

# A New Great Power Balance: The Real Goal Of Washington Madness

What are the erratic policy decisions of the Trump administration about? And why do the Russians seem so keen on going along with a diplomatic process that seems not conducive toward solving the Ukraine war? Even though Zelensky has already rejected the US framework for a negotiated settlement with Russia, Witkoff still went to Moscow and met with V. Putin. Sergey Lavrov is still talking well about the US president on US TV. What's going on? We might see the contours of a process that will not necessarily lead to peace in Eastern Europe, but to a general understanding of Great Power Politics. The linkage between the Ukrainian and Iranian conflict theatres are a clear sign that both, the USA and Russia seem to agree that more is on the table than "just" Ukraine. Also China is at least in part involved in this process, as the Iranian Foreign minister just visited also Beijing. Multipolar Great Power diplomacy is now in full swing and it seems that all three, Washington, Moscow, and Beijing are understanding that this is crucial time to define the rules of engagement between them for the decades to come.

## #M2

Hello, everybody. So it is Saturday afternoon, April 26th, and you're here with Pascal Lottaz on Neutrality Studies. Today, I'm outside on the way to the university because it's nice and calm there in the afternoon. It's just very enjoyable for writing and thinking. On the way here along the river in Kyoto, I thought we could maybe talk a little bit about what's currently going on. The diplomacy of Donald Trump has left many of us in the general commentariat about world affairs quite baffled and guessing what the goal of it all is. Some of these policies seem highly self-defeating. Donald Trump is blurring the lines between these different types of policies. On the one hand, tariffs are usually economic policies designed to help the local economy or the local sector to remain afloat.

But Trump basically uses these as foreign policy tools in order to get his will and his ideas through with China and with the Europeans. On the other hand, you have a crackdown on schools in the United States, on universities, on the freedom of speech by one of the warriors for freedom of speech. This is also one of the disheartening occurrences at the moment. You have these very, very heavy-handed authoritarian tendencies. But then, on the other hand, you have still these ongoing active efforts of Trump to reach a settlement, an agreement with the Russians, while trying to put pressure on China. And when it comes to China, you know, the tariffs really should be called such; there are by now sanctions.

At least the proposed 145% tariffs, those are sanctions on China, right? And they're working in that way. So what occurred to me recently is just that we have now thoroughly arrived in the multipolar world. And part of this is that I do believe that Donald Trump actually sees it that way too, and that

what we are witnessing here is the first time in a long time that we see true great power politics and great power diplomacy playing out in front of our eyes. So today, Steve Witkoff is actually in Oman. I suppose he's already arrived. Steve Witkoff, of course, being Donald Trump's emissary. He was originally only responsible for doing diplomacy with China, but by now, he has become responsible for the Iran talks as well.

And I think this linkage between Russia and Iran is what really needs to be understood most precisely. It's something that seems to be leaving Alexander Mercouris quite baffled on the Duran, as to why Steve Witkoff is even bothering going to Russia. He had his third meeting with Vladimir Putin yesterday on Friday, right? But the point is, today he's meeting with the Iranians in Oman, in Muscat, and there seems to be this realization, at least in the non-Neocon wing of the Trump team, and Witkoff is part of that, of course, he's not part of the Neocons, that what you need is a grand bargain. Even if you can't end the war in Ukraine, what you can do is try to hammer out the new contours of how these three great powers engage each other.

And that is, on the one hand, if it's true, if this assessment is correct, then it is a hopeful thing to happen because it would be, of course, good if we had certain limits on how these great powers interact militarily with each other and that we, for instance, have some form of grand agreement on how to treat each other's nuclear weapons, the nuclear deterrents, and the conventional weaponry too. On the other hand, what it means is that we have an emerging agreement that these military conflicts are not going to go away. That we are going to live in a world where the United States and Russia are simultaneously engaged in a kinetic proxy war and still maintain diplomatic relations and maybe even interactions in the economic spheres with each other while this is going on, you know.

It's this moving away from the all-or-nothing, moving away from the black-and-white thinking of especially the, well, the neocon sections of the people who were running and then ruining the 1990s and 2000s and who dragged the United States into or pushed the United States into wars like Iraq, Afghanistan, the destruction of Libya, out of this motivation to dominate and to have your own set of rules apply to these places that if you cannot control them, you destroy them. And it seems that this is now changing. So the acceptance that different parts of the world will be under different hegemonies and, you know, Marco Rubio, who's actually in the neocon faction, the real foreign secretary of the US, but not in charge of Russia, not in charge of Iran.

