

The Geopolitics of Peace in a Post-Western World

Allama Iqbal Lecture 2023

Prof. Jeffrey Sachs

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I wish to thank the Oxford-Pakistan program for the great honor of inviting me to give this year's Allama Iqbal lecture. I am very moved by the invitation and I want to thank everyone here for the chance to think together, reason together, question together, and brainstorm together on some of the truly challenging and sometimes frightening issues of our time. I am very grateful to students on campuses across Pakistan for joining us online. I hope that tonight's lecture will be the beginning of ongoing discussions with young people on these issues, because you will very soon be the leaders of this world. You are going to receive the world in a very fragile condition. The world will need your wisdom, cooperation, and collaboration to salvage the transcendent human values to which Allama Iqbal aspired.

International Relations as a Prescription for Peace

We are in the midst of an extraordinarily dangerous and destructive hot war in Ukraine, and there is now daily talk about the prospects of a US-China war in Asia, perhaps over Taiwan. Such an expanded war is too horrific to contemplate, and yet it has become the casual discourse of US op-ed columns almost daily. The people who write these columns are not thinking straight, are not knowledgeable, and indeed are utterly irresponsible. We cannot afford a continuation of the current war, and we cannot afford a war between the US and China. That would be the end of civilization.

There is also the idea that the Ukraine war will not spiral into a nuclear war. The English-speaking media, especially in the UK and the US, tells us not to worry, that it is unlikely that Putin will use nuclear weapons. The media tell us not to be afraid. Let me tell you: Be afraid.

The world is not in safe hands right now. The governments in the United States, here in the UK, and around the world, are truly dangerous to our health and wellbeing. It is our responsibility to think clearly, because our lives depend on it.

I have been thinking a lot about the Ukraine war, and I am very concerned. This is a war that is extraordinarily dangerous and should never have happened (see the Addendum). This is not simply a war that Putin decided to launch, unprovoked, on February 24, 2022. That is nonsense for anyone who has been around. I was an adviser to President Mikhail Gorbachev; I was an advisor to President Boris Yeltsin; I was an advisor to President Leonid Kuchma, the first president of independent Ukraine; and to others. What you're being told about this conflict and others is simply not true. I say that based on first-hand experience of more than 30 years.

We're here this evening to reflect on international relations. Geopolitics is part of the field of international relations, or IR. International relations theory studies the interaction of states, especially regarding war and peace. There are many sound and good ideas in IR theory, but I want to make a basic proposition. International relations theory should involve not only a *description* of the causes of war, or a *prediction* of future wars, but also a *prescription* of the pathways to peace. International relations theory should be a normative, that is, a healing field, not only a positive field aiming for description and prediction.

It is not good enough for IR to explain wars. We don't have medical schools merely to explain diseases; we have medical schools to cure diseases. We don't have schools of public health merely to explain epidemics; we have schools of public health to prevent and control epidemics. These disciplines, as well as economics and international relations, should be moral disciplines, in the sense that they should aim to improve the world, not merely to explain or predict it. The field of IR, in particular, should be a field to prevent and end wars.

President John F. Kennedy, the greatest US president of my lifetime, said a very important thing in his Inaugural Address (January 20, 1961) that we should keep in mind. He eloquently and succinctly described the existential reality of our time, declaring, "The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life." This truth remains our overwhelming and existential reality. We have technologies now that are so remarkable that if we put our mind to it, we can end poverty; education can be made accessible to every child in the world; and healthcare coverage can reach every person. We can provide every young person with the tools for a productive life. All of this is within reach in a very practical and affordable sense.

Yet the same powerful technologies, the same breakthroughs in semiconductors and atomic physics and other areas that enable us to end poverty, also make it possible to deploy thermonuclear weapons that can end humanity, or that power the massive destruction of the physical environment and climate system on which global civilization depends.

Kennedy came into his presidency more sensitive to the opportunities and perils of technology than any president of modern history, yet he nearly stumbled into full-scale nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962. This fact is very telling for us. The world is complicated, and even if a leader has great wisdom, blunders, lies, and political pressure can bring the world to the brink of destruction. Kennedy made terrible blunders in the first year of his government, especially in agreeing to the CIA-led invasion of Cuba (the so-called Bay of Pigs invasion). The subsequent reactions of Soviet Chairman Nikita Khrushchev, who thereafter placed offensive nuclear weapons in Cuba, brought the world to within a hair's breadth of nuclear war.

The Cuban Missile Crisis sixty years ago shows us vividly how dangerous our world really is.¹ If you are not afraid, you are not getting it. We need to pull back from the brink of nuclear war in the ways that I am going to speak about this evening.

¹ The most remarkable, accurate, and chilling account of the Cuban Missile Crisis is in Martin Sherwin's book, *Gambling with Armageddon* (2020).

A Challenge to the Inevitable Tragedy of Great Power Politics

John J. Mearsheimer, a learned and distinguished professor at the University of Chicago, has written one of the most powerful books of international relations of our time, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001). In recent years, he has also been one of the wisest scholars explaining how the Ukraine War needlessly emerged in no small part through the provocations of the United States. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* is one of the most important books of recent decades, yet it does not meet the standard that I have set for international relations: to be a moral field.

Mearsheimer's book is powerfully descriptive. It talks about the tragedy of great power politics and the unnecessary, tragic, and devastating wars that we therefore fight. Mearsheimer writes that tragedy is an inevitable fact of life of great power politics, yet I do not believe that we can afford to accept tragedy as our fate, especially in the existential conditions that John F. Kennedy described.

Tragedy in the past meant World War I or World War II; tragedy in the future could well mean the end of the world because our modern technologies, especially nuclear weapons, make possible the destruction of the world at human hands. We cannot accept the tragedy of great power politics as the conclusion of international relations. We should view the tragedy of great power politics as the starting point of international relations, because we need to find a solution to the tragedy. We need great power peace, not great power tragedy.

The words Mearsheimer wrote in 2001 are very powerful: "The sad fact is that international politics has always been a ruthless and dangerous business, and it is likely to remain that way. Although the intensity of their competition waxes and wanes, great powers fear each other and always compete with each other for power. The overriding goal of each state is to maximize its share of world power, which means gaining power at the expense of other states. But great powers do not merely strive to be the strongest of all the great powers, although that is a welcome outcome. Their ultimate aim is to be the hegemon—that is, the only great power in the system."

