Dmitry Polyanskiy: Europe's Broken Security Architecture Led to War

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#Glenn

Welcome back, everyone. We're joined again by Dmitry Polyansky, Russia's permanent representative to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, or the OSCE. Thank you for coming back on the program.

#Dmitry Polyanskiy

You're welcome.

#Glenn

So we see a lot of high-level problems in the pan-European security architecture. NATO and Russia seem to be moving toward a wider conflict, possibly even war. Diplomacy is a mess. We're nowhere near a negotiated settlement. And European governments want a seat at the negotiating table, but they don't actually want to talk to Russia, it seems. The OSCE was established in 1995, based on the Helsinki Accords and the Charter of Paris for a New Europe. It was supposed to be the foundation of an inclusive pan-European security architecture that would promote indivisible security. So I was wondering, why doesn't it play a greater role? And I guess, in the current situation, should it?

#Dmitry Polyanskiy

Well, I think it would be natural to expect an organization with "security" and "co-operation" in its name to play a role here. But it's a tricky question. You could get a little philosophical about it. As you rightly said, it was created in 1995, at a time when there was a lot of hope that we were moving toward a fairer world with new security arrangements. Some people were hoping that NATO would change or disappear and that we'd have a new security system in Europe for everyone, including Russia. But then it turned out that the West didn't want to keep the promises it had made.

I think it's a very well-known story. I don't need to tell you the details. As far as the OSCE is concerned, the arrangements you mentioned about indivisible security, which is the backbone of the whole OSCE system, were swept aside. Instead, absolutely unhindered NATO expansion and absolutely unlimited freedom to choose alliances were put above everything else. In practice, that led to a situation where Russia's security concerns were completely ignored. At each step, our warnings weren't given due consideration. And there were a number of stages in getting to where we are now.

That's how things deteriorated. And the organization, which has those two important words in its name, "security" and "co-operation," isn't actually dealing with security co-operation. All the arrangements on transparency, confidence-building, and arms control have been forgotten. Now it's part of what I would call our Western neighbors' Euro-Atlantic toolbox. They're trying to make the most of the organization while ignoring Russia's interests and, in a number of cases, disregarding the rule of consensus. That has very serious implications, to put it mildly, for the organization and its future.

#Glenn

Well, I was wondering, in this scenario, what can the OSCE do? A common criticism of the OSCE after the Cold War was that it was pushed aside as the EU and NATO, as exclusive blocs, took center stage in organizing European security. The criticism was that the OSCE ended up focusing almost exclusively on human rights issues east of Vienna. But do you see any role for the OSCE, as it is now, in the conflict in Ukraine? I mean, there are a lot of human rights issues, including minority rights issues. Or do you think it's too selective? How do you see the organization's chances of playing a role, at least in the area of human rights?

#Dmitry Polyanskiy

Well, the future of the OSCE is dire, to put it mildly. And I think the organization itself and its participating states in the European Union and NATO get full credit for that. Again, hopes were high. People were expecting the OSCE to become a real framework for security arrangements that would put everyone on an equal footing, including Russia. But those hopes didn't materialize. And I think you framed it right, Glenn, because this organization has already played a role in this crisis. And it played a negative role because it completely forgot about one of its functions—conflict prevention—as problems between Russia and Ukraine were piling up. We warned repeatedly that the organization was taking the wrong course. It has mechanisms that are generally quite well suited to that purpose.

For example, they have a High Commissioner on National Minorities whose mandate is precisely to monitor the situation, make recommendations, and use quiet diplomacy to prevent conflicts from arising. That can be very effective. But the problem is that the role of the High Commissioner, which

is crucial for preventing conflicts between neighbors, was completely distorted and reduced to criticizing and kind of lecturing countries in Eastern Europe. That was the reality. When we tried to raise a number of absolutely flagrant violations of the rights of Russian speakers in the Baltic states, for example, they were ignored. We also spoke about the kind of state Ukraine was becoming. It was a very dangerous development that would inevitably cause problems for all of us, especially for Russians.