It's quite questionable what he's still in charge of, actually. But he said at the beginning of his tenure that the United States accepts that China and Russia are great powers in their own right and that we do live in a multipolar world balance. So I think what is happening now is that Blinken is trying to, or not just trying, but actively linking the issue of Iran and Ukraine. Not in the way that one influences directly the other, but that the real goal of these negotiations at the moment is to come to a sort of process which then leads to a renewal of certain basic principles of the game.

One thing that's important to keep in mind is that in 2019 it was Donald Trump who nixed the INF Treaty, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Agreement, which stated that the United States and

the Soviet Union, and then later Russia, could not possess weapons with a range between 500 kilometers to 5,500 kilometers. This was basically an agreement to de-escalate the entire Cold War, and it was part of other treaties and agreements on weapons reduction to de-escalate the Cold War, and it worked very, very successfully to the point where, in 1989, both powers decided that this warfare, the Cold War, was done and over with.

These treaties were a long process, a long drawn-out process, and they started with informal talks and discussions between these great power rivals. One of the reasons why Trump nixed the agreement, and to me it's the main reason, was that Russia was in breach of the treaty. But whether that's true or not, I'm the wrong person to actually judge that. But there's a second reason given, and that is that China was not part of it. And yes, China wasn't part of it by design. The INF Treaty was by design a bilateral treaty because also the Europeans were not part of it by design.

So it left some of these intermediate-range capabilities on the European continent, but it eliminated the threat between the great powers and also reduced the threat of accidents on the European continent. Now, the theater has shifted, and the European continent is still in danger at the moment, of course, and we see that one part of the renewed warfare that we've got is actually in the European heartland. But the issue of Iran and the issue of China are paramount in the thinking of the Europeans. So what I believe is going on is that NATO is discussing or was discussing in Russia with Putin, not just Ukraine, but also how to deal with and approach the issue of the Middle East.

And he's taking this now and discussing it with the Iranians in Oman. Their foreign minister, Araqchi, was in Russia and China last week. These powers are now renegotiating or discussing how to approach the Middle Eastern conflict. In a sense, this is something that all three of them have in common at the moment. The Chinese, the Russians, and the Americans have an inherent interest in making sure that nuclear proliferation doesn't occur. So the three of them have an interest in assuring Iran that it doesn't need nuclear weapons. The United States is, of course, trying to do so with threats and intimidation. But Russia and China also have no interest in further proliferation. And this is a classic thing to happen, right?

One of the reasons why the Non-Proliferation Treaty that caps the states that can have nuclear weapons was successful is because all five powers, victors of the Second World War, were ultimately allowed to have them, and they jointly worked on convincing everybody else that they shouldn't have them. No nuclear weapon state has an interest in having more states with nuclear weapons. So this actually works in favor right now of these negotiations. The things that Donald Trump does, the things that America does right now, are just, to me, the outgrowth of this new American thinking, which I think Alexander Mercouris and Alex Christoforou, who are under Duran, correctly call spheres of influence, spheres of interest.

They think, the Trump administration thinks in those terms, and I think the Russians and the Chinese are actually in agreement that this is the right way of restructuring the multipolar world. Now, what Donald Trump is trying to do with the tariffs is he's now using them more as sanctions in

order to break away states from the Chinese economic sphere of influence. And this, to me, seems like a policy that's poorly designed and self-defeating in the end. But I think that's the logic behind it. Let's use a sledgehammer in order to break away states from the Chinese economic sphere. So, the Russian negotiations at the same time are supposed to re-establish some form of agreements between Washington and Moscow.

And the thing that Donald Trump probably learned in his first administration and should know by now is that not everything, not the best-case scenario that you can imagine, is probably what is going to transpire or happen in the end. Because one thing needs to be well understood, which is that these large powers, the great powers, are countries that work very differently from smaller ones that you and I might be living in, even relatively big countries like Japan or Germany. Great powers, by virtue of having built a system that gives them this much influence—dominating the digital sphere, dominating the economy, dominating and ruling entire monetary systems—have built so many institutions and must have built so many structures that they are inherently very difficult to govern.

So even though we have strong men at the helm of all three of the great powers at the moment, they cannot run everything themselves, and they do not run everything themselves. They are shepherds of a system that they need to keep alive. And by the sheer fact that we have a system, it means that things have been running okay in the past and have enabled the United States, Russia, and China to actually produce the level of prosperity needed to also have the implements of war and the propaganda systems in place to control enough of their own populations. And it happens that systems break apart, that great powers just leave the scene of the international world.

