

NATO Is Sleepwalking Into War With Russia

| Ian Proud

Former British diplomat Ian Proud joins Neutrality Studies to discuss Russia-NATO escalation, Western support for Ukraine, Europe's lack of diplomacy, and the risk of a wider war. He also talks about Europe's dependence on the US, the need for direct Europe-Russia talks, Iran diplomacy, the Abraham Accords, and his new novel Searching: A Love Story. Links: Substack: <https://thepeacemonger.substack.com/> Searching: A Love Story on Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Searching-love-story-Ian-Proud/dp/1739543130> Neutrality Studies substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> (Opt in for Academic Section from your profile settings: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com/s/academic>) Merch: <https://neutralitystudies.com/shop> Donation: <https://neutralitystudies.com/donate> Timestamps: 00:00:00 Introduction 00:00:38 Russia-NATO escalation and Kiev embassies 00:02:12 Western policy and risk of wider war 00:07:52 How Europe could return to diplomacy 00:12:01 Europe's dependence on the US 00:17:47 Iran, Minsk, and diplomacy as cover 00:23:40 EU foreign policy and national diplomacy 00:27:21 Ian Proud's new book and where to follow him

#Pascal

Well, welcome back to Neutrality Studies. Today, for the very first time in real life, it's my great pleasure to introduce to you again my dear colleague, Ian Proud. Ian, thank you for coming.

#Ian Proud

Thank you. It's fantastic to meet you in person for the first time. It's absolutely wonderful to actually get together with realists and see them as actual human beings. It's a wonderful experience.

#Pascal

Here we are in all our human being-ness. It's very different from actually being online, right? Better.

#Ian Proud

Much better.

#Pascal

Much better. So, Ian, I would like to ask you actually about your views on what's going on currently. Maybe let's start with Russia and this escalation drive, right? We've seen that over the last couple of weeks, Ukraine and NATO have been firing deeper and deeper inside Russia. They've killed 21,

mainly schoolgirls. And Russia is now attacking and striking against Kiev. Just last night, they had another large strike. So you, who served actually inside Russia, in Moscow, as a British diplomat—if you got this request from the Russians to evacuate from Kiev, what would you do?

#Ian Proud

Well, at the start of the war, all the embassies evacuated. It's worth remembering that every single kind of foreign embassy, I think including possibly the Americans, evacuated. So the British embassy, I think, went to Warsaw or something like that initially. So it was an embassy in exile for quite a long time at the start of the war. So that's not anything novel. They've decided to stay, but I think that's a fairly risky thing to do right now during this escalation phase. But that's a decision they'll be taking all the time. If it were me, I'd probably be thinking about evacuating again.

#Pascal

Yeah, but evacuating—wouldn't it mean a considerable loss of face for the West if they did that? Or why do you think they're staying put, even though it might now risk the lives of their diplomats?

#Ian Proud

Well, we're in a bizarre situation where we have diplomats with no diplomacy. In Western governments, and the British government in particular, we're really guilty of this—or they are really guilty of this—because we've stopped trying to see a negotiated end to this terrible war, which is only affecting civilians on both sides of the conflict. And we've created this unshakable narrative that we have to support Ukraine come what may, whether that's billions and billions in money, whether that's weapons that won't really see any kind of change in the war, whether that's keeping our diplomats in harm's way even at a time of escalation. You know, we're so afraid of losing face by admitting, actually, that this war needs to end, that we continue to pursue irrational policies. And this is just yet another of a very, very long list of irrational policies.

#Pascal

So what do you think this is going to do actually now to the dynamic between Russia and NATO? I mean, to me, it seems the longer, the more that we're headed towards even more escalation. I mean, I look at it as Western salami slicing towards internationalizing the Ukraine war. Of course, in NATO's ideal world, this will be a salami slicing toward Russia, right? And I'm wondering there, I mean, how high do you think the risk is that the Russians at some point will say, like, no, now if you want to internationalize the conflict, okay, fine with us, let's go there.

#Ian Proud

I think we are slowly creeping towards a general war in Europe. In fact, Western politicians talk about it all the time as if it's an inevitability, which is one of the most shocking things. And all of our decisions, in particular our decision not to pursue diplomacy, just seem to confirm that. Our blanket support for the Zelensky regime, despite ever-increasing evidence of its corruption—for example, the repression of its citizens, the bussing of young men to the front line, and all those things, the growth of Nazi ideology and its prominence within the Ukrainian military—we seem to be blind to this because we are so fixated on supporting Zelensky to fight to the last Ukrainian that we can't see a way out.