It ignored our warnings. Russia raised these concerns on several occasions in letters or statements. We did everything we could, but the organization remained absolutely deaf and blind to what was happening. Blatant double standards were applied in a number of situations. As you know, the OSCE has three pillars, or three baskets, as some people call them. The first is security, the second is the economy and the environment, and the third is human rights. They're all important, and they all come from the Helsinki Final Act and the commitments that all the states made. And again, it's all there. Everything is in the Helsinki Final Act. If we had implemented it to the letter, or at least acted in keeping with its spirit, we would have avoided a lot of problems.

But the collective West is treating the Helsinki Final Act like a shopping list: "We want to buy this, but we don't want to buy that." It's no different, by the way, from how the West treats the Charter of the United Nations. There are a lot of similarities here. It's cherry-picking. They pick whatever they think is good for them and ignore what's awkward for them or what goes hand in hand with other provisions. It makes no sense to apply one principle without fully taking into account the others that are linked to it, and everybody knows that. But this game went on for years, or even decades, and it brought us to where we are now. And right now, it's very hard to see any role for the OSCE. It's being completely bypassed. It isn't taking part in any negotiations or, I'd say, even in building bridges. Even in that very broad sense, I can't say the OSCE has a role, because it's been monopolized by Western countries.

They bend the rules in their favor. They're now ignoring the rule of consensus in a number of situations, and they're trying to weaponize the OSCE against Russia, to use it as just another instrument in their hybrid war against my country. They're doing that instead of sticking to the organization's mandate and using it to build a framework that would benefit everybody, including those states. That framework would help us solve existing problems and avoid future ones. Everything is there. Everything is in the OSCE documents, in the Istanbul Declaration and the Astana Declaration. All the principles of indivisible security are there. All the beautiful words have already been spoken. But now it's time to stick to those words. And that's exactly where the West has a problem. They want to cherry-pick.

They want to stick to one thing: the freedom to choose alliances. But they completely ignore the principle of indivisible security, which is undermined when they interpret that freedom as having no limits. So, to answer your question, Glenn, I don't think the organization has a role in this process. I also don't think its recent experience helps, because everybody knows how the OSCE behaved through its Special Monitoring Mission after the Minsk agreements were signed. Everybody expected

the organization to be an unbiased broker, an unbiased observer. But now we know all the circumstances, and it's quite clear that the OSCE was just another pawn, another tool in the West's toolbox, in this game that started in 2014. The Minsk agreements were part of that game. They were a smokescreen for arming Ukraine and preparing it for a conflict with Russia.

#Glenn

I think the common criticism of the whole process, from the Helsinki Accords all the way up to the OSCE, is that it has two components that can seem contradictory. On the one hand, it calls for indivisible security, so one side shouldn't enhance its security at the expense of the other. At the same time, it says that all states can choose their own foreign policy arrangements. So, you know, when we talk about Ukraine joining NATO, for example, the Russians can say, "Well, this violates the principle of indivisible security." If Russia pushes back against Ukraine joining NATO, the NATO countries can say, "Well, that goes against Ukraine's right to make its own security and foreign policy choices."

It does seem, though, that these two principles don't inherently have to be in conflict. If NATO and Russia reached an agreement under which NATO didn't offer membership to other countries, you know, based on the principle of indivisible security, and both sides sought to harmonize their integration efforts, then we could overcome this. It just seems that with this open-door policy, where everyone can join, the problem between NATO and Russia essentially became a problem between Russia and Ukraine instead. But now we hear Russia saying that to end the war, we have to address the underlying causes.

And please correct me if I'm wrong, but from Russia's perspective, the underlying cause is that NATO expansion reintroduced zero-sum bloc politics and undermined indivisible security. It's actually undone the idea behind the OSCE as an inclusive security architecture based on indivisible security. What exactly does that entail, do you think, in terms of an institutional framework? Can we revive the OSCE, or do we need something new, given that the OSCE has played kind of a strange role over the past few years? As you say, Russia now sees it as essentially a tool of the West rather than a security architecture.

#Dmitry Polyanskiy

Well, frankly, I don't think we're at the stage where we can get into all these specifics. Anything is possible, hypothetically. The OSCE isn't completely dead. It's in a coma, yes, but it's not completely dead. Theoretically, it could be brought back to life, provided there's goodwill. Again, provided there's goodwill, a new framework could be created. Maybe it would be more successful and more efficient than the OSCE. Who knows? But both options require goodwill. There's no goodwill right now. There's no trust. There's only mistrust. And there are a lot of problems piling up.

