Washington Is Destroying the USA to Rule the World | Dr. Arthur Khachikian

How come that, as Jimmy Dore says, "there are homeless people under every bridge in America, and they don't even fix the bridges"? How is it possible that in the nominally richest economy in the world there is so much poverty, drugs, and despair and why did that problem grow over the unipolar moment when the USA was the unquestioned sole superpower on this planet? Well, turns out, hegemony is not good for the hegemon. Clinging to global dominance comes with heavy costs, born by the most vulnerable of society—a process that already the USSR had to go through and now it's the USA that is learning the same lesson. Today I'm talking to Dr. Arthur Khachikian. Arthur holds a PhD in International Relations from Stanford University, where he wrote a dissertation on Great Power Politics and Intervention in the international system. He currently teaches at an Armenian University in Yerevan, the capital city. Today we want to discuss the very large picture of contemporary world politics.

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We became like the Soviet Union. We started wasting our money, $14 trillion—it's a number I've heard—declaring wars all over the world and losing them, not even winning. I mean, this horrendous waste of resources when in the U.S. we have such serious problems as health care and education. Our middle class has disappeared. Fifty percent of Americans are living paycheck to paycheck. I mean, what is this? This incredible inequality in income, so many problems. And America always comes last.

#M2

Hello, everybody. This is Pascal from Neutrality Studies, and today I'm talking to Dr. Arthur Khachikian. Arthur holds a PhD in international relations from Stanford University, where he wrote a dissertation on great power politics and intervention in the international system. He currently teaches at an Armenian university in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, and he is a friend of Professor Jeffrey Sachs, who actually connected the two of us. Today, we want to discuss the very large picture of contemporary world politics. So, Arthur, welcome.

#M3

Thank you very much. It's a pleasure. I hope I deserve the title of being a friend of Professor Sachs. Thank you very much for having me. And I know you have hosted many, much more important people. But if there are any thoughts I can share with you, I would be delighted.

#M2

The important thing is the analysis. And that's where I would like to pick your brain because you grew up and then studied during a very interesting time period, right? You were born a citizen of the Soviet Union, and then that citizenship ended. You became, I mean, were again Armenian, also on passport, and went to the United States. Can you tell us a little bit about the atmosphere at the end of the Cold War and what shaped your outlook on international politics?

#M3

Thank you for saying that. In a way, I am the product of the end of the Cold War. I'm a product of Gorbachev's new thinking. And I always joke with my American friends in the '90s. I joked with them at Stanford. They said, you know, we won the Cold War. And I said, no, no, you didn't win the Cold War. I won the Cold War. Look at me. I came here all the way from the Soviet Union with $4 in my pocket. And, you know, I came to this amazing university. And I will be forever grateful to those people who accepted me there. And I did my master's and PhD and worked with some remarkable people.

And so I was that living bridge between the United States, Russia, and Armenia, the Soviet Union—what was the Soviet Union—and the United States. It was really an incredible time. I'm in Armenia now. It was here that, when I was a high school student, I listened to the BBC, Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, and Radio Liberty at night, which was kind of dangerous because if anybody found out, I would get in trouble. So I was kind of a known dissident back in my high school. Once, I criticized Marx, and I got in a lot of trouble with the principal.

But afterwards, when Gorbachev came to power, these hopes that we had for a future, this inspiration, it was an incredible time, a very inspirational time. This kind of, you speak some German—I don't speak German a lot—but, you know, it was kind of this ode of joy, "Freude, schöner Götterfunken," that kind of atmosphere. And it was here in Armenia, I had a friend with whom I worked at the Red Cross, Erich Wolstein. And when the Berlin Wall came down, he was driving in the streets of Yerevan with a German flag, celebrating the fact that the wall came down. It was an incredible feeling. We thought that we were now going to put aside the hatred, the war, this propaganda.

We're going to be one family, one Europe. And that's what Gorbachev actually wanted to do. We talked about a common European house, if you remember, a common European home, Europe from even like a common security space, I guess, from Vancouver to Vladivostok. There were some really far-reaching statements. I also remember Ronald Reagan. I was quite fond of him. He was a very, very charming person. He came to Moscow, and on Red Square, they asked him, do you still believe that the Soviet Union is an empire of evil? And he said, no, I don't. It was a great time, this feeling of reconciliation, and friendship, and goodwill, and hope.

And, you know, nobody can believe this now, not to mention Yeltsin's speech in Washington when he said, God bless America. And then American, French, and English troops marching on Red Square. Can you believe this? No one would believe this now. But they marched together to celebrate a common victory. It was a very inspirational time. And look where we are now. It all fell apart like a house of cards. This whole new world order fell to pieces. It's a shambles. All of it is forgotten. We are now witnessing the bloodiest, most devastating conflict in the world and in Europe since 1945. And, you know, we can only hope that the efforts made by President Trump and President Putin will produce some results and this bloodshed will end.

But it's just a total collapse, a fiasco of all these hopes and all this inspiration, this atmosphere of hatred, in fact, even worse than the Cold War. It's much more dangerous now than the Cold War. We witness the erosion of nuclear deterrence. The concept of nuclear deterrence is eroding. There are open discussions of nuclear exchanges, which did not really take place during the Cold War, maybe with one or two exceptions. With the advent of hypersonic missiles, nuclear proliferation, and missile defense systems, it's a much more unpredictable and dangerous environment than what we had. And this kind of intensity of propaganda, I don't think... You know, we had that in the '70s or the '80s. It wasn't like this. Not this much hatred, open anti-Russian hatred. I mean, I've never seen anything like this.