Mearsheimer argues that there are three features of the international system that lead to that. The first feature is the absence of central authority leading to international anarchy; in other words, the lack of a global Leviathan, in Hobbesian terms, leaving only anarchy at the top, with great powers thrusting for survival and dominance within that anarchic system. The second feature is that states have offensive military capability, so states must be aware that another state can launch a surprise attack, or first strike, which could potentially be devastating. And third, states can never be certain about the intentions of other states. Therefore, Mearsheimer argues, the best guarantee of survival is to be a hegemon because no other state can seriously threaten such a mighty power.

We can easily see the tragedy that results when all major powers try to be number one. The struggle to be the hegemon means endless strife, as it is impossible that every nation, or indeed any nation, achieves global hegemony. Since no state is likely to achieve global hegemony, the world is condemned to perpetual great power competition and repeated wars. That is *realism* in international relations theory, and there is nobody that has developed that theory more effectively and cogently than Mearsheimer.

Incidentally, Mearsheimer's powerful book was written two decades ago when the US had seemingly normal relations with China and with Russia. It seemed, at the time, to be an American-led world, with the US as the sole superpower. Nobody at the time was talking about great power tragedy. The concern was about terrorism, not great power conflict.

To his enormous descriptive and predictive credit, Mearsheimer presciently wrote that the period of calm would not last and that the world would return to a period of conflict. He correctly predicted that China's rise would lead to dire US-China tensions, and perhaps to outright conflict. His realist ideas proved to be powerful and predictive, yet also tragic. They are powerful, yet not powerful enough, because they do not give us the power to surmount the tragedy of great power politics.

I want to talk about peace as the avoidance of war. As a non-IR specialist and as an economist who has been engaged in global economic diplomacy for 40 years, I want to talk about international relations and war as I see it from my professional vantage point, while also acknowledging that I would like to see solutions emerging from the field of international relations as a prescriptive theory of peace.

Three categories of war

We should start by differentiating the kinds of wars that we are aiming to avoid, because wars are not all in the same category, so there are also different kinds of peace that must be achieved. While all categorizations are oversimplifications, and my categories are surely an oversimplification, I believe that a three-way classification of war can be useful.

I distinguish three categories of war. The first kind are wars of empire, or wars of plunder. The second kind are the great power conflicts. And the third kind of war are inter-ethnic conflicts, including many civil wars. I believe that these three distinctive categories require not only distinctive descriptive theories, but also distinctive prescriptive approaches for stopping these wars.

What are wars of plunder? Wars of plunder include the British conquest of the Indian subcontinent; the European conquest of Africa at the end of the 19th century; and the United States' destruction of Native American nations, especially during the 19th century, which are a series of genocides that are not even recognized today as genocides because hegemonic powers don't have to explain their actions. History is written by the victors after all, especially when genocides lead to the destruction of whole nations. The United States killed, enslaved, and kept under apartheid millions of African Americans, Native Americans, and other racial and ethnic minorities. Such are wars of imperial plunder.

Great power wars are wars of hegemonic competition in Mearsheimer's sense. We can go back to the Peloponnesian Wars between Sparta and Athens from 431 to 404 BCE, or the wars between Persia and ancient Greece about which Herodotus wrote in *The Histories*. World War I and World War II are clearly great power conflicts. We must be clear that there are also *proxy wars* that function as hegemonic wars. For example, the Vietnam war was not really a war between the United States and North Vietnam, but between the United States and the communist world, especially the Soviet Union and China, with Vietnam (and Laos and Cambodia) as the battleground. Similarly, the Ukraine war is

not mainly a war between Russia and Ukraine, despite what you read every day. It is primarily a war between Russia and the United States, and it needs to be understood in those terms. (It is not even a war between Russia and NATO, since the US utterly dominates NATO in military, political, and economic terms.)

The great enthusiasm of the British press for the Ukraine war is mainly due to nostalgia for the Crimean War, another hegemonic war in which Britain and France fought Russia between 1853 and 1856. Former Prime Minister Boris Johnson surely saw himself as today's Lord Palmerston, the imperialist leader of Britain during the Crimean War, whose aim was to smash Russia, in part to prevent Russia from challenging Britain's imperial domination of South Asia.

The third type of war is inter-ethnic war. The Israel and Palestine conflict is an example of that. So too is the Ethiopian war that has now reached a ceasefire and may mercifully be ending. The India-Pakistan wars are complicated, of course, but to a significant extent, are also inter-ethnic wars. This category of war is distinctive. These wars are clashes of cultures, of societies, and of religions.

Wars of plunder are wars of the strong versus the weak; that is, wars of injustice. Wars of great powers are wars of the strong versus the strong; that is, wars of hegemonic competition. Wars of inter-ethnic conflict are wars of the weak versus the weak; that is, wars of mutual fear.

Economic and technological changes as causes of war

In 2020, I wrote a book called *The Ages of Globalization: Geography, Technology, and Institutions* (Columbia University Press), in which I described how technological and institutional changes, as well as physical geography, interact to produce long-term global changes across many different ages of globalization. One of the notable facts of that study is that each new epoch, driven by technological and institutional changes, was typically accompanied by wars, as technological changes in various ways led to changes of relative economic and military power. Changes of relative power lead, in turn, to the kind of wars that I have described.

Technological divergence occurs when the more technologically advanced countries gain further decisive advantages over less technologically advanced nations, leading to wars of plunder. Imperial wars are basically wars in which a more powerful adversary has more powerful economics and underlying military technologies that allow it to expand its geopolitical power.

Technological convergence, on the other hand, means that poorer countries are catching up with the richer countries. Perhaps surprisingly, technological convergence is also conducive to war, typically to wars of competition, as poorer countries narrow the gap with richer countries, thereby threatening the hegemonic power of the dominant nations. Periods of technological convergence therefore tend to be periods of wars of competition, and to the tragedy of great power politics. I believe that we are in an age of technological convergence giving rise to new and tragic hegemonic conflict.

Finally, shared vulnerabilities of various kinds, including economic vulnerabilities such as poverty, and environmental vulnerabilities such as droughts and floods caused by long-term climate change, are

conducive to rising fear and intensified inter-ethnic violence. For populations with higher income levels, less hunger, and longer life expectancy, inter-ethnic or intergroup struggles tend to diminish in fervor. The dire facts of poverty and competition for basic economic resources, on top of usual inter-group stresses due to religion, ethnicity, or culture, are therefore conducive to this third kind of war.