An example thereof is, of course, the Soviet Union. But the point is, the Soviet Union wasn't broken by U.S. hard or soft power. The Soviet Union was broken by Russia. It was broken by internal problems that led to nationalism in the largest republic, Russia, usurping power and thereby breaking the system that the Soviet Union had built from the inside. There are people who are currently predicting that something similar is happening with the United States. People like General McGregor are saying that the United States is in such a quagmire internally, with so many contradictions, that those will probably, in the end, lead to a civil war. Now, whether that's correct or not, I don't know.

But those are the things, those are the most dangerous things to the United States. And we can see how certain of these policies of Donald Trump are so contradictory and probably so hurtful, especially the tariffs, right, that they might actually add to this dynamic. So large great powers are systems, very complicated and complex systems. To me, they resemble more, you know, ships. Once they're on a way, once they're on a trajectory, it's very hard to change the trajectory, and it's certainly not possible to put in the reverse gear. They're not cars; they're ships, large steamers. And the best you can do is create processes that then adjust a course away from disaster, but you cannot immediately go into reverse drive because you have too many interest groups and factions within the system that will push against that, right?

And you have too many systems already in place that will keep you on track because you have institutionalized too much of this. You can see how Donald Trump is trying to actually dismantle a couple of these institutions, right? The USAID, and trying to break down parts of the civil service of the United States. Those are attempts at breaking some of the institutions that keep the course of the U.S. where it was. And this is, I believe, what explains one of the very legitimate criticisms of Brian Berletic from the New Atlas, that what we are seeing is a continuation of the agenda. Yes, yes, the United States is not going to fundamentally change its approach to international relations because it can't, because it is path-dependent, because the big ocean steamer is on its way.

So continuity of agenda is something that's baked into the system, but so it is for Russia, so it is for China. You cannot fundamentally change the way that these states conduct foreign policy because of the institutions that they necessarily had to build to get where they are. Now, what you can do is try to adjust the course of them so that they don't directly crash. But it seems to me that they've come, at least the Russians and the Americans, to an understanding that it is impossible to ever have a super harmonious relationship. I mean, Vladimir Putin said so. We must not expect the sanctions to ever go away because the experience over the last 30 years, 40 years actually, confirms that the United States will stick to these policies.

So these are a fixture now. The sanctions are a fixture, and this carving up of the world economically into different spheres is a fixture of the multipolar world, and it's only going to intensify. So we better just deal with it. But we can deal with it. The Russians can source everything they need, most of it internally, and the rest they can source from China and other places. So can the Americans. And so can the Chinese. And they will compete. And they might even go to war militarily. They might even continue doing proxy wars because, again, the United States also learned how to do proxy wars. And they've been doing them and implementing them in Afghanistan and Ukraine.

And those are things, you know, that even if Donald Trump condemns them, right, he would need to do something like dismantle the CIA. Can you imagine what happens if you try to dismantle the CIA? Well, we've had a president who probably tried in the '60s, but well... If you try to dismantle the CIA, don't drive around in an open car somewhere in Texas as a president. So, you know, these internal mechanisms, including, of course, highly legal mechanisms, are part and parcel of the way that these beasts, great power beasts, work. And then they control everything in their own domains. And if we take an even longer look at everything, what emerges is that we have now these two, three civilizations that are not carving up, but that they're demarcating territories or expectations about the future.

And, you know, the American Empire is really just the last great empire of the Europeans, right? Yes, the Americans fought an independence war against the Brits, the one that had been around for 250 years. They have built the largest and strongest empire the world has ever seen. But the way in which global politics is going is now empowering these other places. These 70, 80 years of decolonization have now left us with many more players on the world stage. And the world has

never been a completely equal place. Although we have fundamentals and principles in international law of the equality of sovereign states, we've got all of that. But at the same time, pretending that a country like Switzerland has co-equal sovereignty with a country like the United States is just absolute blindness. It's like the difference between sizes of animals.

A mouse and an elephant are both mammals. But there's a very big difference between a mouse stepping on an elephant and an elephant stepping on a mouse. The outcome is very different. And in the same way, we've got just sheer size and power differences in the international world that then lead to other states also interacting with these great powers in a certain way. And, you know, when we talk about entire civilizations, the American Empire is the last outgrowth of this European colonial civilization that actually extinguished so many other civilizations, right? I mean, it extinguished the North Americans and replaced them completely. And there was an effort, an inherently European effort over 500 years, to come to the place where we are today.

And it's no coincidence that when we look at the West, we combine the Europeans with the North Americans, the Australians, and the New Zealanders, right? It's white. It's the white part of the world that then also used slavery and so on to bring other parts of the world into these places. And, you know, this is all part of this 500-year-old—should I call it a crime, or should I—I don't know. It's just what happened. It's the 500 years that happened and the 500 years of colonialism that did to the planet what it did. And the Americans are the last large outgrowth of this. It's also the way that thinking in this Western world functions, where you see that they do think of the world in a very certain way and in a very dominance-driven way.