In those days, you separated the communist regime from Russia and the Russian people. Even Western leaders did that. Reagan did that. Margaret Thatcher, another hero of mine, did that too. There was a very careful distinction. And my final point—I'm sorry, my answer is very long—but there is a huge change in the quality of leadership. I mean, we had people, we had visionaries. We had people like Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, Helmut Kohl, and François Mitterrand. And with all his faults, Mikhail Gorbachev. Of course, it's very controversial to say this now. In Russia, they don't like it when you say this. But they were people who thought philosophically. They had this systemic, holistic vision of the world. They had amazing foresight and wisdom, which is more than I can say about some of our leaders today, sadly.

#M2

How was it? This is on my mind the whole time, and I ask this a lot, and I still can't wrap my head around it. How did we lose that peace? How did we Europeans, and I include all of us, you know, from the Caucasus and Russia and all the way to West Asia and Europe, how did we lose that? I mean, it's such a dumb thing to do. It was such a hopeful time. And you look back at it and yes, okay, sure. You can say, like the Scorpions and a certain part, there also was some sort of CIA involvement and, you know, the propaganda. The propaganda was there, and Radio Free Europe always was a propaganda thing. But there was genuine aspiration, especially from the side of the Soviet Union, to make this better.

And, you know, one of the things that Jack Matlock, the last U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union, keeps saying time and again is that the Cold War ended two years before the collapse of the Soviet

Union because it was in the strategic interest of Washington and Moscow to end it. And only two years later, the Soviet Union collapsed, which actually George Bush Sr. didn't even want. He famously had a speech in Ukraine, in Kyiv, in a parliamentary building, saying, like, you should not secede. Everybody was afraid of what would happen. And then we went into the 1990s. And then what happened? How did we lose the peace?

#M3

Well, of course, you have people who can speak with more authority, but I'll just offer my thoughts. I think there were several reasons. The main one, I think, was what I call the trap of grandeur. When a person gets a lot of money suddenly, they usually lose their head. They don't know what to do with it, and they make silly decisions. When a power and when leaders of a certain power just become too strong and they feel that they can do whatever they want, it plays a trick on them. There was a famous British politician, Lord Acton, in the 19th century who said, "All power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely." It's very dangerous for any particular country to be all-powerful and to be always right.

It plays a trick on your mind. Now, I must say that there were a lot of people, and we'll talk about it if you like, many people in the United States who warned about this. So there were a lot of very wise people who had foresight, amazing foresight. And some of them have been mentioned on your program before. There were people who said we shouldn't lose this chance to build one world where we could cooperate with Russia. Russia is a vital partner. And I will go into this with your permission. There was a letter by 50 senators and diplomats written in 1997 saying that there is no threat emanating from Russia and that the expansion of NATO would be, they said, a mistake, an error of historic proportions. They said that.

There is this famous statement by George Kennan, the architect of containment, which has been mentioned before, saying that this is a tragic mistake. It will bring on another Cold War. An esteemed colleague, William Perry, former Secretary of Defense, almost resigned over it, and he said again it's a needless provocation. You have the very famous telegram, again referencing William Burns, who sent a telegram in 2008 saying that the inclusion of Ukraine is the brightest of all red lines. You know, person after person was warning against it. I'm in no way comparing myself to all those people, but there was a conference at Stanford in 1995 or '97, I believe, and there was a debate on this issue.

And certainly it was a bit of a show because the issue had been decided by then. But I wrote a small article and said that the expansion of NATO to the east, if it didn't take into consideration Russia's interests, would lead to a war in eastern Ukraine and the Caucasus, and would build a new Berlin Wall and a new Iron Curtain, hundreds of kilometers to the east. I wrote it back then, and many of my colleagues were in agreement. But I think what happened is, number one, there was organizational and institutional inertia. There were organizations, research institutions, and think tanks that were created for the business of the Cold War, and they made a lot of money on it.

And for them to suddenly stop functioning and find another job or find another application for their resources was not very easy. There was also psychological inertia. There were a lot of people who could not overcome their hatred, shall we say, for Russia and continued to see Russia as an enemy. There were people from certain countries in Eastern Europe who very understandably, I must emphasize, understandably had certain feelings on the subject, because it is true that they suffered a lot in the past at the hands of the Soviet Union. And we could understand that.

Of course, we have to accept that. But we didn't have the wisdom to find the right way of addressing their grievances and moving forward. And there was also the pressure of the diaspora groups, ethnic diasporas in the United States. Bill Bradley, the U.S. senator, speaks about that. He also says that it was a blunder of fundamental proportions. He says that it was done under these domestic pressures and Bill Clinton needed those votes and he needed that platform to win over some of his supporters in the United States. So all of that combined, I know, brought this result, and I wrote about this result. And I must say, when you end a large war in human history, there's usually what we call a post-war order. And there are certain rules for how this needs to be done.

So if you want, I can go into that. If you look at how these post-war orders emerge, every time there is a major war, the world leaders come together and say, we don't want this. Never again. Let's come up with a way of preventing these wars. It's a cyclical process. For example, there is the Thirty Years' War and the Peace of Westphalia. And there's the Duke of Sully and the grand design of Henry IV. You know, this is the French king, European Federation, 15 states, equality, equilibrium, common decision-making. Let's not do this anymore. It doesn't work. There's the War of Spanish Succession, the Napoleonic Wars, the Concert of Europe that emerges after that, the League of Nations, et cetera, et cetera, the United Nations.

So every time these people come together, there are certain principles on which this is built. The principle of balance and equilibrium, right? Collective security, restraint, mutual concessions, and very importantly, especially it's very visible in the Concert of Europe, do not exclude a great power, do not corner a great power. There are many other rules. All of those rules were violated. We went from collective security thinking to bloc politics, partial security. For some reason, politicians, they should know better. They know that security, you cannot ensure your security unilaterally. When you try to make yourself very, very secure, you start threatening your neighbor. This is IR theory 101. This is from Thucydides to Herz.

