

Jack Matlock: The Cuban Missile Crisis & NATO's War in Ukraine

Jack F. Matlock, Jr, was the U.S. Ambassador to the USSR, 1987–1991, and had a key role in negotiating an end to the Cold War. Ambassador Matlock also served at the US embassy in Moscow during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Ambassador Matlock discusses the lessons of the past to end the Ukraine War and avoid nuclear war with Russia. Buy Diesen merchandise: <https://diesen-shop.fourthwall.com/en-nok> Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: <https://glenndiesen.substack.com/> X /Twitter: https://x.com/Glenn_Diesen Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/glenndiesen> Support the research by Prof. Glenn Diesen: PayPal: <https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/glenndiesen> Buy me a Coffee: buymeacoffee.com/gdieseng Go Fund Me: <https://gofund.me/09ea012f> Books by Prof. Glenn Diesen: <https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B09FPQ4MDL>

#Glenn

Welcome back, everyone. We have the great privilege today of being joined by Ambassador Jack Matlock, the former U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union, who, together with President Reagan, negotiated an end to the Cold War. So thank you very much for coming on the program, and also thank you for your contribution to world history.

#Jack Matlock

Glad to be with you.

#Glenn

So you were stationed at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow as a young diplomat during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. I wanted to ask you about, well, how diplomacy prevented catastrophe and also ideally link it to the lessons for today's confrontation with Russia, as NATO appears to be heading toward a direct war with Russia. Well, I guess just as an opening question, what do you remember most vividly about those days during the Cuban Missile Crisis?

#Jack Matlock

Well, at the time... no, we did not understand all of the dangers that occurred. Actually, we came very close to an exchange of nuclear weapons, which could have escalated into a catastrophic conflict. The situation was that after the United States had tried to invade Cuba using Cuban exiles,

which failed, the Cuban leader, Fidel Castro, asked the Soviet Union to station intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Cuba, which they did secretly, though our intelligence began to pick that up. And there was a diplomatic confrontation beginning in the UN and with messages back and forth.

And the situation was that once we discovered that there were intermediate-range missiles in Cuba, which could have reached Miami and even much further into the United States, that was considered totally unacceptable, and Kennedy was advised by the military that he should attack those bases. Fortunately, he turned that down. We learned later that if we had, actually, the commander in charge—I think it was a colonel—could have fired those missiles if he had come under attack. So it was fortunate for all of us that Kennedy turned that advice down. But there was then an exchange of messages with Khrushchev. We did not then have what we later had, a hotline, so that they could, in effect, communicate quickly.

So these letters—one of them, one of the key letters—was delivered to us immediately, in the American Embassy in Moscow, about 10 in the evening. And we had to translate it and transmit it to Washington by telegraph. I was one of the key translators working on the message. At that time, of course, we could not transmit Russian; we didn't have Cyrillic in our system. So it had to be translated in any case before Kennedy could have read it. But we were able to get a summary to him very quickly, and the full text in less than two hours. It was nip and tuck. And eventually, what was decided was that the Soviets would remove those missiles from Cuba and announce that they would do so.

At the same time, they pointed out that we had nuclear missiles stationed in Turkey, which could hit the Soviet Union. And Kennedy agreed to remove those eventually, but not to announce it. So, in effect, we had to make it look as if Khrushchev had backed down to our pressure. That, I guess, was important to Kennedy politically. The fact was, we made a deal for both to withdraw. Now, what we learned later was that there was a real danger of the place going nuclear because, at one point, the American destroyers had located a Soviet submarine which had nuclear torpedoes aboard, and it was forcing it—it needed to come up for air—and it was shadowing it. We learned later that the commander of that submarine wanted to give an order to torpedo the destroyer.

Fortunately, the commander of the squadron was on the same submarine and countermanded the order. Goodness knows what would have happened if that had gone through. So, looking back over this, and later as the Cold War ended, we had meetings with the people involved—several meetings on both sides—to discuss these issues. And at the time, it was clear that we on the American side did not know how close we actually came to that. Also, looking back, when people talk now about international law and what all, you have to say that, in effect, Cuba had every right under international law to ask for protection. They had been attacked. And so our threats were, you might say, not justified under international law, but they certainly were justified in terms of avoiding a conflict.

So, looking back, I would say that that was a very close call, but it taught both of us that we really had to deal with this issue. And, of course, we did over the next 20 years or so, finally beginning to bring down the number of nuclear weapons and to set up rules that would make this sort of confrontation less likely. Unfortunately, since the end of the Cold War, most of these moves have now been removed. We are back in a situation without the arms control negotiations we had in the Cold War. Step by step, these have been abandoned, I think, much to the danger of the world today, because we are now in at least two conflicts where nuclear weapons could eventually be used. One of these is the war in Ukraine, and the other...