I will provide a few quick examples of technological change as the driver for imperial war. The great cause of 19th century divergence was the invention of the improved steam engine by James Watt at the University of Glasgow. The steam engine is probably the most important invention of the last 500 years in both economics and geopolitics. From the point of view of economic power, productivity, industrialization, inter-ocean transport, and military force, Watt’s steam engine was a critical development, and Britain used it to become the first industrial society. Britain over-powered the rest of the world in economic, financial, and military might, which led to the so-called Second British Empire of the 19th century and one of the great turns of history.

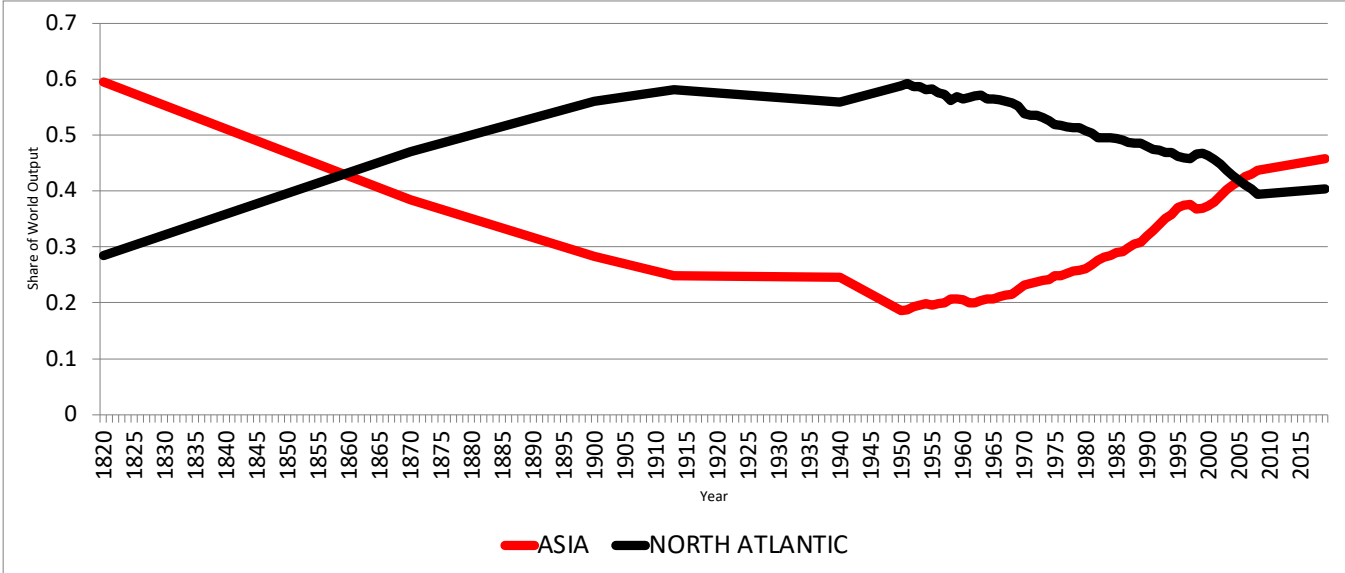


Figure 1. GDP as a Share of World Output of Asia and the North Atlantic Regions, 1820 – 2019. Data from Maddison Project Database, version 2020. Bolt, Jutta and Jan Luiten van Zanden (2020), “[Maddison style estimates of the evolution of the world economy. A new 2020 update.](#)”

Figure 1 shows the shares of world output of Asia and the North Atlantic regions between 1820 and 2019, as measured by the late macroeconomic historian Angus Maddison and his team. As late as 1820, Asia had 60% of world output, and the Indian subcontinent was still the textile center of the world. Asia’s share of population was also roughly 60%, with per capita incomes still relatively equal around the world. Around 1790, however, the new Watt steam engine was first connected to a belt to move power looms and spinning jennies, and Britain soon became the world’s manufacturing powerhouse. India was soon relegated to providing raw cotton to the industrial mills of Lancashire, Manchester, and Liverpool in England. Of course, the Indian sub-continent soon fell under Britain’s imperial rule, formally by 1858.

The industrial age was therefore a momentous era of divergence. The rich countries, notably in the North Atlantic (England, continental Western Europe, the US, Canada, and very few others), gained enormous industrial strength and rising output per person in the 19th century. The poor countries, notably in Asia and Africa, succumbed to North Atlantic imperial domination. Latin American countries were somewhere in limbo, no longer the imperial possessions of European powers, but also not industrialized.

During the 19th and early 20th century, the North Atlantic became the dominant geopolitical force of the world, the global hegemon. Britain dominated the North Atlantic till around the 1870s, but then was challenged increasingly by US and German industrialization. By the early 20th century, the rise of Germany had given rise to the tragic wars of hegemonic competition with Britain, alongside the ongoing wars of plunder by the North Atlantic countries in Africa and Asia.

Still looking at Figure 1, the largest gap between the North Atlantic and Asia occurred in 1950, after which the outputs started to converge again. It is extremely important to understand this timing. In 1947, India and Pakistan become independent countries, and in 1949, the People's Republic of China became a newly independent country after decades of invasion and civil war. That independence provided the basis for the subsequent era of convergence. More generally, 1950 marked the end of North Atlantic imperialism, and the rapid spread of independence in Africa and Asia.

Broadly speaking, therefore, the period from 1800 to 1950 was a period of technological divergence and growing power of the North Atlantic relative to the rest of the world. It was the period of European high imperialism, and the conquest of large areas of Africa and Asia. The period after 1950, broadly speaking, was a period of technological convergence. The most important reason for convergence is sovereignty, and sovereignty means the beginning of mass education. In 1950, Pakistan and India had illiteracy rates of around 90% because there was no mass education under the British Raj. The essence of empire was to deny even basic education, because illiteracy of the masses facilitated subjugation of the masses. Therefore, independence was fundamental for the economic divergence becoming economic convergence. The end of World War II, and the beginning of independence across the world from European empires enabled the beginning of mass education and led to global changes.