#M2

And the security dilemma. It's not even difficult to explain. It's really, I mean, yeah, IR 101.

#M3

But what is so funny is I feel like, should I go back to college again? Because you taught me all these things, and somehow this knowledge didn't make it up the organizational chain, because these people should know this. Thucydides, you remember, the construction of defensive walls in Potidaea and Athens was seen as an act of war, even though it was a purely defensive step. So 2,500 years ago, we knew what the security dilemma is. In the 18th century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, your compatriot, by the way, I understand, said that war comes from your efforts to make peace. When you try to ensure peace, you bring on war because you try to make yourself secure at the expense of others.

This is IR 101. Balancing theory—we've known this for centuries—when one side tries to increase its power, its opponent or the other powers usually try to balance against it. It was very easy to see that Russia was going to drift towards China. I was there. I was a student. I was an interpreter. And by the way, I saw that era where American and Russian officers were walking hand in hand, smiling, discussing a common European security structure. I was there in the '90s. I was translating for them. And I remember a Russian guy said, "You know, if you push us too much, we're going to go towards China. We're going to go east." And people didn't believe it.

And famously, Zbigniew Brzezinski, in his "Grand Chessboard," said that it wasn't going to be possible, and we need to use Ukraine to make sure Russia never becomes strong again. So that's that balancing. Another rule is inclusion. So the whole European integration project, conceptually, why was it put in place? Because we wanted to prevent a new war. We wanted to tie Germany and France so much that it wouldn't be even conceivable for them to go to another war together. And it worked. European integration was a way of uniting the nations of Western Europe and Central Europe and making sure war never happens again. We put that principle on its head.

We used economic integration not as a uniting force, but as a divisive force, a force for dividing Europe. And we made the European community the avant-garde for NATO. We made economic integration a cover for military integration. We coupled those things together. And instead of uniting nations, it started dividing nations, which is exactly the opposite. So some of the nations, some of the post-Soviet republics, had to choose east or west. Do you want the West or do you want the East? Do you want Russia or do you want Europe? Which led to this terrible tragedy in Ukraine. Because clearly, these countries could have benefited from being a bridge between the two.

There were some samadhi principles: do not corner a great power, do not declare anybody a loser. I mean, look at the Concert of Europe. It worked for 40 years because France was included; France was not humiliated. And look at what happened. By the way, Russia did not lose the Cold War. As Ambassador Matlock famously said, they were treated like the loser, and they shouldn't have been. Look at what happened when France was cornered and humiliated in the late 19th century and when Germany was humiliated after World War I, the diktat. Look what happened with that. I mean, we know this. This is International Relations 101. Why did these people not know this? I will never know.

#M2

One observation and one question. The observation is you are absolutely right. One of the things that is constantly underestimated, especially by some realist colleagues, is the importance of these agreements, the moments when we actually end wars by pens, by striking pens. The Thirty Years' War, about 1815, the Vienna Conference. The funny thing is these are always big parties. These people come together and have big parties. To me, the agreement that actually began the process to finally end the Cold War was also an agreement in 1975, the Helsinki Final Acts. The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe is the greatest achievement of the Cold War when, with the strike of a pen, you basically hammered out the principles on which, actually, in the end, Gorbachev and so on said, those are the principles and we're going to abide by them and, well, whatever happens, happens.

And they wound it down. So you're right about the megalomania. But the question now, to me, is how far is our guilt as international relations scholars if we create these concepts and then do not realize that we ourselves are not capable of applying them? What I want to say with that is, how is it that we actually understand the security dilemma, and yet our colleagues—maybe not you and I, but our colleagues—are not able to apply it? A very important experience of mine was that a teacher of mine at my university here in Japan literally taught us the security dilemma, but he also argued that Japan needs to have more weapons in order to be secure against China.

And when I asked him about that, he said, like, oh, but this is going to kick off the security dilemma. He said, like, no, no, no, no, because the Chinese would understand that we only need those weapons for self-defense. I mean, they are defensive weapons, even if they can be used for offensive means, but they would understand because we tell them that's what we're going to use them for. So that's the same person. He's very smart, very good mind. So is it something in the way that we understand or try to analyze international relations that creates the pitfalls of them continuing to do the same stupidity?

#M3

There is something to be said about that. I thought about it before my interview. There is a cognitive psychology aspect and there is an organizational politics aspect. In cognitive psychology, there are a lot of biases that we have as people when we think about the world. That argument, they will understand that this is just defense, was used by a very famous politician. I will not name him because I know him very closely, and you shouldn't talk about him if you want to ever travel to Russia. So he said they should just understand that this is a defensive alliance. We're not threatening you. If you know anything about international relations, you know that in IR, there is no difference between defense and offense. There is no difference. I mean, I just cited an example of Thucydides. Building a wall in Athens was seen as an act of war.

It was a purely defensive wall, but it was seen as an act of war 2,500 years ago. We know this. There's the cognitive aspect of it. We always think of our way of thinking and our actions as just, moral, and rational. Well-intentioned and rational. And we always think of the opponent as evil, as someone who has bad intentions, who misinterprets the world. He doesn't understand that I'm good, basically. I'm good, I'm rational, my intentions are good, and I do what I must. He is not. He is my opponent. He is evil. He has bad intentions. He's trying to trick me. We never assume that anything that happened accidentally can actually happen accidentally. We see intention on the other side, which was one of the reasons why the Cuban Missile Crisis escalated so far. So he should just understand that I'm good. It's very normal.