#Jack Matlock

In the Middle East against Iran. Now, Iran doesn't have nuclear weapons, but Israel does. And it seems to me that today we are forgetting Iran. The lessons, and particularly in Europe, they're forgetting the lessons we learned during the Cold War. One of the most important agreements that we later negotiated during the Reagan administration was to place intermediate-range missiles in Europe to defend Europe against, in that case, the Soviet Union. And the point of these was that we then got rid of them with an agreement so that both sides removed these intermediate-range missiles.

I might say that in those days, when we did classified war games, it was clear that if nuclear weapons were ever used in Europe, they would be used against the very countries that were being defended. It was a ridiculous situation. But later, we pulled out of those agreements. They are no longer there. And it would seem that the participation of the West Europeans and the United States in the war in Ukraine is now raising that danger, I think, to a very high level.

#Glenn

Why do you think the rules have gone away? Because when I look at the diplomats today, they seem to view compromise as a source of weakness. It's often referred to as appeasement. They do not accept any red lines. They also do not seem to have any fear of nuclear weapons anymore. This is also portrayed as a weakness. How do you make sense of what happened to diplomacy and diplomats in general? Why don't we do the basics anymore, such as considering the security concerns of opponents? This is something that often strikes me. We don't discuss what Russia's worried about. We don't discuss Iran. We don't discuss China. All of this is almost seen as treasonous — that you shouldn't have empathy with the opponent, that you should ignore their security concerns.

#Jack Matlock

But it's hard for me to understand why they are taking the stand that they have. Because if nuclear weapons are used, they are extraordinarily vulnerable. And the thing is, in facilitating Ukrainian

attacks on Russia or Russia-controlled territory, they are stimulating within Russia a very strong campaign to use nuclear weapons. Anybody who reads the press can see that there are elements there. These have been, I think, constrained by Putin, despite his reputation in the West. And I certainly don't approve of the invasion of Ukraine. But in his eyes, it was provoked. It was provoked by the military interference of the U.S. and other NATO countries in that conflict.

So it seems to me that the Europeans are ignoring the danger to themselves. And meanwhile, by prolonging this war, Ukraine is suffering greatly. And the idea that they're defending democracy is absurd. The current Ukrainian government was the result of a coup d'état. And second, the current president has not been elected. They missed elections at least two years ago. If polls are any indication, he could not be elected today. I think most Ukrainians want an end to the war. And yet they're being encouraged by major West European countries — the UK, Germany, France — to continue this war. It is not in their interest to do so.

And aside from Ukraine, Russia does not threaten them. Now, when they start supplying intelligence, supplying targeting information, supplying the actual weapons for Ukraine to attack Russia, in Russian eyes, they become possible, you know, subjects to attack themselves, particularly the transport routes of these. And I think that they are totally ignoring this idea. Meanwhile, of course, we have the continuation of fighting in the Near East, which is affecting not only oil supplies but also things like fertilizer and so on, and is about to, I think, bring the danger of casting us all into a tremendous recession.

#Jack Matlock

As an American, I would have to say that most of this military equipment and so on, we are borrowing the money to pay for it. We have the highest deficit in money.

#Jack Matlock

In history, I think. And this really, I think, cannot be continued for much longer. And it's really hard for me to understand why these governments don't find a way to end that war. In the case of Ukraine, those borders which Ukraine has defended were created by Hitler and Stalin. They were created for the purpose of controlling that area. But those in Ukraine that were not historically part of Ukraine or not historically part of the Russian Empire, they were in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, are now virtually controlled by neo-Nazis. And as this becomes more apparent, it's very clear that, given what happened internally in Ukraine, when the original guarantees to the Russian language and other nationalities were given.

This was taken away so that the internal problems in Ukraine were very great. And to sacrifice lives and property and everything over borders that were created by the two greatest dictators of the 20th century is absolutely absurd. I think most people simply do not understand how those borders were there or what happened internally in Ukraine, which brought on this war. And let me also add

that, you know, unfortunately, the United States has set a precedent for attacking countries which have not attacked them. This was certainly true in the attack on Iraq, a total attack which occupied it, which at the time not only Russia but also Germany and France opposed.

They were correct to do so. But another issue is that the expansion of NATO, once NATO started expanding after the end of the Cold War, turned what had been a defense alliance into an offensive alliance, and one which obviously countries that were not in it, like Russia, would oppose. So it seems to me today people have totally misunderstood the history of these. They are in a very dangerous situation. And now, when we get into these conflicts like Ukraine and also now Iran, we tend to forget how they originated and how actually they're not going to be solved by military action. And they're bringing the whole world, I think, into a catastrophic course.