So that blinds us to the possibility of a negotiated end to this war. And it's for that reason. And the thing is, I see no change in that mindset. I see absolutely no evidence of a change in that mindset. And it's for that reason that I feel we are gradually, and I think it will take a few years, creeping towards a slow escalation that may lead to a war which, like this war, is completely avoidable.

#Pascal

But, you know, war... I mean, in what way could Europe actually do a war with Russia? That's the other thing that's on my mind. When you do this kind of escalation from the NATO side, it seems to me even more irresponsible, just keeping in mind all of the productive capacities that you need to sustain that. I mean, it seems to me that they are not there. And even the Americans at the moment are showing that when it comes to Iran, they lack... they lack what it takes. They lack missiles. We know from Ukraine they lack shells. The only thing that seems to have recovered a bit is the drone warfare. They're able to produce drones. But who do you think within the NATO framework is responsible for this type of planning? Because it just seems to me that the Europeans couldn't do it at the moment, even if they wanted to. Well, that actually suggests that there is planning. There is. I think there is. I mean, I do think they plan toward that.

#Ian Proud

But I can't believe they do plan towards that, because if they looked rationally at the available evidence, the disposition of forces available to them, the economic means, the energy they'd need to do that, they would realize very quickly that a war against Russia would be pointless, massively damaging to the whole fabric of Europe, the economies of Europe, and the citizens of Europe. And in the final analysis, it may ultimately end in a resort to the use of nuclear weaponry, which nobody should hope for, quite frankly.

So, you know, the Russians, I mean, a lot of what's happening in the Ukraine war is built on this kind of fantastical calculation that somehow people are going to turn on Putin and overthrow him, which shows a basic lack of understanding of the Russian mindset, a lack of understanding of Russia's worldview based on its history of foreign invasion, whether that's by the Nazis, whether that's by Napoleon, and so on. The Russians will fight if we want to fight, whatever the cost. They

lost millions of people in World War II. We seem to have forgotten that wasn't very long ago. How could we forget? So if the calculation is that Russia would crumble against the threat of a general war with the EU, then I suggest that that is a dangerously mistaken view. But I suspect that is the view. But so many of these views are pushed forward based on what appears to be pure fantasies rather than real analysis.

#Pascal

Hey, very brief intermission because I was recently banned from YouTube. And although I'm back, this can happen anytime again. So please consider subscribing not only here, but to my mailing list on Substack. That's pascallottaz.substack.com. The link's going to be in the description below. And now, back to the video. What would it take for Europe now to de-escalate this? Because it seems to me that Europe has kind of talked itself into a very, very narrow corner, also when it comes to its energy security and whatnot. I mean, the way that the ties with Russia have been cut loose, to me, are utterly irresponsible. But then again, you were a diplomat and you know how the diplomatic ways function. I mean, what would it take to kind of de-escalate and then slowly bring back this relationship? Do you think it is possible to bring it back with the Russians?

#Ian Proud

I hope that it is. And I also believe, because I've studied the Russian statecraft for many years, that the Russians will be receptive to that. I think it's a mistake to think the Russians don't want a normal relationship with the continent of Europe, because they do. And I believe various efforts have, even since the start of the Ukraine conflict, everything I saw suggested that Russia wanted to kind of, you know, re-engage, kind of address these concerns. You know, the Minsk agreements were part of that process with the European nations, but we have rebuffed their overtures every time.

And, uh, so I think the Russians will be receptive to that. But I think it involves three things. You know, I mean, lots of really bad analysis talks about a peace plan between Russia and Ukraine. Of course, that's important, but you need to kind of tease out what's involved in that. You know, there has to be some negotiated deal between Ukraine and Russia, the two kind of parties to the conflict, in which they agree on the terms in which they can lay down arms and live in a peaceful, friendly coexistence going forward. That is just one part of that. The second part of that is what Ukraine's relationship with Europe is going to be.

Now, people keep jumbling this into the actual peace deal between Ukraine and Russia. It's a separate point. So this is a conversation between Europe and Ukraine, which I think the Europeans are not entirely ready to have because it's so messy and so costly, including politically costly for the Europeans, that they keep kicking the can down the road, and that's just going to make Zelensky mad every time. But the third vital piece is what Europe's relationship with Russia is going to be in the future, because without that peace, we will only be pressing a pause button or a sort of longer-term conflict with Russia. Europe needs to figure out how it's going to coexist.