It's very human. Another thing, what you said, why did this academic knowledge not make it up the organizational ladder? My observation—this is not a theory that I've tested scientifically—is that wise people, people who are in education, who educate themselves, see the world as more complex. They see complexity. They see many different variables. And in many cases, they are equilibrium-oriented. People who may not have spent a lot of time in education see the world as more simple, simpler. They see a few variables. There's a simpler world, and therefore, there's a simpler explanation for everything. So they usually have simple solutions. Wise and educated people usually think, and they are full of self-doubt and restraint, and they're very humble.

People like this are usually not welcome in politics, right? People who are in politics and these organizations want simple solutions and people who are full of self-confidence. Sadly, these are different types of people. And they're also political narcissists. I mean, I don't mean anybody in particular, but it's very tempting to declare yourself the next Caesar or the next Napoleon, the owner of the world, to project your ideas on the world just because you have the power to do so. And powerful countries have this tendency, right? I mean, take Woodrow Wilson, the most idealistic U.S. president, a great person, but he was an academic in politics. He didn't really fit in there, if you read Niebuhr and Carr. Or the Russian Bolsheviks.

They had their vision of the world. It was based on class struggle and the victory of the proletariat, and they thought the whole world should follow. Trotsky believed that there would be a proletarian revolution when he came to negotiate with the Germans in Brest-Litovsk. He didn't even stop his propaganda; he started talking to the German participants at the conference, trying to convert them. It's this thing about projecting your vision on the world that comes with power and with this trap of grandeur. I think it happens. It's also, you know, people who are humble, who think about equilibrium and about complex solutions. They usually don't make it up that organizational ladder. It's my theory. I haven't tested this scientifically yet.

#M2

It's, you know, one of the things that I came to understand is that it has nothing to do with the degree of education. Some of the smartest, some of the best analysts of international relations, I tend to find in taxis. Taxi drivers tend to be very well-educated. Thus, in current politics, actually,

maybe it's just my sampling, but I have several experiences where I travel abroad and strike up a conversation with the taxi driver, and the taxi driver is very well-informed about local politics and connects that, because they're often from abroad, with what's happening at home. Same here, same in Armenia. They're very smart. And so it has nothing to do with whether you went to university to study this. It has to do with how you think, on how you're able to connect pieces of information. So are we lacking kind of an organizational theory of international relations that would explain how information flows or fails to flow and inform decision-making?

#M3

Oh, we have it. I mean, we have it. We have the theory of how this works. We have organizational theory. We have cognitive psychology. They do explain how a lot of times organizations become blind to new information. They think about everything in terms of the past, you know, the past wars, past experiences, and people have these blinders on. You have your psychological blinders. We're usually closed to new information. Our way of thinking is based on our past experiences, life-changing experiences, educational background. And once we form our opinions, it's very difficult to change them. We're very hesitant. And then we start selectively receiving information. We hear what we want to hear.

And we ignore the information that does not correspond to our pre-existing views. It's Jervis. He wrote this almost 30 years ago. It's a well-known thing. And then you surround yourself with people who say yes. You surround yourself with people who are afraid to tell you what you don't want to hear. And then this becomes a self-replicating process. Both the leader and the organization put blinders on, and they only receive the information they want to receive. They see what they want to see. It was easy to see. I mean, there are dozens and dozens of people who were warning that the expansion of NATO is a fundamental mistake. Huge names. I just gave you a few of them.

#M2

Many, many more.

#M3

But you don't want to change your worldview. Once you have formed your worldview—Russia is bad, the West is good—you use this opportunity. These people could not overcome the temptation to take revenge and to use the moment of Russia's weakness. They couldn't do that. Senator Bradley said, we kicked them when they were down. We completely mismanaged. And I must say, another thing I must say—and I'm sorry, I'll be brief—when I was there, I saw a genuine desire, a will, on the part of my Russian friends to be friends with Americans. And I'm friends with both parties, so I'm like in between. It's like my family members. I have my Russian family and my American family. I like them to get along.

But I saw this general desire. Russians genuinely admired Americans in the '90s. They thought that Americans were going to give them the answer to their problems. Another tragic thing that happened was the era of gangster capitalism. These reforms were implemented in such a way that when you talk about the '90s now, the Russians cringe. They say, well, democracy, liberalism, no, thank you very much. Can we just stick to what we have? Because they tried it in the '90s, and it was a horrible time. It was gangster capitalism. They were disappointed. But when I was at Stanford, there was delegation after delegation coming from Moscow, Russians trying to learn from Americans, teach us how to do business.

Teach us how to rewrite our laws. They were studying the juridical system in the United States. They wanted to adapt the Russian system to the American justice system. There was this general desire: we want to be your friends. Teach us what we have to do. Why would you waste such an opportunity? It's just so hard to understand. I guess some people just could not overcome these cognitive biases. And they continued, like I just said, they felt that Russians are only doing this because they're forced to do this. There is no genuine goodwill on their part. And it's natural. It's cognitive psychology, sadly.

#M2

And our colleague and friend we talked about, Professor Jeffrey Sachs, was part of the group who went over and gave advice, right? But he also advised the U.S., right? And said, like, what you need to do in order to get this running is this. And he keeps telling how he was rebuffed and how he was naive to believe that the U.S. would do this. But one just needs to look at how many brilliant Russian analysts and former Soviet citizens, you included, today converse and do their work in English, and how many Americans and Western Europeans do their work in Russian. It's not even a question, right? The level of willingness to work in and with the West was huge.

And then the level of rebuffing was equally huge. But something you pointed out at the beginning is very important here. The level of animosity and hatred toward Russia today is higher, and the propaganda is higher. Chas Freeman pointed this out on this channel two and a half years ago. He said he remembers the latter part of the Red Scare in the U.S., and he said that what we are experiencing today with Russia is worse. The propaganda we're experiencing is worse. How did that happen? I mean, how come that after all of this, today the situation of propaganda and Russian hate—not Russophobia, Russian hate—is higher than before?