#Glenn

One of the things I find, I guess, extraordinary is, if you go back to the 1990s, there appears to have been a very vigorous debate, I remember, that is, especially in the United States, about expanding NATO. It seemed like there was a lot of opposition by leading diplomats, such as yourself, recognizing that this could put us essentially... well, in another Cuban Missile Crisis, as we now see with Ukraine. However, slowly, it just seemed to go away. Not right away. In 2008, of course, when NATO promised future membership to Ukraine, you had huge opposition then as well. You had the former CIA director making the point that this would trigger war. You had Angela Merkel saying this would be seen by Moscow as a declaration of war. But why has it become so controversial to recognize that NATO expansion, that is, expansion of an anti-Russian military alliance, would provoke conflict? Because it appears that even the discourse seems to omit this thing.

#Jack Matlock

Well, unfortunately, I think that the American governments from, you might say, the 1990s on, adopted a foreign policy which, it seemed to me, ideologically was similar to the Soviet policy of what they called the Brezhnev Doctrine, which was that if a country once became socialist—and I'll put that in quotes, because these were countries ruled by the Communist Party—then once they became socialist, one had to defend socialism if there was a challenge to it. And this meant that, for example, the Soviet Union intervened in Hungary first and then in Czechoslovakia in order, so-called, to preserve socialism. We talked about spreading democracy.

Well, first of all, we didn't define democracy very carefully. But the idea that an outside power, particularly using economic sanctions or military force, can create a democracy in another country is simply absurd. It can't happen. In fact, if it's from the outside, internal politics is usually resisted almost everywhere at one point. And so it seems to me that that was a false doctrine, and we had what we called a liberal world order, which was coupled with a military doctrine that said we had to dominate everything. Full-spectrum dominance was part of the military doctrine, which was proclaimed during the second Bush administration.

You think other countries are going to pick up on that? I mean, it just seems to me that we forget all of the sort of basic, both moral and philosophical lessons which history and also religion should have taught us. I think most religions and philosophical traditions have the equivalent of "do unto others as you would have others do unto you." And yet this is precisely the principle that is now being forgotten by almost all sides in these conflicts. I would also say that the whole idea of diplomacy seems to have gone by the, you know, nobody is applying it anymore. Simply force, propaganda, arguments which are often based simply on emotion.

Using terms that could mean almost anything, and often in the course it's language—language which doesn't produce, I would say, rational thinking, but simply emotional surges. I think all of this is quite dangerous. And given the other problems we're facing on the planet—the destruction of the environment and increasing problems with the weather and the consequences—along with the potential that artificial intelligence can produce more and more, I'd say, killing machines and ways of killing and destruction, I don't see how mankind is going to survive this if these continue. It's really that serious.

#Glenn

Well, what is the... what is the strategy now of NATO? Because you would think, given that we stand in front of a possible nuclear war, that they would want to put an end to this thing. But as you said before, the effort appears to be to prolong the war instead. Is the objective simply to defeat Russia, or is it to use the Ukrainians as cannon fodder to simply weaken Russia? What is the strategy of NATO today? It's a bit difficult to comprehend because they talk about defeating Russia, but how do you defeat the world's largest nuclear power when that nuclear power perceives itself to be fighting for its existence?

#Jack Matlock

It is very hard to predict these things. And I know many people think that, well, Vladimir Putin is losing power and could be removed. Who knows? Maybe so, although people have been predicting that for 10 years now. And it seems to me that in many ways he has sustained forces in Russia which are more dangerous. He is under pressure from factions to use nuclear weapons and to use them against those West Europeans who are supplying them and, in fact, daring them. I mean, if they hit, for example, some German or maybe a Polish facility, do you think that the U.S. or France or Germany is going to risk themselves by using nuclear weapons?

I mean, I don't think people are really facing that when you hear people like, you know, some of the EU leaders who are unelected and often represent some of the smallest countries in Europe acting in such a belligerent way. I would also point out that too many people think of Russia as—you know, the Soviet Union was not Russia. It was a communist-ruled country which actually preserved the languages of its minorities, even promoted them as long as they followed the party line. So it was

not a matter of Russia trying to wipe out these nationalities. But now... it was Russia who led the breakup of the Soviet Union. That occurred not because of Western pressure, but because of internal process.

And Boris Yeltsin, who was the elected leader of the Russian Federation, led the breakup of the Soviet Union. So the idea that the Russians were always the bad guys—I mean, Yeltsin was on the side of the Baltic countries. When there was violence there, he ordered Russians not to interfere. And now, you know, people are saying, oh, the Russians are always the bad guys, they're the imperialists. Well, yes, they were imperialists. So were the rest of us. And so this thing, I would also say that this matter of the sanctions is totally one-sided. Who sanctioned the United States when we invaded Iraq and occupied it without any threat to the United States? Of course, they couldn't.