This is true even for realists. I watched a very, very insightful video the other day by India and Global Left, Jyotishman Mudiari, who does a great, great job over there. He interviewed John Mearsheimer, and what struck me with Mearsheimer and his analysis, because he's a wonderful realist and a great thinker, is that he is anything but a warmonger. He is very much oriented on advising people how to do politics realistically in order to avoid great power wars. He says, you know, security competition cannot be avoided between great powers, but wars can be avoided, hopefully, if governments don't do absolutely stupid things and pursue self-defeating policies.

And he has shown tremendous courage when he wrote the book on the Israel lobby and stood by that. But even he, when he analyzes China and how China became a great power on the podcast, said that again, and he has said it many times before. He basically says China is the mistake of the United States because the United States let China into the World Trade Organization and helped China become an economic powerhouse. And on this economic power, China has been building military power. And now, since he says 2017, he regards China as a great power and superpower rivaling the United States. The interesting thing about this framing is, of course, that even he does not attribute China's success to China; he attributes it to the failure of the United States.

And that's a very, very Euro-American way of thinking, of seeing anything that happens in the world as either a reflection of things that the Euro-Americans did correctly or a reflection of the things that

they did poorly. But it's a reflection of them. It's a function of what they did, not what's happening in the international world. Now, I'm pretty sure John Mearsheimer would have a lot of thoughts on this, and I'm sure his thinking is way more nuanced than how I'm portraying it here, but the propensity of the Euro-Americans to view themselves as the center of the universe—Eurocentrism for the Europeans, and I call it American quintessentialism for the Americans—this idea of being the irreplaceable nation and the shining city on the hill, right from where everything else for the world emanates.

That thinking is very deeply ingrained in the philosophical upbringing of people in the West. And this is now, to me, where we're going to have not a clash, but a serious change. This system needs to adapt for the first time to the fact that you have different civilizational approaches to world politics, and that you have a system in which China might create different understandings of how it interacts with nations, with neighbors like Japan, Mongolia, and Russia. We're not going to undo international law. That's maybe the good news about all this. International law is staying with us, and the United Nations seems to be staying with us because none of the three actually questions this.

But we are headed for a serious overhaul of the bilateral relationships between countries. And I think, to come to a conclusion as I'm nearing the end... Ah, why do they do this? Overall, what we're seeing now is this adjustment of the United States to this new reality. Even though a lot of these policies are also self-defeating, and I'm not saying that they're well thought out, I do think they are trial balloons, a lot of them, and they might just hasten and speed up the decline of the US as the anchor point of the Western Empire. Probably they do. But I think overall that's what this administration's approach under Mr. Trump is about—trial balloons in order to create these fears. And a new agreement with Russia and China on the weapons question.

He did have that already on his agenda before. He did talk about it. He did talk about the fact that he would like to eliminate a lot of the US weaponry, Russian weaponry, and Chinese weaponry, and that this linking that's going on now is the attempt at hammering out a new grand bargain, or let's call it a grand strategic understanding of the limits of the system that we're going to be living in, where wars are still possible, where military interaction is still possible, but where economic and diplomatic interaction also remains possible. We don't have black and white, and we don't have world peace, but on the other hand, we also don't have complete and utter world destruction.

So maybe in the best and most benign interpretation of what's happening, it's the Trump administration trying to look for a multilateral arms treaty and linking these theaters, linking Russia and China together with the United States in order to have a process that leads these three large ocean steamers to actually go in the same direction and not clash. Call me an optimist, and I am a horrible optimist, but I have a hunch that this is what the whole thing is about, making him responsible for both theaters.

Because Witkow is the most rational of the negotiators and together with the rational part of the Trump team, those who would like to de-escalate. So I think we are seeing currently the attempt at

de-escalation despite Donald Trump bombing Yemen, which is a horrible thing to do, and despite him green-lighting the continuation of the genocide of the Palestinians. I'm not saying this is a good thing. All I'm saying is that all of these things are happening at the same time, and the contingency, the moment right now, lends itself to different trajectories in the future.

And Trump is actually probing them, probing them all. And one of the probes, I think, the one that they would like to go to is some form of at least implicit understanding of how to structure the multipolar world, which would mean the United States is included, of course, in the multipolar world, even though I don't think the United States has any intention of joining the BRICS. But the BRICS is only one part of the multipolar world, and the United States is now working with the Russians and the Chinese on hammering out the basic new principles. Time will tell. I've got to go. Thank you for your attention today.