#M3

Well, I think, first of all, Russia is seen as a weakness. In America, it's seen as a weak power. Even William Perry said that when he was objecting to NATO expansion, they said they are a third-rate country. They'll just do what we tell them to do. Basically, that's arrogance. That's the trap of grandeur I was talking about. Russia is weaker. In the Soviet times, there was a very clear distinction between the communist regime and the Russian people. When Ronald Reagan came to

Moscow, when he was speaking to the Soviet people, he always made a distinction between the Soviet regime and communism. He very carefully talked about that. But then he always praised the Russian people and the Russian culture. And now we have this attack, this totalitarian attack on anything Russian.

You speak Russian, people look at you. You say, you know, maybe this wasn't a good idea, and you're a Russian agent right away. Right away you get attacked. Such a degree of intolerance. One thing I want to say, I observe, and of course, I'll be accused of being an old man. I don't mind. I'm proud to be an old man. I observe a general decline, not just in the level of leadership and the quality of leadership, but also in the quality of education and culture all around the world. And I think it's a theory. We have to test it. But I think the ideological competition between the West and the Soviet Union forced both parties to invest heavily in education because you needed to make your population immune to the ideological influence of your opponent.

So they invested heavily in education. I must say the Soviet Union had many problems. There were many terrible things, but there were great things. Our educational system was amazing. We were one of the most educated societies in the world. It's a far cry from what we have today. And I think this competition between the East and the West made both parties more educated. We thought we were sharper. After that, there's no competition. We declared prematurely the end of history. Remember that famous book? And I wrote at the time at Stanford. I was a very recalcitrant student for some reason, very opinionated. I said, it's not the end of history. It's just the beginning of history. How can you write that?

There's so many other models. How can you not realize there are so many other models? It's something about people. You cannot be totally right. It's very dangerous when you lose control, modesty, and humbleness. You have to be humble. Yes, you may be right in a certain sense at a certain time, but it's very dangerous to project that. Say, okay, I found the solution to everything. The solution to everything is my model. And I said jokingly at Stanford, in this amazing seminar with my amazing colleagues whom I love dearly, remember, with such gratitude. And we had a seminar. And again, they were pushing this game theory. It's actually, you don't believe in game theory.

I said, listen, I like some game theory, a little bit of modeling, as long as you don't fabricate your numbers. But I have a lot of experience living with totalitarian ideologies. I made them laugh. I said, I lived for 18 years in a country where everything was about class struggle and the dictatorship of the proletariat. Look where they are. Look where I am. Then I lived for another four years in a country where everything was about ethnicity and ethnic identity and nationalism and politics. Look where they are. Look where I am. And now I live in a country where everything is about utility and game theory. You know what? I'll survive you, too.

And they laughed just as they were roaring with laughter. You cannot be 100 percent right. Be humble. There is a saying in Russian: if you want to make God laugh, tell him about your plans for tomorrow. Be humble. Don't project your ideas, your vision on the whole world. Don't think that

you're always right in every case. Be humble. There may be things that you're missing. And I think this trap of grandeur, thinking that we're all-powerful and we have all the answers, is one we did not avoid. It was a mutual agreement. Listen to Jack Matlock. You know this better than I do. So this trap of grandeur, it played a trick on us.

#M2

This is a very good observation because the trick that we play on ourselves is to believe that we know, that we understand, and that includes you and me, right? I mean, we wouldn't be talking here trying to explain if we didn't believe we understood something. So in a sense, I mean, if we take that thought to its ultimate conclusion, everything is relative and nothing matters and nihilism, and let's switch off the recording and go home. But no, I mean, we're still condemned. I think of this as the necessity, in order to be alive, to accept contradictions.

So I need to accept the contradiction that even while I say we should be critical of ourselves, we mustn't lose ourselves in this. It's just like, you know, this beautiful thing: if you tell a student, never trust your teacher, you bring them into this impossible situation. If they trust what you say, they don't do what you're telling them. And if they do what you tell them, they will not trust you, which will then again put them into this... You make it impossible to fulfill this. But this is part of what it means to accept the complexity of life. But then the question becomes, how is it that... Sorry, I've just lost my train of thought.

I wanted to go somewhere with this. No problem, I'm going to. I wanted to go to the point that we play this trick on ourselves, right, where we believe we understand. And then from this, we start arguing with everybody else and impose one vision of the world. And that's when, usually, when that gets extreme, it becomes an ideology. And when that gets even more extreme, you try to realize that ideology abroad. And it seems to me that the unipolar moment was one in which the idea that liberal internationalism won over tried to go there and realize it. You try to realize it abroad. And that's when it hit the wall in several places, including in Russia.

#M3

I think you just need to be aware of these cognitive traps so you know your limitations. So you know that, yes, I think I'm right. This is the evidence I have. This is my theory. I mean, I think I've proved it. But maybe there are some things I'm not seeing. It's just like when you drive: the blind spot. Yeah, there's a blind spot to your left and to your right. You turn your head, right? Because you know there's a blind spot. At least in my time, there wasn't sophisticated equipment that makes it unnecessary. But you have to be aware. You have to just remind yourself, okay, but maybe I'm missing something. Let me consider this person's opinion also. And I think being educated in two different systems really helps.

Because when you're educated in the Soviet Union, again, with great education, at least at the high school level, and you believe in this philosophy, theory, you know, workers, the capitalists. And then, you know, I was 15. I was in high school, and I told the teacher, OK, but why do the managers and workers always have to fight? Don't they have common interests if they work in the same company? If the company makes a profit, everybody wins. You could see I was a latent American. So the teacher called my father and said, you know, I love your son. That's why I'm calling you and not certain organizations. Please talk to your son because I cannot have this in my classroom.