It doesn't have to be friendship, but how it's going to coexist with the largest geographically kind of nation on Earth, the largest military power on Earth, energy independence of Europe, super fat, and all those things it has to kind of figure out. And that involves, you know, dialogue between Europeans and the British, you know, and Russia. So when the Europeans talk about having diplomatic dialogue with Russia, this should not be about the Ukraine-Russia peace. I think we should let the Americans and whoever's involved, you know, outside of Europe, moderate that sort of diplomatic dialogue. The European role in diplomacy is figuring out Europe's role with Russia, Europe's future relationship with Russia. And I think that is a level of thinking that, ah, I've seen no evidence of having emerged, particularly when you listen to the likes of Kaja Kallas, who comes out with these bizarre and maximalist views of, well, Russia will only talk to Russia when Russia withdraws all its forces to the 1991 borders.

I mean, total kind of la-la-land fantasy kind of statements. So no, it has to be about Europe-Russia, Europe-UK, and Russia, and that has to be where the diplomatic engagement starts, because that is a missing piece in the puzzle. Ukraine-Europe, massively messy. Ukraine-Russia, also hugely messy. Europe-Russia, massively messy. So three very, very messy baskets of issues, all of which need equal attention.

#Pascal

Equal attention. But the question to me is, can the Europeans do it on their own, right? Because to me, Europe at the moment seems extremely dependent on the United States—ideologically, but also economically and whatnot. So, you know, some people say that Europe is a proxy or a satellite of the United States. And of course, we can say that when we want to be, you know, very outspoken or whatnot, but it doesn't really help with the analysis, right? It doesn't help with understanding who actually takes decisions. So, question to you: how independent do you think the major European players are—the UK, Germany, France—when it comes to decision-making about their own diplomacy?

#Ian Proud

Well, they're not, but they have to be. Yeah, with people like Ursula von der Leyen, a truly dreadful kind of leader, I think, of the Commission, a generally kind of bad list—but that's just a personal view. I am actually pro-European, as you know, having grown up in Germany. I mean, if they want to position Europe as some sort of geopolitical actor, then they have to step up and do it. They have to be able to engage with Russia as Europe, as a collective Europe, however they decide to do it, in whatever format they decide to use, with the US outside the door. You know, the security in Europe is about the countries of Europe. And those countries include Russia, and they include Ukraine.

You know, so the Europeans have to step up. And I think that's actually possible because, if you think about it, the whole kind of Ukraine-Russia peace—I mean, the Americans have got their hands

all over that. I think it's actually been productive that the Americans started to nudge up closer to it anyway, because without that, absolutely nothing at all would have happened. Sadly, it seems Trump appears slightly to have given up on that because of his bizarre conquest in the Middle East and all the rest of it. But the Americans are involved, but they shouldn't be involved in the Russia peace. That's when the Europeans have to finally show some sort of leadership. I'm not yet convinced that they can.

#Pascal

No, and the question to me still remains, like, how much decision-making power do they actually have, right, in terms of the largest superstructure that we have—and that's NATO, right? If the Americans want something within NATO, how much power do the others have to say no? And, you know, going all the way back to 2008, the Bucharest Summit, right? When it was the Germans and the French who said, no, do not promise Ukraine and Georgia membership in NATO. But then basically the Americans did it anyhow. And a few months later, we had that war, right? So how much can the Europeans say no if the Americans really want something?

#Ian Proud

Well, they haven't been able to hitherto, although by the same token, they were remarkably effective in derailing any of Trump's efforts to kind of broker between Ukraine and Russia. So they have been able to say no on issues that appear to be important to them tactically at any given time.

#Pascal

Well, that is actually why some people, including Brand of Politics, say, look, this is all theater. This is just make-believe that there is actually genuine disagreement when in fact they're going toward the same route, right? I mean, it's all toward the whole, like, Europe-US split is more about how to militarize Europe and how to sell militarization to Europe. What do you make of that argument?

#Ian Proud

No, I think this bit is more kind of substantive than that, actually. I think Trump, he's brought many things, many of them bad things. But he's brought a reckoning about, actually, the future role of NATO in Europe itself, the U.S. commitment to NATO. And that has provoked Europeans, I think, or should be provoking them to kind of say, well, we should be independent. But that then raises questions about, well, with NATO, why do we even need NATO in the future? I mean, that is the real question. I think Europeans are perfectly capable of taking their fate in their hands. Why would any rational actor import massively expensive energy from the U.S. when they have cheap, piped energy from a continental neighbor?