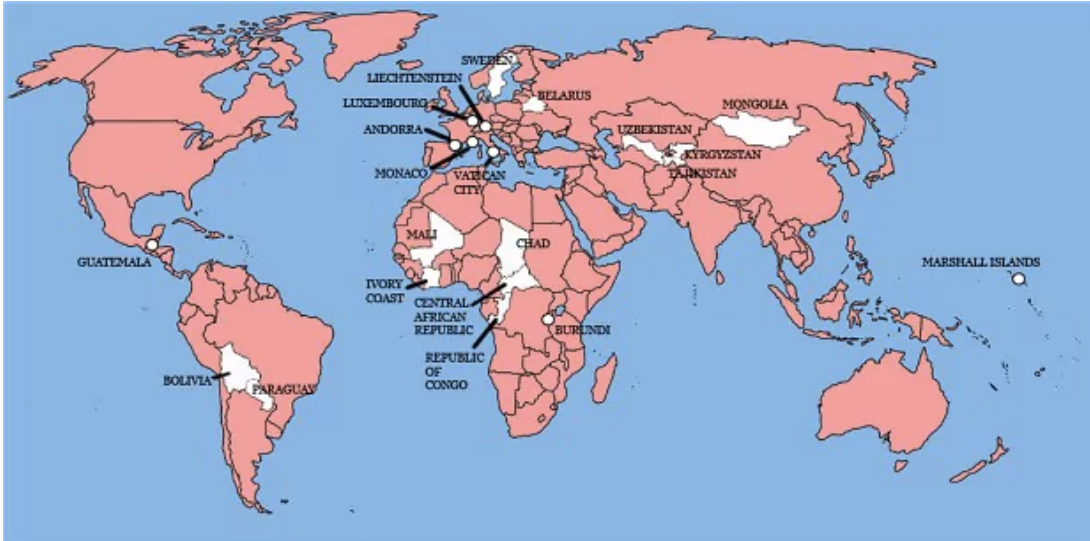


Figure 2. “Liberal Hegemony,” adapted from Stuart Laylock, *All the Countries We’ve Ever Invaded: And the Few We Never Got Round To*, The History Press Ltd., 2012.

Figure 2 is a semi-serious, semi-facetious map from the book *All the Countries We’ve Ever Invaded: And the Few We Never Got Round To* (2012) by Stuart Laylock. The countries in white (there are 22 of them out of 193 UN member states) never were attacked by Britain. Britain was the most militaristic country in the world in the 19th century, and the United States, in my estimation, has been the most militaristic country in the world after 1950. It goes with the territory of being the hegemon. Yet, Britain and the US are also supposedly liberal democracies. The basic point is that liberal democracy has little to do with peaceful foreign policy. Foreign policy is about relative power. Britain used its vast relative power advantage to conquer large parts of the world, and for the parts that it didn't conquer, it invaded at various times. We should not confuse democracy at home with peace abroad.

What are the main solutions to wars of plunder? I propose that there are two main solutions. The first is technological convergence to narrow the gap so that the rich can't exploit the poor. The second is collective security to protect the weak from the strong through collective security mechanisms such as the United Nations. The end of European imperial rule led to a shift from divergence to convergence, and that fact did diminish the frequency of wars of plunder. There was a trailing edge of roughly 30 years (1950-1980) of the final stages of imperialist wars, a prime example of which was the Vietnam War, which raged until 1975 as a war of independence from France later taken over by the United States. Similarly, there were the late imperial wars in Algeria, Indonesia, and elsewhere. Yet the shift from divergence to convergence eventually reduced the frequency of wars of plunder.

Great Power Wars

Technological convergence reduces wars of plunder, but it also is conducive to more great power conflict. That is the Mearsheimer tragedy: as countries converge in economic and military power, they begin to compete more aggressively for domination. Rising powers fear that they'll be held back by incumbent powers. That was Japan's fear in 1941, and that was Germany's fear in 1914. This is also China's realistic assessment now that the United States is explicitly trying to contain China's rise.

Incumbent powers fear they will be overtaken by rising powers. Graham Allison at the Kennedy School of Government wrote a widely read book called *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017). Thucydides's Trap is an analogy to Athens' rise in power in the fifth century BCE that, according to Thucydides, triggered a hegemonic contest between the leading military power, Sparta, and the rising power, Athens. Although Sparta technically won the contest, both Sparta and Athens were exhausted by decades of war and Sparta was soon toppled from regional influence. Athens' heyday of democracy and even independence ended in the fourth century BCE. The Peloponnesian War, like so many tragic wars of hegemonic competition, was a negative sum war.

Today we are in a similar situation. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), China overtook the United States in total output in 2011, measured in purchasing-power-parity prices (Figure 3). This means that China is now the larger economy compared to the United States. This should be expected, as China has four times the population of the United States. Of course, China will be a larger economy, except if China for some reason remained perennially poor, or technically, remained at less than 1/4 the per capita income of the United States. Why wouldn't China rise in economic terms? China is enormously productive, creative, innovative, hardworking, and has an excellent education system.

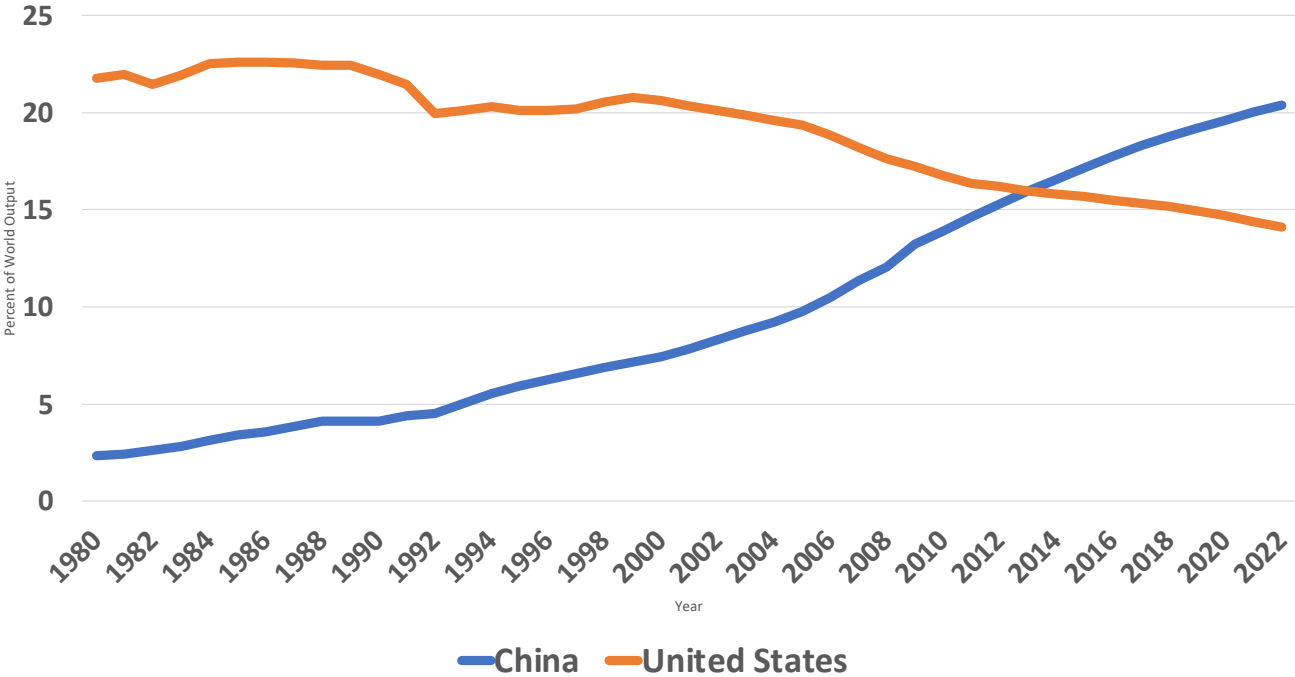


Figure 3. China Overtakes US World Output. Data from International Monetary Fund (IMF).