But being brought up in that system and seeing the holes in Marxist theory even then was easy. But then when you make it to the West, it becomes more obvious. But then you start seeing the holes in the Western way of thinking. Liberalism is a great thing. It's a great thing. I'm an old liberal. I mean, I wouldn't be listening to the BBC under my bed at night, you know, with my shortwave radio if I weren't a liberal. I do believe in human dignity, human freedom, freedom of speech. By the way, how liberal is it to call anybody who disagrees with you Putin's puppet? Is it liberal? Is it really? I had to quit my university because of all this pressure that was applied to me. But it doesn't matter.

So, liberalism is a great thing. But, number one, it's not perfect. Our democracy is not perfect. It has great flaws like lobbying, corporate influence, private interests, manipulation of the media, and fabricated consent. There are a lot of weak spots. And, number two, not every country is ready for it. And, number three, you can't do it by force. Just like Jack Matlock said, you should do it by persuasion. How were the Soviet citizens conquered? I can tell you exactly how, because I was one of them. Why did we start loving America so much? Music, film, ideological influence, cultural influence. You can just see that this way, this way of life, in many ways, is better. Persuasion, that's what worked.

America didn't invade the USSR and force us into capitalism. It did not do that. It was much wiser back then. So invading countries and forcing them to adopt your ideology and regime is almost never a good idea. It's funny because all this wisdom of the American political elite of the late 20th century, where did it all go? I mean, Americans knew how to do this. They didn't invade the USSR. They converted us by persuasion, by example, by their culture. This is what should have been done. But again, you can't be all-powerful, and you cannot be always right. You cannot be always right, and you cannot be all-powerful because that plays a trick with your mind. You become arrogant.

#M2

The funny thing is, or the interesting thing is, that the other two great powers, the Russians and the Chinese, are currently deploying that strategy way more than the US. I mean, they're not trying to lead by force. Okay, you have force in Ukraine, in the Donbas, yes. And if you are Georgian, then you will immediately say, hey, we have two provinces that were basically clipped off by force. Yes, that's true. But in the way that they try to appeal to the global majority, they try to appeal, first and foremost, with a couple of principles: the equality of states and the principle of non-intervention.

Russia and China are touting those, and they're trying to show how economic development can be done in a way that doesn't lead to becoming a vassalized state like a lot of Europeans to the U.S., right? They try to then say, like, hey, we are open for business. This is, in a way, the U.S. strategy during the Cold War, right, to appeal to others while also doing all of the regime change and so on and so forth. I mean, it went hand in hand, but at least the public appeal was a much more open one than what it has become now. Would you agree?

#M3

It's actually what I told my American colleague years ago. I said, you know what's so funny is that China is now behaving like the United States in the late 20th century, and the United States is behaving like the Soviet Union. This is what is so strange. I mean, all this wisdom went away. And yes, exactly. China is using economic influence, cultural influence, and technological advances to really spread its influence in this world. And slowly, just like America did, it's slowly conquering the world, but in a different way—not militarily, not by invading countries. And the last 25 years of U.S. foreign policy, I mean, I'm very sorry.

I mean, with all my respect to those people who stood behind it, I love them dearly. But it's very difficult to call it a success. I mean, look at Iran, Afghanistan, Libya, Georgia, Ukraine. These are just the five most—Syria, not to forget these horrible, horrible events. And by the way, you're talking about liberalism and human rights and international law. And you bring an al-Qaeda al-Nusra leader to power in Syria, and then you go to shake his hand, and then you give him a makeover like a teenage movie, you know, those teenage movies with makeovers, like a 16-year-old girl who got a facial and curlers in her hair. What is this?

#M2

But all of this... All of this, you can still put makeup on a pig, right, and sell it as a pretty lady. You can still do that. But, I mean, it's even worse. I mean, look at what this did to the United States. I mean, the U.S. promise was that, look, you will become like us, and we are wealthy and prosperous with TV sets and meals at home and so on and so forth. And you were. And you were. And now we have a generation which is going to be poorer than... once they reach their parents' age, than their parents. I mean, while China, that is being demonized, has lifted 800 million, 500, 600, 700 million people out of poverty into the middle class. It's like just a comparison. Doesn't work anymore. You can't portray this one as a failing system and yourself as the shining city on the hill. Reality kicks in and actually the rest of the world, I believe, sees that if we talk to people, especially in Southeast Asia and also from Africa and so on, they go like, yeah, we see this.

#M3

China is a country—I'm not an expert on China—but from what I know, it is a country where 50 million people died of hunger after the so-called Great Leap Forward. Fifty million people were eating

anything they could find—rats, insects—to survive. And then China adopted the Western model in a very intelligent way. There's a guy called Deng Xiaoping. And now China rules the world. And in the U.S., we became the Soviet Union. We started wasting our money, $14 trillion—it's a number I've heard. Enormous waste of our resources, declaring wars all over the world and losing them, not even winning, losing them. I mean, look at the footage of these poor people running after that airplane in Afghanistan, trying to grab onto something to save their lives.

It was so humiliating. It reminded me of 1975, I believe, that last helicopter dropping off a U.S. ship off the coast of Vietnam. I mean, this horrendous waste of resources when in the U.S. we have such serious problems as health care and education. Our middle class has disappeared. Fifty percent of Americans are living paycheck to paycheck. I mean, what is this? This incredible inequality and so many problems. And America always comes last. My hairdresser in New York used to say, America always gets involved with everybody's business except her own. It's just a complete reversal of the U. S. foreign policy. And it has not been a success, sadly.

