know, they haven't gone away with this election. It's just that the face it's presenting to the world is changing. Trump's face is no longer predominant, and there are other faces that are being presented to the world. But you just have to read the underlying messages that are coming through.

#Pascal

So, just in conclusion, is your takeaway from all of these developments that we are headed toward a showdown, or that everybody now accepts there will be a showdown in one way or another?

#Alastair Crooke

What it suggests is that I don't think there will be a deal with Russia. I've explained why, for those reasons. There will not be a deal with Russia, and there will not be a deal with Iran. What is that going to mean? I think it will mean that the Europeans, with their allies in the Democratic Party who are, you know, Russophobes and have been for decades, and were involved in the Maidan and all of these things, will continue to say, “The only answer is to put pressure on Russia.” And I think the China hawks will argue for pressure on China, on technology, to keep American leadership going.

And that brings me, just very quickly, to my fourth moving part in all of this structure: the economy. I mean, it is very, very fragile. I'm not sure if, you know, whoever was behind the spy story imagined or thought it might bring down the equity market in America—the tech equity market, at

least, maybe more. Well, maybe they thought, you know, maybe it's no bad thing if Trump owns it. Then, you know, it won't be blamed on us. I don't know. That's just my fourth element, because the economy is becoming quite critical and will certainly have huge geopolitical consequences.

It's not even worth discussing what it means for Europe. They're so bad. But, I mean, generally, it's a really important moving part in all of this. And, you know, what are we going to see? Interest rates going up? Inflation is certainly going to go up. Are we going to see a meltdown in a highly leveraged equity market? What will that mean, and how will that affect your politics? Well, I don't know. These are all moving parts, and as I said to you at the beginning, it's quite hard to draw out of that a very clear picture of the direction we're all going in, because we just don't know.

#Pascal

Yeah, and that has to be the conclusion, because you shouldn't make predictions, especially not about the future. No, but thank you for the overview of all these moving parts. And God forbid there was something like a 2008 kind of crisis—what would that do to the entire system? We don't know, but it is very valuable to hear this kind of analysis. Alice, there are people who want to read that analysis from you. They should, of course, go to your homepage. They should sign up for your Substack. Can you tell us where to find you? Yes.

#Alastair Crooke

Yes, I emphasize the Substack because it's not under my name. There are sites out there in my name, but they're not genuine. They're fake. But there's only one real place, which is Conflicts Forum, all one word, at Substack.com. And that's where you can find us. We write regularly about events in the region, particularly about the parts of Israel that others don't reach, because it's mostly buried in the Hebrew press and things. So we do selections and summaries of those things, but generally we write about events. That's the only place where you can really find us.

#Pascal

Everybody, the only legitimate place to find Alastair Crooke is the Conflicts Forum Substack. I will put a link to it in the description box below. I hope to talk to you again soon. Alastair Crooke, thank you so much for your time today.

#Alastair Crooke

Thank you for inviting me.