#Glenn

And there's no end in sight to this situation.

#Dmitry Polyanskiy

Unfortunately, we're not there yet. You started with the prospect of a new war. Frankly, I don't think it's far off, and it's very real. Some people may underestimate how real it is, but the Zelensky regime has an interest in keeping the war going because their survival and their well-being really depend on it. If it stops, then everything stops. They won't be able to rob their country anymore. They won't be able to send their countrymen into this absolutely senseless meat grinder at the front. For them, everything hinges on the war. That's why they keep it going, and they'd like to get other players directly involved.

I think it's the greatest dream of Zelensky and his henchmen to see a direct confrontation between NATO and Russia as soon as possible. And they're doing everything they can to make it happen. You know, we've recently had reports from the Baltic Sea and the Mediterranean Sea about our vessels being attacked. This is a clear provocation. And what's even more provocative is that, while I haven't heard much about it, the statements I've heard from Finland, for example, seem to approve of Ukraine's actions. They're saying that Ukraine has the right to retaliate against peaceful vessels in neutral waters, but in many conflicts, that's a casus belli. So we really are very, very close, and Zelensky is doing everything he can to push us into this abyss, which we can already see from where we stand.

So now the question is what to do with all this mess and how to get the West and Russia talking again. What form would that take? Would it be through the OSCE? Would it be some other framework? I personally believe that the United Nations should play a role in this process at some stage, but I may be mistaken. Nobody has a clear answer to that right now. But I think everybody who really wants to contribute to peace has to find a way to stop this absolute madness in Europe: all this militarization, all these preparations for a war with Russia that Russia has never declared and has never wanted to declare. My country's leaders have said that repeatedly, including President Putin himself. I think that's the primary task we need to focus on right now. As for the form, I think we'll find it.

#Glenn

But until we find a way to establish peace, we also seem to need a way to manage the conflict. And I think that's where one of the main dangers lies right now. You referred to the attacks on these Russian ships. We've been fighting this proxy war for almost five years now, and in any proxy war, there are some unwritten rules. Over the past four and a half years, we've seen a gradual escalation, with the rules constantly being rewritten to allow for further escalation. But the attacks on the Russian cargo ship in the Baltic Sea and on the Russian warships off the coast of Libya are something very different. What dilemmas do these attacks pose for Russia now? Is it about where

the Ukrainians have stationed their weapons? Is it about who's providing the intelligence? Is it about possible direct NATO involvement? What are the issues here? Because, again, we don't even seem to have clear rules of the game for how this proxy war is supposed to be fought.

#Dmitry Polyanskiy

Well, I think we have a lot of information. We know a lot about what's happening. We know where these weapons come from—the UAVs, the missiles, and all this equipment. It's naive to imagine that the Ukrainians produce all of this. We know it's produced elsewhere, mostly in Britain, and that Britain is behind a lot of the intelligence operations the Ukrainians claim as their own. I think that's an open secret.

I also think this situation poses a challenge not just for Russia. We're showing the utmost restraint. Maybe nobody in Europe sees it that way, but if you look at it from a different perspective, you can imagine how Russia could have retaliated by now. Frankly, it has every reason to do so, but we've managed to show restraint. But what about the Mediterranean nations, for example? What about the Greeks, the Turks, the Spaniards, or the Italians? There are some indications now that these naval drones, for example, came from Albania, not from Libya itself. I read an article that claimed that was the case. So many countries are involved.

It's attributed to the Ukrainians, but in reality, it's not a Ukrainian operation. It's somebody else's operation. And this is another stage of escalation. I think it's very important to realize that this is another stage of escalation. And if you remember how events unfolded, the United States and Russia were the main players in getting the process going again, with trilateral negotiations involving Ukraine and a meeting in Shenzhen. There was a lot of hope that this would get us to a point where we'd have at least a basic understanding of how we're going to live with each other, and that would be a good starting point for any further discussions.

The Americans support the idea of a European security architecture. We accept this idea, and we say we're ready to act along those lines. How does Zelensky respond? Let's recall. On the eve of the Shenzhen summit, he launches a massive attack on the Crimean Bridge. The attack took months to prepare. It was carried out with the help of foreign intelligence and foreign specialists, and a Dutch company supplied the missiles. So it's a joint operation. It's not a Ukrainian operation. It's a NATO operation, in fact. Russia and the United States offer an opening, a possible way out of the mess we're in, and Zelensky responds by escalating.