As Mearsheimer uncannily predicted in 2001, China's rise led to the onset of US-China hostility. I was certainly wrong about this. I've been engaged with China for 40 years now, and many of my students are senior officials or academics in China. I could never have imagined in 2001 that we would currently

have US-China tensions, simply because China is not a threat to the world. It is only in our imagination that China is a threat to the world. Yet, what Mearsheimer said came true. As China got bigger, China became an enemy. Mearsheimer is predictively right. Convergence brings threats, counter-threats, a dramatic escalation of rhetoric, daily opinion columns about a coming war, and then, yes, finally there will be a self-fulfilling tragedy.

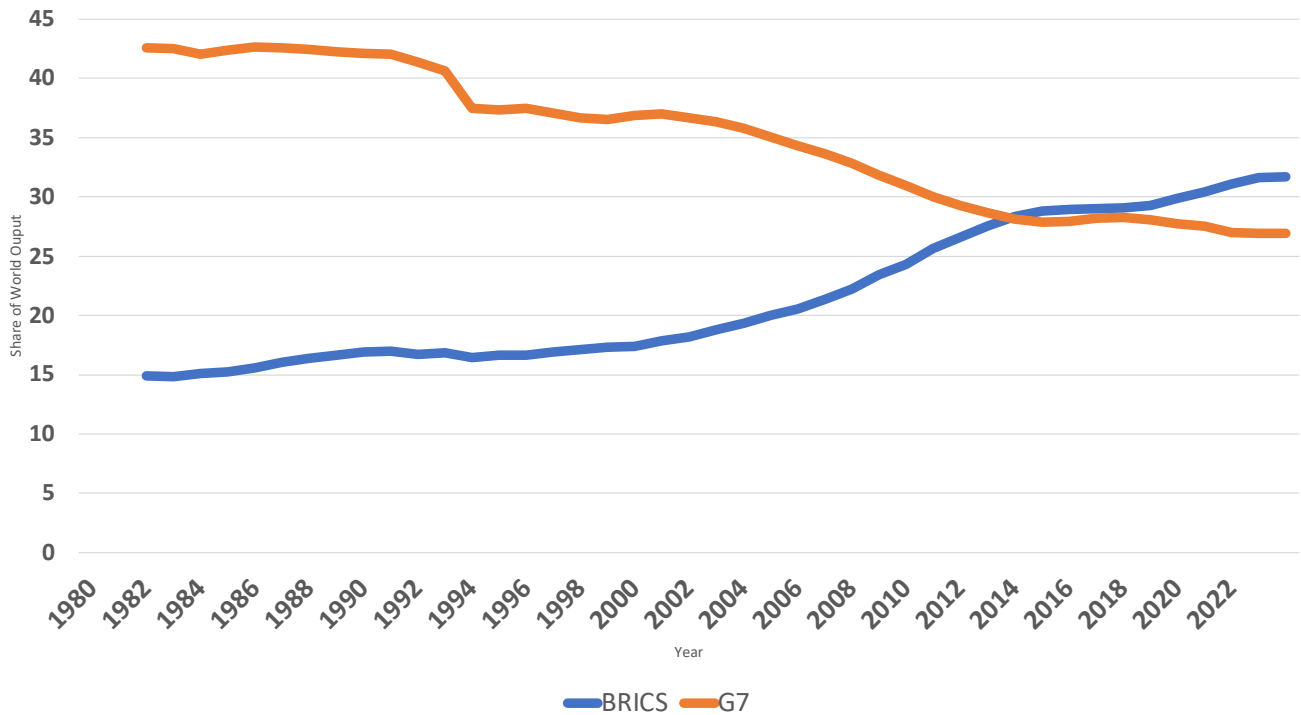


Figure 4. Share of G7 and BRICS in World Output. Data from IMF.

Note, too, that the BRICS countries – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa– now have a larger combined output than the G7 countries (Figure 4). This is rather remarkable because it means that economic convergence is taking place far more generally than China. The North Atlantic is being pushed from its perch in the age of technological convergence.

The Prisoner’s Dilemma and the Tragedy of Great Power Politics

I include a moment of game theory here to say that the tragedy of the great power politics is reasonably well depicted, at least at first pass, by the famous Prisoner’s Dilemma, which is the game theory concept developed in 1950 to show the possible anti-cooperative outcomes of a social dilemma. The Prisoner’s Dilemma Game features two parties who can either cooperate with the other party or cheat on the other party. Even though cooperation is mutually beneficial compared with mutual cheating, they often end up cheating, which is a tragedy as both parties end up worse off.

RUSSIA USA	De-escalate	Escalate
De-escalate	5,5	-10,10
Escalate	10,-10	-5,-5

Figure 5. The US-Russia Strategic Dilemma in Ukraine, Prisoner's Dilemma. Author's own illustration.

The Prisoner's Dilemma is conventionally presented as a 2-by-2 game, with possible outcomes depicted as four quadrants. In the game depicted in Figure 5, the US choices are depicted as rows, while the Russian choices are depicted as columns. The first number in each quadrant is the payoff to the US, while the second number is the payoff to Russia. (Of course, these are the payoffs to the leaders in each country, which may or may not represent the real payoffs to the average citizen of each country.)

In this game, each side can choose to escalate or to de-escalate. Suppose that both sides de-escalate. They avoid war and the costs of an arms race. Their payoff is 5 to each side. Suppose that both sides escalate. They end up bearing the heavy costs of war, with payoffs each of -5.

But suppose that the US de-escalates while Russia escalates. That is akin to unilateral disarmament. Russia can come in and swoop up the prize, such as geopolitical and resource dominance over Ukraine and other countries. In this case, Russia wins big-time (payoff of 10) while the US loses big-time (payoff of -10).