And the United States has derived considerable advantages from maintaining sort of a world payment system and so on. To use that and deprive the Russians of it when we had urged them to throw off communism and have a market economy—and they did it with great, I would say, damage in many ways. The 90s were a terrible time for them. It wasn't democratic, and yet now that they have entered the world economy, and after Putin became president, paid off all their debts after having been bankrupt, now they're subject to suffocating sanctions—except they're not suffocating them. I just simply do not understand. All I can say is we have a generation of leaders who did not experience the Cold War and seem not to have understood the lessons that we should have learned at that time.

#Glenn

Well, let me ask this last question here. When you were there at the embassy in the 1960s, you guys found an end to the Cuban Missile Crisis. You and Reagan negotiated an end to the Cold War. Again, it was a diplomatic pathway there as well. How would you look at today's crisis, though, over Ukraine? How is it possible to resolve this war?

#Jack Matlock

Well, I think the only solution is going to be redrawing those borders. These are not, you might say, long-standing traditional borders of Ukraine. All that territory up until the end of the Cold War had been parts of other countries, other sovereign countries. And at first, I would say Russia not only observed respect for the territorial integrity, actually, but the conditions for that, I think, were pretty clear—that Ukraine not become part of a hostile military alliance. So, to retain that, Ukraine had to stay out of NATO, and NATO had to avoid trying to bring them in. And I think that was very clear to all of us.

When the whole question of NATO expansion came up in the late 1990s, I testified before Congress—the Congress of the United States—to the Foreign Relations Committee in the Senate, headed at that time by Joseph Biden. And I testified that it was a huge mistake to begin to expand NATO because if

that was continued, it could bring us to a very serious crisis. Well, the fact was that the argument for expanding NATO was that some would say "out of area or out of business." In other words, we had to use it as an offensive alliance. And in effect, it was. And although Russia accepted some of the early additions—those in Central Europe and then the Baltic countries—I was in New York when Vladimir Putin, then sort of a new president of Russia, came, and he gave a talk at Columbia University.

And I asked him directly during that about the three Baltic countries joining NATO. He said he didn't think that was necessary, but that in effect he would tolerate it as long as there were no bases there. And this is another thing—we began to put military bases in these countries in Eastern Europe even before the question of Ukraine's membership came up. And this was very much opposed, and I think for good reason, because although the systems that we were putting in Poland and Romania were anti-ballistic missile systems, nevertheless, those systems could be used offensively with a change of software. So it was clear why any Russian leader would have opposed that. And yet, you know, issue after issue, we began to treat Russia differently from others.

We had sanctions which prevented them from being part of the World Trade Organization over immigration practices, which had actually ended in the last year of the Soviet Union and had never been an issue in Russia. But we kept them on for other reasons, bringing China into the World Trade Organization more than a decade before we allowed Russia in. And then we carried out sanctions over so-called human rights violations when such violations were also occurring in the United States. And this whole issue of sanctioning other countries for things they do at home, I think, has been totally misplaced. And yet this is something that the Europeans are now carrying even further than the United States.

And yet, you know, obviously much of German industry is not going to be competitive without, say, Russian gas. And to tolerate such things as the sabotage of the Nord Stream pipeline, just to deprive Russia of a market, I think violates not only traditional international law—it violates, in my view, simply basic decency. And so this idea that Russia is the only aggressor and has to be sanctioned when other countries are also carrying out arguably even more serious aggressions really baffles me—how anyone who really understands the history of these issues and what is involved can go this course.

The only way, and you know, as these wars go on, they become more and more difficult to settle. And you get more and more damage on all sides. And the point is that if, miraculously, the original borders of Ukraine could be restored, Ukraine could not rule those areas. It would be tremendous instability. And anyone who knows this issue—you know, I'm one, I happen to know both the Russian and Ukrainian languages, and I'm familiar with the history of that area—it is something that right now the politicians totally ignore and totally distort. And this is to the damage of everybody involved.

So the only way it's going to be solved is by Ukraine now relinquishing some of those territories, and, you know, how much may be subject to negotiation. But emotions are so hard on both sides, and both sides have been so dug in, trying to achieve something which is not achievable by these methods. Meanwhile, we see the Europeans putting more and more money into defense. They would not be threatened by Russia in any sense if they weren't interfering in Ukraine. And this idea—and of course my own country is bankrupting us with all of this emphasis on the military—and as we see further developments, we are seeing more and more means of destruction, which, if continued, is simply not sustainable.

#Glenn

Ambassador, thank you so much for sharing your insights and your experiences. These are troubling times.

#Jack Matlock

We should be more optimistic, but until our ears wake up to the basic things, we are making mistake after mistake. Thank you for the opportunity to be on.