And you can see the escalation in what President Putin said: there's no way we can now agree to any kind of ceasefire, whether it's a local ceasefire, a ceasefire covering infrastructure, or whatever. So Zelensky has dashed those hopes with his absolutely reckless action in Crimea. And of course, there will be a very serious response to this. In fact, there already is, and every Ukrainian is feeling it right now. Now there's talk that Europe might enter into direct talks with Russia. It's hypothetical, of course. There are a lot of ifs, and many things are still unclear. But at least there are voices in

Europe saying, "We need to engage with Russia, because otherwise our destiny will be decided without us," blah, blah, blah. You know the story. What's Zelensky's response?

He's attacking two of our ships, one in the Baltic and the other in the Mediterranean. And he not only attacks them, but he also gloats about it. He's now openly acknowledging that this was an operation by the Ukrainian special services. Again, I would say it's very doubtful, to put it mildly, that Ukraine is capable of carrying out this kind of operation on its own. It got some help, for sure. But that's another response. So instead of supporting direct talks between Europe and Russia, Zelensky is once again responding by escalating. I think that's the clearest possible indication that Zelensky is not interested in peace. What would the third stage be? What will he think of next? There were reports that Kaliningrad Oblast was being targeted.

I read yesterday that a couple of drones were allegedly detected. How could drones reach Kaliningrad Oblast without flying over Poland, Lithuania, or some other country? It's impossible. So we can think about what a third stage of escalation might look like. There have been a number of statements from Russia saying that if the security of Kaliningrad Oblast is at stake, we would consider any response provided for in our doctrines. So this is an extremely dangerous juncture. Zelensky is doing everything he can to undermine, to sabotage any peace efforts, whether they come from the United States and Russia or even from those in Europe who are thinking about peace. He's doing that through his provocations and by trying to draw NATO directly into a military conflict with Russia. That's how I see it.

#Glenn

I find it interesting, though, that the rhetoric is changing quite a bit. On November 11th, I saw that Mark Sedwill, the former British national security adviser and cabinet secretary, was arguing that NATO is a defensive alliance, but that the most effective form of defense is offense. So this is the new definition of a defensive alliance, it seems. But the rhetoric is increasingly hostile now. There's the old debate about whether or not to go to war, but there's a lot of pushback from the public. It doesn't look like they've prepared the public for war yet. You know, Glenn, if I may jump in here, interestingly enough, we had this discussion at the Permanent Council about…

#Dmitry Polyanskiy

These claims about NATO being a defensive alliance are quite popular among my colleagues on the OSCE Permanent Council. They made those claims again in the context of debris falling on foreign embassies in Kiev. They also claimed that this was an offensive attack by Russia and all that. I gave them an example of what it looks like when an embassy is deliberately targeted: In 1999, NATO fired five missiles at the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, killing three diplomats. That's deliberate targeting. And that's something a defensive alliance would never do, for sure. So, of course, it's hypocritical, and we're all familiar with the empty lip service about NATO being a defensive alliance.

#Glenn

Yeah, I remember that, because I was actually in the army back in 1999. I remember Henry Kissinger making the point that the attack on Yugoslavia happened 12 days after the first round of NATO expansion. His argument was that the Russians were quite worried about NATO essentially taking over European security and putting itself above the UN. And he said, "Well, now we can't reassure the Russians anymore that NATO is a defensive alliance, because obviously that went out the window when NATO attacked Yugoslavia."

But it appears that the narrative still survives, long after Yugoslavia, Libya, and so forth. Just one last question: How do you see the risk of further escalation? We've heard a lot of enthusiastic talk about deep strikes into Russia. We've seen the Scandinavian countries making themselves more available to the United States and Britain. How do you see the possibility of Russia retaliating in some way now? Because from what I've heard in Moscow, there's concern that NATO has interpreted Russia's restraint as weakness. Do you see any possibility that Russia is preparing to move up the escalation ladder?