#M2

Yeah, this is just the belief about yourself or the belief of, let's say, at least some of the ruling elites who think of the image of the U.S. as something they knew as children or as young people, when in fact they are now 40 years older and the U.S. has become fundamentally different, but they still operate under that mindset. This is necessarily going to lead to a train wreck. And maybe this is one more thing to talk about briefly: the influence of belief about yourself or self-image versus the image others have of you and what this does to the development of international relations, because it leads to serious, serious risks of misjudgment. Again, you know, the neoconservative propensity to believe that U.S. military force can solve anything when, in fact, it always runs itself aground.

#M3

But it's natural. Sadly, it's natural. It's not just the U.S. In every major empire, the elite used to make, you know, they always made errors like this. When you become too powerful, you have people, and a lot of them, some of them are political narcissists. They have this pleasure of projecting force, of feeling that they own the world. They can do whatever they want. They enjoy this. There are people like this in every country. It's not just the U.S. Every power has gone through this cycle. I mean, we had the Spanish hegemony, then we had the French hegemony twice, then we had the British hegemony in the 19th century, then we have continental German hegemony.

It comes and goes. It comes and goes in cycles. Power distribution changes, the balance of power changes, and then you have people like this saying, okay, here's my moment to be Napoleon, sadly. But it is natural. It is in our psychology. People who are wise and restrained and humble are not welcome in politics and organizations like this. They like people who can say, yes, sir, and who have

simple convictions and simple solutions. And they're full of confidence. And that is very sad because, like, I could go on and on, but we don't have time. There were dozens of people who warned about the consequences of this fundamental mistake.

And it was easy to see. And when they blame one side, of course, violence is terrible. I condemn violence in every case, not just in one case. In all cases, all invasions should be condemned, not just one. But what did Britain do when Germany started arming itself in the early 20th century? Did they say, oh, it's just a defensive measure? No. That was one of the major reasons why Britain entered World War I, the naval race. What did France do when Germany started rearming? Again, for defensive purposes, during the interwar period, they did the same thing. But it's very difficult for people to see the world objectively. It's almost impossible.

And then we blame one country for doing something that other countries did in every single case. There is not a case in world history where one country started expanding its alliance towards another country, by the way, a former opponent, and that country said, sure. You know, why don't you do that? 850 kilometers from Moscow. Why don't you just put your missiles there? It's fine. It doesn't bother us because we know it's a purely defensive measure. This has never happened. When you say things like this, you're putting aside everything we know about international relations for the past at least 2,500 years. So this standard democracy, sadly, it's human. Sadly, it's human. It's normal.

#M2

I mean, this is why it would be so comforting to believe that this is orchestrated, you know, that there is a public face that tells you one thing, but in the back, like they were always intending to attack Russia, right? That was always the plan, and you just lie to the general public while you do nefarious things in the back. But I think it's much sadder. I think it's just stupidity arising out of the complexity of the system. I think there is the front.

#M3

What we say and what we project and what we pretend to be. And then there's something that's happening behind that. And I know Professor Sachs, whom I respect dearly, believes that was the plan from the beginning. And it's difficult not to see that because when you look at Brzezinski's book, I can understand this person, given his background and the very painful history of his country. I can understand it, but this was a major mistake.

#M2

But Brzezinski's book came out once he was out of power, right? Once he was free to write all of those wet dreams that he had about breaking up the Soviet empire. I mean, and also the Rand Corporation is easy to point toward these reports and say, like, look, they planned it all out. But at

the end of the day, you can point at at least 15 or 20 other papers that were also written by similar think tanks and that never realized, right? The US and the US system and these think tanks and so on, they thrive upon just throwing out a lot, and you have so many lobbyists that lobby in so many directions. So which ones get implemented and which ones not? And I don't think that there's a clear trajectory for that. And you select...

#M3

Those that you want to select. Yes. And you select those opinions and those arguments that match your own arguments and your own opinions. And when you've spent 40 years thinking of Russia as an enemy, some of you will have the wisdom—and I was very honored, very privileged to work with people whom I worked with—those people will have the wisdom of overcoming their bias, but many of them will not. And it's human to not overcome and to select from that flurry of reports and arguments, to select the arguments that suit your interests, what you want to do. For example, make billions and billions of dollars on war because we have a military-industrial complex, which you're aware of, and their lobbyists. You select what is in your economic interests and what coincides with your preexisting beliefs. It's cognitive psychology 101.

#M2

I invited you to this channel because you were recommended to me by Jeffrey Sachs, whom I agree with. I mean, we are an example of confirmation bias. We can't even escape it ourselves.

#M3

Yes, but we are aware of it. And I might offend someone and call him, I don't know, a Washington puppet or a Trump puppet just because he disagrees with me, because we need to be aware that we have our biases. They have theirs. You would probably not be opposed to speaking with someone who can present the arguments from the opposite side. But you're not going to call them names. What irritates me is when they do the script reading. There was this, by the way, brilliant speech by Professor Jeffrey Sachs at the European Union. There was a debate I saw with a gentleman.

There's no real engagement. There's no counterargument. He was reading a script. This guy is just repeating keywords. They have this list of keywords and catchphrases that they throw at you. I went to Deutsche Welle here in Armenia for an interview. I walked in and I saw how they're training people to say nasty things about Russia. And I'm like, listen, if you don't like Russia, fine. But you're a journalist. You should not create a bias. From the beginning of your interview, from the beginning of your program, you're creating a bias. This is not professional. They will not listen.

#M2

I had to take my mic and run off because a lot of people think of arguments as something that you need to win instead of something that you need to learn from.

#M3

Exactly. But it's the same model, Pascal. It's the same model. There are equilibrium people and there are domination people. In personal relationships, in governing countries, there are people who are wise enough to say there is an equilibrium. Let's just keep an equilibrium. And there are people saying, no, no, no, let's dominate. There are different types of people. We need to study where this comes from. But you know that, for example, right now, finally, I have to applaud certain people in Trump's administration. They said, yes, finally, yes, this is a multipolar world. Let's learn to create an equilibrium. Thankfully, thank God, 35 years of this terrible suffering all over the world because you want to dominate.