The punch line of the famous Prisoner's Dilemma is the possibility, or indeed, the likelihood according to game theory, that the players will each choose "escalate," ending up with payoffs of -5, instead of de-escalate, ending up with payoffs of 5. The Prisoner's Dilemma is a Mearsheimer-type tragedy.

To see why the tragedy occurs, consider the US strategy. If Russia chooses to escalate, the US clearly should choose to escalate. But if Russia chooses to de-escalate, the US should again choose to escalate, walking away with the big prize of 10 (and leaving Russia with -10). Therefore, the dominant strategy for the US is to escalate. By symmetrical reasoning, the dominant strategy for Russia is to escalate. Both sides choose to escalate and both sides end up with payoffs of -5. Hence, the tragedy.

Mearsheimer's point is that escalation is the *rational action* to take if each side is playing for its own advantage, taking as given what the other country is doing. In the case of the war in Ukraine, both sides escalate, and both sides lose, while Ukraine, the site of the US-Russia proxy war, of course, loses the most.

In practice, the US pushes NATO enlargement and Russia pushes war in Ukraine to stop NATO enlargement. This ends up with a disaster for both sides. Instead, both countries should realize that this non-cooperative outcome is working badly for both sides. They should both de-escalate. The US should stop trying to expand NATO. Russia should go home and let Ukraine be, secure that NATO will not expand to fill the void. This approach – NATO non-enlargement and Russian withdrawal – would leave both nations better off, and would save Ukraine.

International relations theory should provide answers on how to get both sides to de-escalate, rather than being a theory that explains the tragedy of escalation. Yet we are in the tragedy of great power politics, and the situation is getting worse, and fast. As Mearsheimer rightly says, we are not in a static situation with payoffs of -5 for both sides. We are in a situation of continuing escalation, the end of which could be nuclear annihilation.

If Ukraine were to be armed by NATO for a successful invasion of Crimea, there would very likely be nuclear war. We would be no doubt be instructed by the mainstream media not to worry, just moments before annihilation. My advice, once again, is to worry. We need to move urgently from the bottom right cell (escalate - escalate) to the top left cell (de-escalate - de-escalate) because it's mutually beneficial, and can avoid Armageddon. We do not yet have an adequate international relations theory to accomplish this, but that is what we are searching for.

I believe that the first answer to the crisis is to negotiate. John F. Kennedy also made this point in his Inaugural Address, when he declared, "Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate."

There is a famous and frequent finding in game theory that if the people playing the Prisoner's Dilemma are allowed to speak with each other before they play, even without any way to reach a binding agreement, they will cooperate most of the time (in some experimental settings, cooperation with pre-play communication rises to 90%).² The mere human touch of negotiating changes the game fundamentally, even though there is no binding mechanism to the talk. Yet how many times has

² For a recent discussion, see Kagel, John, "Cooperation through communication: Teams and individuals in finitely repeated Prisoners' dilemma games," *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 2018, vol. 146, issue C, 55-64, accessible here: <https://econpapers.repec.org/RePEc:eee:jeborg:v:146:y:2018:i:c:p:55-64>

President Biden spoken with President Putin since February 2022? The disastrous truth is that the two leaders have not spoken even one time.

The second key point about the Prisoner's Dilemma is one that Ronald Reagan emphasized: "Trust but Verify." A mutual agreement on de-escalation need not be based on trust alone. The idea is to trust but *verify* through observable measures, such as peacekeepers, demilitarization, third-party guarantors, risks of sanctions triggered by non-compliance, inspection regimes, etc.

There is a closely related game to the Prisoner's Dilemma, sometimes called the Game of Chicken or the Hawk-Dove Game. In that game, the escalate-escalate outcome is so dire (e.g., nuclear war) that each party prefers to play de-escalate ("surrender") if the other side insists on playing "escalate." In this case, there are multiple possible outcomes, including each side scaring the other into submission, or each rolling the dice (a "randomized strategy") with the possibility that both dice come up with "escalation," leading to Armageddon.

In some ways, the Ukraine War is better described as a Game of Chicken rather than as a Prisoner's Dilemma. The West wants to scare Russia into accepting NATO enlargement. Russia wants to scare the West into the risk of nuclear war. Both sides want to prove their toughness, and so both "randomize," giving the possible outcome of escalation to nuclear Armageddon. As with the Prisoner's Dilemma, the escape from this tragedy, perhaps the ultimate tragedy, is for both sides to play "de-escalate."

Inter-communal violence and the social structures of fear

The third kind of war is inter-communal violence, which is a special kind of war governed by the social structures of fear, notably fear of the "other." This type of conflict is amplified by group identity in which there is little or no peaceful communication between the two identity groups. There is instead open hostility, typically long lasting, with very high fear on both sides. Both sides are typically prisoners of history. As my wife quips, reversing Santayana's famous aphorism, "Those who can't forget history, are condemned to repeat it." This is opposite to the usual idea: when groups are stuck in inter-communal conflicts, if they cannot forget past wrongs by one side against the other, then they may be too fearful to find a path to peace.

There are very few structures of protection for communities in inter-ethnic settings, so fear runs very, very high. There is no well-developed jurisprudence or political structure for group rights. In the United States, the law focuses on individual rights, not on group rights. US law is (supposedly) "racially blind" even after centuries of slavery and racial discrimination and persecution. This blindness of the law to group protection leads to heightened inter-ethnic fear, and indeed, inter-ethnic and inter-racial violence.

The world community, including the UN system, does not have adequate concepts as to how to ensure the rights of different communities in a diverse, multi-ethnic society. The Ottoman Empire was a multi-ethnic community with the so-called millet system, in which there was a measure of self-jurisdiction of non-Muslim populations, including the rights to practice other faiths. These non-Muslim populations were not of the social stature of the Muslim populations in the Ottoman realms, but they had autonomy

and a governance structure. This system thereby maintained important group rights. Yet our current constitutional designs do not generally include the search for effective and workable group rights, and this makes inter-communal conflict more likely and persistent.

Fear is a deep driver of this. There are powerful studies by psychologists, social psychologists, neuroscientists, and conflict resolution specialists emphasizing the role of fear as a subcortical, fast-reactive kind of decision making. To move from the lower right cell (escalate-escalate) in conflict to the upper left cell (de-escalate-de-escalate) in cooperation is a cognitive act, not an emotional act. Fear derails that kind of cognitive act.