#Dmitry Polyanskiy

I wouldn't go into hypotheticals right now. I'm still an optimist. That's my nature. But frankly, there are fewer and fewer grounds for optimism, or even for positive realism, let's put it that way. Everything that's being done is pushing us toward direct conflict, and it's not coming from our side. We're only retaliating. We're just trying to find some way to respond. I don't know. Many people in my country, including some who hold very important positions, argue that our response should be more resolute. But of course, that brings us to the brink of nuclear war, to put it mildly. And it's very hard to tell where the line is today. It's so blurred that it's hard to know what might be considered a casus belli and what might mark the start of a full-fledged war.

I think the people in Europe who are saying and doing these things to provoke us further are very irresponsible. This strategy really has no chance of succeeding. Either it will lead us into a nuclear conflict—maybe that's their aim—or it will have to bring more responsible people into decision-making positions. I mean people who can think about a positive agenda for engagement between Russia and the West and come up with a formula that would help us. Unfortunately, in most countries, the current Western elites are incapable not only of thinking creatively but also, I would say, of thinking without Russophobia. This Russophobia has completely poisoned their minds. They can't think any other way.

But they think in terms of hatred toward Russia and see it as a zero-sum game: if Russia wins, Europe loses. They don't see any middle ground, any chance for compromise. And you also need to bear in mind that this anti-Russia project, which has been underway in Ukraine since at least 2014, is their pet project. The elites currently in power in most European countries have confirmed their support for it, and that's why they can't denounce it without losing face. They can't accept any other

logic. They think this absolutely ugly regime that's in power in Ukraine should survive. And I think that's the biggest obstacle to peace, even bigger than finding a security equation for Ukraine or whatever. The key issue is what will happen to Ukraine and what will happen to its absolutely inhumane policies toward the Russian-speaking population.

In fact, under Zelensky, this country has become a dictatorship, a concentration camp. That's not my impression; it's the impression of a lot of Ukrainians who are now speaking out, sometimes even openly. This is the key issue, and I think it may be even harder to resolve than the security crisis we're facing. These European allies are so committed to supporting the Zelensky regime. How can they turn on a dime and make the changes needed to return to a more normal policy and accept the situation as it stands? Unfortunately, it's hard to imagine that happening with the current European leaders, and I think that's very dangerous.

#Glenn

I had a talk a while ago with George Beebe, the former director of Russian analysis at the CIA. He made the point that a lot of what the Russians are asking for is already covered by existing agreements. That includes the focus on indivisible security and the concern about restoring the fundamental rights of Russian speakers in Ukraine. A lot of this is covered by everything from the Helsinki Accords to the Charter of Paris for a New Europe and the OSCE framework. So there should be a way to find some consensus on issues where the sides seem to be so far apart.

#Dmitry Polyanskiy

The rules are there. The rules are there, as I said. They're written. They're known. They're not contested. The problem is that the West doesn't play by the rules. When the West sees that the rules are leading to a situation where its supremacy, its domination, is being questioned, it creates another set of rules and says, "No, no, no, we'll play the game by a different set of rules. The old rules are still important, but we have another rules-based international order," as they say. And that's where the problems begin.

#Glenn

Let me ask you, though: What are the Vienna discussions that the Russian delegation to the OSCE recently brought up?

#Dmitry Polyanskiy

Thank you for asking. This was a very important move on our part, and it's also our response to not being given the floor at important OSCE events. You know, the third dimension, which deals with human rights, is a very important part of the OSCE agenda. But the West has tried to monopolize it by organizing a lot of events without Russia and then claiming that they're OSCE events. The Human

Dimension Conference in Warsaw is one example. So to make our voice heard, we organized these Vienna discussions, which were met with great enthusiasm by many.

The current Swiss chairmanship of the OSCE took part. It was a full-day event. About 40 speakers participated, and we managed to cover a lot of humanitarian issues related to cooperation within the OSCE. We weren't trying to leave anyone out. Everyone was invited to speak and make their point. We think this dialogue on human rights within the OSCE should, first, follow the rules we all know and agreed on and, second, be inclusive. And that's what we mean when we promote events like the Vienna discussions, which I hope will have a positive follow-up.

#Glenn

Well, Mr. Polyanskiy, thank you so much for taking the time. I appreciate you sharing your perspective.

#Dmitry Polyanskiy

Thank you very much.