This was very unwise because, again, another IR theory 101: hegemonic cycles. This is something you learn in the first year. Hegemons rise and decline. The power distribution always changes. You will never be the eternal hegemon. We know this from the Germans, the Brits, the Spanish, the French, the Dutch, etc. It comes and goes. Be wise. Think in terms of an equilibrium, but it's not sexy, Pascal. To think about peace, to be a leader of peace, is not as sexy as being the winner of, you know, somebody who won a war. It's not very sexy. Domination is sexy. Girls like it, some of them. You know, being equilibrium-oriented may not be as sexy.

And these organizations that are created for the purpose of winning wars don't like it when you go in there full of self-doubt and humility. They want, "Yes, sir. Yes, we're going to get this done. We're the good guys. They're the bad guys. Let's kick their ass." It's just so much more virile and macho to say that. And then you have a million people killed in a country that, after three years of horrible suffering and bloodshed, is told that everything they fought for was a lie. This is disgusting. This is absolutely disgusting. If I were you, I would be enraged by this.

#M2

Yeah. Yeah. Me too. But it's actually the truth. I mean, I tell my students, look, if ever somebody asks you to take a gun and go and shoot a guy, just say no. Just say no. Because whenever you do that, you will be lied to. You will only pick up a gun and try to shoot a guy if people have lied to you time and time again and if you have bought into the lies. It's horrible because the people who have been lied to were absolutely played, but they were played on a very high level. They have been played, and actually, for this now coming out as a lie is the way for that herd to actually reconcile with the fact that this is all dumb. It was a dumb reason to die for on both sides, actually.

#M3

But democracies have another weak spot that the elites have discovered. It's called fabricated consent. It's called the manipulation of public opinion, manipulation of the media. And when you spend billions of dollars on my favorite BBC and Voice of America, I don't listen to them anymore. I'm bitterly disappointed. I can no longer listen to the BBC. And it's so ironic that I would do this when I could lose my job and everything for this. And now I'm not listening just because I don't want to anymore. When you put all the billions of dollars into ownership, you own the media, and they keep sending the messages.

It's not even an intelligent argument. It's just like a list of keywords and insults that they throw at you from all directions, not just in England or in Europe or in the U.S. Here in Armenia, they're sponsoring dozens and dozens of NGOs, and all they do is keep emitting these messages with the same key phrases, catchphrases: Putin is the devil, Putin is Satan, just demonizing one particular country, demonizing one particular leader who wanted to be a part of NATO. In the early 2000s, he wanted to be part of NATO. He was the first person who called President Bush after September 11. But we're not told that.

You can fabricate consent. You can manipulate public opinion. And from what I understand, partly also from listening to interviews you did, it started after the war in Vietnam. During the war in Vietnam, public opinion was very effective. It immediately applied pressure on the U.S. leadership to stop the war. And they learned the lesson. It was a so-called living room war because Americans were in their living rooms, seeing on television what was happening in Vietnam. They learned their lesson. They learned how to control the media, how to buy out the media during the invasion of Iraq. I remember that.

The footage on CNN—I don't even take CNN seriously anymore. It's just very unpleasant. It was like boys playing with their father's rifle, you know, on those tanks. Yay, we're going to invade Iraq. Look how cool it is. You could see it was turned into a show. And now thousands of Americans have died. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have died. It was all for nothing. Iraq turned into, as Trump says, Harvard for terrorists. It was a total failure. But the media would not report that because the government and the foreign policy elite learned to buy them out. They bought them out. Now they own them.

#M2

But I am pretty sure that just out of the system and out of the logic of it all, it will run itself aground. Because at some point, a 15-year-old student in high school will hold up their hand and say, "But teacher, isn't... isn't it a little bit different?" I mean, it runs itself out because it becomes so shallow that a 15-year-old high school boy or girl will actually see through it. And I think we are getting close to that point. We are getting closer, at least.

#M3

Yes, these are cyclical processes. Look at communism. We were taught that we're going to have a bright future and everyone is going to share equally. And after a couple of decades, our parents did not believe this. My grandfather and my grandmother believed this. But with time, it just kind of fizzled away. It does happen. These are cyclical processes. I'm still a believer in liberalism. I still believe in the West. I still believe in American leadership to an extent, in European leadership, in Russian and Chinese leadership. I believe in equilibrium, in reason, in restraint, in humanity, compassion, learning from history. I still believe that. These processes, they come and go. People like this come and go. One thing that doesn't come and go is hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians and Russians who died. It's a crime. This is a high crime, and it's disgusting.

#M2

Yes, and we will talk about it, and we will write the history of it, and we will name the people who did it. Not learn from it. And we'll learn nothing from it. We usually learn the wrong lessons, especially we Europeans. Europeans have an incredible capacity for learning the wrong thing; it's mind-boggling. Anyhow, Arthur, if people want to read more from you, where should they go? Do you publish somewhere?

#M3

I am publishing something here with my research center. It's called the Center for International Education and Study Abroad. We have a blog. We have a website. It's a group of my colleagues. And if they would like to read from me, I would be delighted. I'm writing a handbook on international relations theory in Armenia because there isn't one in Armenian. So I'm trying to condense everything I know from my Stanford years, American literature, and Western literature into this little book so my students can learn it. I think I'll be done in a few months, and I would be very grateful for your comments.

#M2

Fantastic. And I will try to put, if you send me some links on where people should go, I will put these into the description, and we will keep the discussion going. We will hopefully have more discussions also with other colleagues, and maybe next time we can talk about the Caucasus. But for today, I would very much like to thank you, Arthur Khachikian. Thank you for your time. Thanks, Pascal.