As Maria Jarymowicz and Daniel Bar-Tal have written, “[F]ear is an evolutionary safeguard to ensure survival in view of potential threats and dangers. It is a component of a fundamental survival mechanism. But at the same time, because of classical conditioning or due to the irrational thinking evoked by fear, it often has extremely mal-adaptive consequences.”³

Therefore, some potential partial answers to resolving these kinds of conflicts would include group rights, especially for minority groups within a multi-ethnic political setting; the search for universals in ethics (this is where Allama Iqbal plays an important role); an ethics of tolerance, which is a special kind of ethics; intergroup dialogue; social and political structures of mediation; and shared culture, including arts, sports, music, and literature. I disagree fundamentally with the call, for example, of excluding Russian athletes from the 2024 Olympics or to stop playing Tchaikovsky or to stop Russian ballets. This is the opposite of what we need to find peace in the world.

Ancient wisdom to find solutions

I believe that ancient wisdom can help us to find solutions, whether it is Confucius, the Buddha, Aristotle, Averroes, or the prophet Isaiah. There is a commonality of views across the great faiths that I think is what Allama Iqbal was searching for, and that is vital, if we're going to find an end to this kind of conflict.

There are at least six shared pillars of ancient wisdom across the Greek, Jewish, and Christian traditions, the Islamic faith, Buddhism, Hinduism, and other ancient wisdom traditions. First, they are all based on virtue ethics, which teaches that to achieve well-being we must build our characters. This was not the dominant form of ethics in the English and Germanic world of the last three centuries, but it is making a very strong comeback. I think virtue ethics is the right form of ethics, more than deontological or utilitarian ethics, because it puts ethics as the core of individual responsibility.

Second, these six ancient wisdoms emphasize that humans struggle between lower urges, such as cheating to take advantage, and their higher callings, including cooperation. Virtue ethics call on reason of various kinds as fundamental to reaching that higher calling. Virtue ethics say that we need a vision

³ “The dominance of fear over hope in the life of individuals and collectives,” Maria Jarymowiczi and Daniel Bar-Tal, *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 36, 367–392 (2006)

of perfection, which is where spirituality or religion are fundamental. From Plato and Aristotle through the various faiths, God or the first mover or the idea of the ideal form are the sense of perfection, and humans have a responsibility to strive for something better. Iqbal emphasized that science and the spiritual are conjoined, and ancient wisdom strongly emphasizes this point. The idea that religion and science are antithetical is a modern idea, not the idea of ancient wisdom.

Finally, virtue ethics supposes that there is a single human family. The modern genetics of *Homo sapiens* proves this, rooted in our knowledge of the single human family in the migration from Africa around 70,000 years ago, as well as the idea that we can find a common spirit as the basis of our shared humanity, despite our distinctive faiths and cultures. This is a shared view of all of these ancient wisdom traditions.

Iqbal, as a great thinker and philosopher, as well as a poet, offered the goal of Islam as a message for all humanity, not just a message for the believers. He argued that we need to search for rational foundations in science and Islam. Iqbal quotes the Prophet as saying, "God! grant me knowledge of the ultimate nature of things!" (Iqbal, Allama Muhammad. *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. Kindle Edition, p. 2) and he says, "The main purpose of the Qur'an is to awaken in man the higher consciousness of his manifold relations with God and the universe" (p. 5).

In this spirit of a geopolitics of peace, Iqbal wrote in his New Year's Message in 1938,⁴ on the eve of World War II, "[I]n every corner of the world, the spirit of freedom and the dignity of man are being trampled underfoot, in a way to which not even the darkest period of history presents a parallel," anticipating what was to come, but calling for a world of universal human dignity. He wrote, "That only one unity is dependable, and that is unity of the brotherhood of man which is above race, nationality, color or language, so long as men do not demonstrate by their actions that they believe that the whole world is the family of God, they will never be able to lead a happy and contented life, and the beautiful ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity will never be realized." This is the single human family.

Resolving our differences for our common interests

We still have the makings of the single human family, but they are extraordinarily fragile. This year is the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which is the closest we have ever come as humanity to expressing a common shared ideal. The UDHR was brought to fruition by Eleanor Roosevelt, who assembled philosophers, theologians from all faiths, and leaders from across the world to forge the UDHR, which is based on the idea that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.

As I have laid out, there are different kinds of conflicts that need different kinds of remedies. We need different kinds of institutional approaches. I believe that the United Nations remains indispensable for our survival, even as its fragility is evident in the face of great power politics, private greed, and state

⁴ Allama Iqbal, New Year's Message 1938, <https://www.iqbal.com.pk/allama-iqbal-prose-works/speeches-writings-statements-of-allama-iqbal/991-prose-works/speeches-writings-and-statements-of-allama-iqbal/2620-allama-iqbal-new-years-message-broadcast-from-the-lahore-station-of-the-all-India-radio-on-the-1st-january-1938>

impunity. The world is very difficult now, and the UN has a very difficult time functioning in a difficult world. But it remains, in my view, our best hope for the universal human family.

Let me close with the words of President John F. Kennedy from his Peace Speech, given on June 10, 1963. This speech is so powerful and inspiring, and practical in its beneficial effect, that I wrote a book to extol it and describe its place in history, *To Move the World: JFK's Quest for Peace* (2013).

In this wondrous speech, Kennedy asks the American people to change their attitudes towards the Soviet Union, because as JFK argued, the Soviet people are also human beings who also want peace. At the very height of the Cold War, just months after the Cuban Missile Crisis, an American President told the American people of the importance of empathizing with the Soviet people in the interest of world peace. When Nikita Khrushchev heard Kennedy's speech, he immediately summoned the American envoy in Moscow, Ambassador Avril Harriman, and told Harriman that Kennedy's address was the finest speech by an American president since Franklin Roosevelt, and that Khrushchev wanted to make peace with Kennedy. Just six weeks later, the partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty was signed. Kennedy and Khrushchev demonstrated how to get from the lower right quadrant to the upper left quadrant, with empathy, decency, and communication with each other as fellow human beings.

I close tonight's lecture with President Kennedy's eloquent and wise words from his Peace Speech:

So, let us not be blind to our differences--but let us also direct attention to our common interests and to the means by which those differences can be resolved. And if we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity. For, in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal.

Addendum on the war in Ukraine

I have seen a lot of the history of the conflict in Ukraine firsthand, going back 30 years. This is a provoked war because the United States acted in a way that Russian leaders understandably viewed as deeply threatening to Russia's security.

Mikhail Gorbachev unilaterally disbanded the Warsaw Pact military alliance of the Soviet Union and sought peace between the Soviet Union with United States and Europe. This was an unimaginable dream, but it happened. I attribute a great deal of it not to the Soviet Union's weakness or need for reform, though that was undoubted, but to the extraordinary decency of Gorbachev and his search for a peaceful way forward. Here is a case where a leader made a decisive difference for peace.