I mean, it just makes no sense at all. But these are the illogical kinds of looks that people have taken. But, I mean, it's only through actual dialogue with the Russians. And I believe the Russians want dialogue, and they break out of that cycle and show that they can be independent. And that's going to be tough. Diplomacy is tough. You know, it's not about friendship. I mean, friendship is a bonus. I mean, if you can have friendship, that's even better. But diplomacy is about settling differences and finding ways to coexist. And they need to get back to the realization that that is what diplomacy is about. It's not about getting to summits where you meet lots of people who already agree with you.

That's not diplomacy. You know, that is theater. These peace summits, these coalitions of the willing summits, these are all utterly pointless, meaningless events. If Russia is there, the party to the film, you know, so, yeah. I hope they can step up. I'm still far, far from convinced that they can. Well, no, I'm afraid to say. But, I mean, that's what's needed, three-point. Europe-Russia, complicated. Ukraine-Russia, massively complicated. Ukraine-Russia, even more complicated. There are no easy problems we solve here, and that's why we need statespeople to step up. That's the challenge we have now, a vacuum of statespersonship.

#Pascal

Yeah, and also a vacuum of people trying to avoid these kinds of situations. I mean, what we've seen also when it comes to U.S. diplomacy toward Iran—and maybe we use the last 10 minutes to talk about that a little bit—is that the West seems to be using diplomacy these days, especially the United States, as a smokescreen for military goals. I mean, if you want to make a comparison to Ukraine, the way that the Minsk agreements were used, or at least retrospectively, Angela Merkel and Hollande said that they were just there in order to buy time. Never bought that.

#Ian Proud

I've never bought that line. I thought the Minsk II agreement was an agreement made in good faith. It actually showed genuine initiative by European nations to kind of broker a resolution to that conflict, in the same way that the Germans and the French brokered Yanukovich's gradual departure from office back in February 2014, before Victoria Nuland and co. stepped in and the coup was orchestrated against Yanukovich—and the rest is history, we all know about it. So, I mean, I think the Minsk II was another moment like February 2014, where there was a genuine effort of European diplomacy that led to a credible deal, the genesis of which actually came from the Ukrainian side.

The Minsk II format emerged from a memorandum initially put forward by Petro Poroshenko that involved devolution. So I don't buy that sort of Merkel line. But in terms of actual American diplomacy, I think the Americans have been playing their hand very badly—playing a bad hand very badly. But diplomacy is still happening. We do appear to be nudging towards some sort of a framework, some sort of memorandum of understanding, you know, that would pause the conflict

for 60 days, that may involve some sort of sanctions relief, that may open up the Straits of Hormuz again. Diplomacy is happening.

Thank God for the Pakistan government in terms of what they've been doing there. Diplomacy isn't happening in Ukraine, and that is the difference. That is the difference. I mean, the American efforts have been paused. The Europeans have been talking about diplomacy for six months and still haven't done anything at all. There is still diplomacy happening in Iran, even though every time the Americans decide to move some more missile strikes and, you know, try to kind of nudge the Iranians in ways which any outside observer would say will never succeed. It devours it, but still, that process of talks and moving towards an MOU continues. So that's the memorandum of understanding.

#Pascal

No, you're absolutely right. That's a good thing, of course. Although right now, as we speak on this—what is it today, June the 3rd?—I mean, there are bombings going on again. So overall, you wouldn't be as pessimistic as to say that the diplomacy from the West is, in general, a smokescreen to lure the other one into complacency. I mean, that's the beginning of the Iran war.

#Ian Proud

No, I think it has been in Iran. You know, when they had those talks in Geneva, brokered by the Omani sort of government, and then, you know, the US and Israel started bombing anyway. I mean, that was just a complete sellout of a credible diplomatic process that was taking place. So the Americans keep renegeing every time. We keep launching some attacks every time Trump wakes up at 3 in the morning and decides to go on a Truth Social rant. But still, behind closed doors, the hard diplomacy is still happening. And I think that's the important point here. But you've got to bear in mind that Trump is in a bad spot when it comes to Iran.

I said right from the start that he could end it quickly and look weak. He could go on for longer and look confident. And in between those two points, there are no good options. And so, you know, his task is to spin his way out of this and make it look like a success. Good luck with that. And, of course, the closer he gets to November, the harder that becomes. So he needs to get out sooner rather than later. You know, we're into June now. You know, he's got six months, five months before midterm elections. You know, time is not on his side. Time is on Ivan's side. There we go. But

#Pascal

And this is why I wonder also what these tweets or these truths are all about that he puts out, because they seem to sabotage anything that could potentially be reached in the background. Then again, he might also use them in order to somehow communicate with the Israelis, like the other day, this weird idea to pitch that in order for a peace agreement to happen, all of the states in the

region that don't recognize Israel need to join the Abraham Accords. That's just a weird idea to put out, and it would obviously hurt any kind of process more than it would help. But then again, real diplomacy — does it still happen in the background where people and the cameras are not pointing at?

#Ian Proud

What is happening in Iran and real diplomacy led to the Abraham Accords. Now, you can step back and say that they are very clearly intended to prevent any possibility of peace across Islamic countries split down the middle by the Gulf. But it was diplomacy that led to that trumped-up sort of bad deal of the Abraham Accords, which is intended to kind of perpetuate a division, with Iran being the bad guys and anybody to the west of, you know, the Gulf being the good guys. So, I mean, any deal, whether it's a good deal or a terrible deal, will emerge out of diplomacy. Now, the question is, how can we get diplomacy back on a more positive track? And in Europe, how can we just have diplomacy?

#Pascal

Do you think it is possible to have diplomacy if somebody like Kaja Kallas is the chief, the person in charge? Plus, I mean, officially, yes, the EU is an actor, but on paper, at least, these different member states should also have their own diplomacy. And that has now been completely superseded by the EU structure. Why do you think it is that, except for Hungary, for such a long time, no head of state seemed willing to put his head out and say, by the way, we are able to talk to the Russians in our own competence? Not everything needs to be done by the EU. I don't know.

#Ian Proud

Well, blame the Lisbon Treaty. I mean, we actually did have a common foreign and security policy before the Lisbon Treaty. So that kind of codified it and gave us this High Representative, who's now also Vice President of the EU. But the problem is, I mean, member states still have competence to engage in diplomacy regarding their bilateral relationships, you know, with Russia, but they just don't really do that in any kind of substantive way, except some in Central Europe. You know, of course, I mean, the problem is actually that the EU has continued to try to centralize foreign policymaking power upon itself, and also defense strategy and that sort of thing. And the real point is that that's not what the EU was set up to do. The EU was set up to be this kind of bloc of peace, really, that provided for peace through economic, social, and cultural value.

I talk about this all the time. It should know me. The main thing is to listen to me. And that's what provided for unprecedented peace, you know, on the European continent for the first time in centuries. The fact that the conversation wasn't about war and conflict, it's about opening up and about engagement and relationships, you know, between people from different nations—not trying to homogenize them as some single supranational identity, but recognizing Hungarians could be

Hungarians, Portuguese could be Portuguese, and, you know, troublemaking as we are. And we're all different, but we could all get along.

That was the point of the EU, I think. And so, actually, having a Kaja Kallas, having a Kubilius, is just an effort to centralize and homogenize Europe in a way that ordinary European citizens just don't want. As we're seeing with the elections all over Europe, including, of course, in the UK, they want their governments to prioritize their problems—their potholed roads, their kids being stabbed in the streets (we've had a terrible case in the UK recently), their hospitals not providing good enough care, their girls being raped, whatever—all these problems. These are the things ordinary people care about.

#Pascal

Ordinary people don't wake up and think, "Well, why don't we have a war with Vladimir Putin?" That's just not something that crosses their mind.

#Ian Proud

So I think that, you know, I think what we're seeing is a slow kind of reckoning with this, where European citizens are saying, well, actually, no, we just want our governments to, you know, focus on us. And we like the idea of, like, going to Europe, peacefully coexisting. I mean, that's what we want to do. So that's why the mainstream univocality, I feel, is gradually falling out of favour. And I hope that it does decisively, but let's see what happens.

#Pascal

A Europe of European nations that coordinates but is not forced to become the United States of Europe. That should be the goal. But, well, we can only talk about it. But we will continue analyzing the situation. Ian, if people want to follow you, where should they go?

#Ian Proud

Well, they can follow me on the Peacemonger, but I'll also give a plug for my novel that publishes tomorrow. It's called **Searching: A Love Story**. People may or may not know that I was the first British diplomat to deploy to the disaster zone in southern Thailand after the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004. It massively affected my life, my mental health for years. And I've finally written a love story about it. So if you want to support me, then please buy a copy of my book. It's called **Searching: A Love Story**. Find it on Amazon, Waterstones, all these kinds of places. That's the best way you could help me right now. Just read my book. Learn about people of different cultures just coexisting, loving in the most difficult, harrowing of circumstances.

#Pascal

Everybody go out and get Ian's new book. This time it's a novel. Yes, you should.

#Ian Proud

Thank you so much for your time today. Great to see you in person.