As Gorbachev made his move towards peace, the United States and Germany (which was interested in German reunification) made very clear to Gorbachev that the West would not take advantage of the Soviet's unilateral action by expanding the NATO alliance [eastward](#). US neoconservatives, however, took a different view. Starting in 1992, after the demise of the Soviet Union, the neoconservatives, now in charge of US foreign policy, took the view that the US was now the only superpower and could do what it wanted. More specifically, the US should aim to be the global hegemon.

The authors of this unilateral strategy were from both political parties. In the Republican Party, these included Dick Cheney, Paul Wolfowitz, and Donald Rumsfeld; in the Democratic Party, Hillary Clinton, Victoria Nuland, President Biden, and others. The doctrine of neoconservatism is also the doctrine of US exceptionalism and US unipolarity (that is, the US as the world's sole superpower). The neoconservative aim is dominance, what is sometimes called "full-spectrum dominance," meaning military, technological, and economic dominance in every major region of the world.

In the mid 1990s, there was a huge fight inside the US government between those who said that NATO should not be expanded as that would wreck relations with Russia, and those who said that the US should do what it wants. In the end, Bill Clinton followed the "we do what we want" school of thought, and the first NATO expansion took place, to Poland, Czechia, and Hungary. That raised tensions with Russia, and one of the greatest statesmen and scholars of US-Russian relations in our modern history, George Kennan, said in 1997 that this would lead disastrously to a new Cold War. The Secretary of Defense at the time, Bill Perry, thought about resigning in protest he was so upset with the decision to expand NATO because he regarded it as a basic violation of promises as well as a basic provocation to Russia.

The first expansion was taken badly by Russia, but it did not lead to this war. The next step was in 1999, when for a variety of reasons, NATO bombed Serbia 48 straight days to break Serbia and to break Kosovo out of Serbia. This intervention was unacceptable in my opinion, and in violation of the UN Charter. It was also the first major war in Europe since World War II (not the Ukraine war as we are often told). The US took aim at Russia's close ally. That raised the temperature even higher.

Then came 9/11. President Putin immediately offered help and cooperation to the United States, showing that cooperation between the two sides was indeed still possible. Yet the US quickly made a few terrible decisions. First, the United States unilaterally walked out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002. This was seen as a direct threat to Russia because it meant the possibility of the United States looking for first-strike capability against Russia. Then in 2003, the US launched the unprovoked Iraq War on false pretenses and phony intelligence. Again, that raised temperatures further. In 2004, the United States expanded NATO seven times, to Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, and Slovenia. This was like the water rising around Russia: the bombing of Serbia, the ABM Treaty withdrawal, NATO expansion to the Black Sea and the Baltics. Finally, in 2007 at the Munich Security Summit, Putin warned the US to stop, as the US was crossing Russia's red lines.

In 2008, the US announced that NATO would expand to Ukraine and to Georgia. The clear, if unstated, goal was to surround Russia in the Black Sea region: Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, and Georgia would all be NATO members. Russia would no longer be able to project power in the eastern Mediterranean and Middle East.

At the time, European leaders said to me privately, "What is your president doing? This is completely reckless." Of course, European leaders don't say this publicly. This is part of the deception that goes on. 2008 was a watershed moment, a breakdown of cooperation. One of the results of the push of

NATO to Georgia was the Russo-Georgian War. Even then, US policy makers refused to heed Russia's red lines.

In 2011-12, President Obama instructed the CIA and other parts of the U.S. government to work with regional powers in the Middle East to overthrow Bashar Al Assad in Syria. This was yet another US regime change operation. There would have been no Syrian War but for the United States. In 2012, the UN negotiated an end to the Syrian war, but the UN initiative was rejected by one country – the United States – because the US insisted that Assad must go in any peace deal. You will not find this in the media, because by 2012 the mainstream media had stopped reporting inconvenient truths.

In 2014, the United States helped to overthrow the Ukrainian government. We can even listen to the February 6 tape of Victoria Nuland, then the Assistant Secretary of State, speaking to the US ambassador in Ukraine, Geoffrey Pyatt, about the formation of the new government that would come to power through a coup two weeks later.

The United States helped to pay for the Maidan protests. The evidence suggests that the violence, including shooting into the crowds, came largely from the protestor side, not from the security forces of Yanukovich. These were indeed the first shots of the Ukraine war, as part of a US-supported overthrow of the Ukrainian government.

What was Yanukovich doing in 2013 that was so upsetting to the US? He was pursuing neutrality. He was against NATO enlargement. The US helped to overthrow the government and then immediately backed a Russophobic, highly nationalistic government that came into power the next day. The new government quickly dropped neutrality and even passed a law outlawing the Russian language, though the law was not implemented.

A few weeks later, Russia retook Crimea, and many pro-Russian forces in the Ukrainian military broke away from the Ukrainian military and started an insurrection in Eastern Ukraine (the Donbas). The United States sent billions of dollars of weapons to Ukraine during the 2014-2021 to build and modernize Ukraine's army, which is why Ukraine's army could so effectively fight during this past year. The fortifications and the heavy armaments were funded by billions of dollars in support of the anti-Russian regime that the US had helped bring to power.

None of this history is recounted in our media, in our politics, or in our public discussion. Our mainstream media say that the war was wholly unprovoked and was launched because an evil and delusional Vladimir Putin believes he is Peter the Great. In fact, the war has causes dating back 30 years. The United States should not have tried to move its military alliance right up to Russia's borders.

At the end of 2021, President Putin put forth three demands. The first was Ukraine's neutrality; the second was that Crimea should remain a part of Russia, as Crimea has been the home to Russia's Black Sea Fleet since 1783; and the third was that the Minsk II agreement should be implemented as Europe and Ukraine had promised, but then reneged upon. Yet the Biden Administration refused to negotiate.

I do not mean to justify the invasion and the killing, but to help understand it. Most importantly, we should understand that there is a way for this war to end. The way for this war to end, in my view, is for President Biden to pick up the phone and tell President Putin that NATO will not expand to Ukraine, and in return Russia should end the war and withdraw the military. Of course, there are many other issues, but NATO enlargement is at the center.

Most world leaders believe this is a war of NATO expansion. They believe, as I do, that this is a US-Russia proxy war. If it is not, then the United States should prove it quickly and clearly, by stating publicly that NATO expansion is off the table as part of an overall peace agreement.