

Legend of American diplomacy Chas Freeman: a neutral Ukraine is in the interest of Slovakia

Jonathan McCormick 11 April, 2024

When a ceasefire in Ukraine is negotiated, it will be largely on Russian terms; I don't think the future of President Volodymyr Zelensky is at all certain, and it is quite possible there will be regime change in Kiev, Chas Freeman – long-time American diplomat and former US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia – tells the Standard. He also describes what he sees as the largely futile and disingenuous efforts of the Americans to democratise the world. "We mostly want people who are our lackeys, not people who are independent democrats," the diplomat adds.

Having spent 30 years in service to the United States government as a foreign service officer – with a career spanning India, China, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa and ultimately Europe – Chas Freeman is uniquely positioned to provide us with an insightful perspective on today's dangerous conflicts that continue to rage in Ukraine, the Middle East, and potentially China. Having begun his diplomatic career in India, he went on to serve as the chief interpreter for Richard Nixon during his historic 1972 visit to open relations with China, and was involved in every step of the process of normalising relations between the two countries. He was involved with Africa, primarily in negotiations with Fidel Castro to remove Cuban troops from Angola, and with the Apartheid government in South Africa to give Namibia independence. He served as Ambassador to Saudi Arabia during the 1991 Gulf War to liberate Kuwait. His final post in government is particularly relevant to the current war in Ukraine: as Assistant Secretary of Defense in the early 1990s, he was directly involved in the design of the Partnership for Peace: a NATO-centred, post-Cold War European security system which was originally intended to include both Russia and Ukraine. He is now a visiting scholar at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. Since Russia's invasion over two years ago, he has kept a close eye on the situation and offered insightful commentary on the war and on the political developments surrounding it. As the conflict seems now to be entering a new and increasingly dangerous phase, I wanted to ask him his view on how things stand today in Ukraine, and whether he sees any serious prospects for peace in the coming months. Before ending we also talked briefly about his role during Nixon's historic visit to China, and recent events in the Middle East.

We were being told for a long time by Western leaders that Ukraine was undoubtedly going to win this war against Russia. Now the mood has become a lot more sombre and we don't hear that kind of talk very much. What is the current situation on the battlefield and the future outlook for the war, as you understand it?

It was always preposterous to imagine that what would become a war of attrition between Russia and Ukraine could be won by Ukraine. The disparities in size are too great. The Ukrainians brought a fierce spirit of resistance. The battlefield – certainly their morale – in the beginning was very good. They were very motivated. They acquitted themselves well, but in the end their offensive failed, decisively. They are now in retreat – disorderly retreat for the most part – all along the battle lines. They have lost such a huge number of men and displaced so many people as refugees from the country that there is no prospect that they are going to regain the initiative on the battlefield. I think it was a pipe dream to imagine that they could retake Crimea or the Donbass from the Russians.

Can you explain how these regions ended up under Russian control, after having been part of Ukraine since the breakup of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s? And why this is such an important cause of the current conflict?

The problem began, of course, with the coup in 2014 at the Euro-Maidan, and the subsequent enactment of legislation in Ukraine which deprived the country's ethnic and linguistic minorities of the right to linguistic autonomy. The Ukrainian constitution had guaranteed not just Russian speakers but Hungarian speakers and others – Romanian speakers and so forth – within Ukraine the right to educate their children in their language, and the right to conduct official business in their region in their language. This they were deprived of. This was not only a reversal of the Ukrainian constitution but it was also contrary to the best guidelines of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). In the Donbass this triggered what amounted to a civil war, with the Lugansk and Donetsk regions seceding, or attempting to secede. And this very rapidly developed into a proxy war between NATO and the United States on one side, and the Russians on the other. From 2014 onward, the United States was heavily engaged, as was NATO, in retraining, restructuring and rearming the Ukrainian Army, so that by the end of 2021 – when Mr Putin demanded negotiations, threatening the use of force if they did not occur – the Ukrainian Army was the largest army in Europe, other than the Russian and Turkish armies. So I think the background here is clear, and what is happening now is that the Russians have basically occupied the area they originally intended to occupy, they are finishing the job in Lugansk and in Donetsk. The question now is whether there will be a negotiation to recognise some new order in Ukraine, or whether the goalposts will be moved by Mr Putin and he will try to take Odessa and other traditionally Russian speaking areas in Ukraine.

And you don't believe he intended at the beginning to take those?

I think Mr Putin's objectives in the beginning were quite limited, and they have remained limited. He did not commit the level of force to Ukraine that would be required to subdue Ukraine. There is some question about whether the Russian column that stopped *en route* to Kiev was, in fact, an effort to take Kiev, or whether it was instead a diversion to ensure that Russian troops in the East, in the Donbass, had a freer hand. I don't know the answer to that, but I do know that the Russian decision to invade Ukraine appears to have been last-minute. It was not preceded by briefing of the General Staff in Russia on objectives. It was not preceded by lining up the logistical support that was required. The troops were told they were on an exercise, they were not prepared for the actual invasion, and initially it went pretty poorly. And we've had now over two years of warfare, during which NATO has steadily escalated the level of military technology directed against Russia, and Russia has steadily learned how to cope with that technology.

Are the Russian troops in better shape now than they were at the beginning?

I would say the Russian army now is not the same army that invaded Ukraine more than two years ago. It is a much improved force, maybe the finest in Europe, and the idea that somehow or other this force is going to be expelled is something that defies credulity. Now in the West people are tired of this situation. This has turned out to be another 'forever war' – meaning a war with no clear objectives, with no benchmarks to judge progress or the opposite, and no war termination strategy. We're told that the war will continue to the last drop of blood – meaning Ukrainian blood. And there are not enough Ukrainians to bleed to death to achieve success. So we're at a turning point. We are seeing a Russian offensive, we are seeing the collapse of Western will to support Ukraine, we have gridlock in the United States Congress over aid to Ukraine, and we have dissension within NATO, with various NATO members – including Slovakia, Hungary and others – not in line with the American and German or British position. And we have Mr Macron making threats, which suggest a level of desperation – combined with the classic French desire to craft a new French-led European defence order – and he's

been shouted down by other NATO members. So the vaunted unity of NATO is now questionable. And when there is a negotiation, as there must be, it will be largely on Russian terms. Ukraine could have had much more, had it agreed in 2022 to a negotiation when it was doing very well against the Russians, but it has consistently refused.

It seems negotiations in this sort of violent conflict are always difficult, since each side has a different story about how it started, who's at fault and so forth. If we really want to help bring about some lasting peace settlement between Ukraine and Russia, how important is it that we have a good understanding of the origins and causes of the conflict? And what kind of solution can you envisage that would address the real concerns of both sides?

I find it odd that, although the Russian invasion was completely illegal under international law, so was the detachment of Kosovo from Serbia by NATO, which set a precedent for a unilateral reordering of borders and so forth within the European space. So I think it's very important that we begin with Crimea, which has had several referenda regarding its independence. Right after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Crimeans had a referendum in which they voted to be independent. They are predominantly Russian speakers or Tatar speakers, and they did not want to be part of Ukraine.

You're talking about back in the early 1990s?

That's correct. It's very clear that the people in Crimea do not want to be part of Ukraine, and they've said so on numerous occasions. Therefore, the 2014 referendum that the Russians managed – however they managed it – which produced a vote overwhelmingly in favour of leaving Ukraine and attaching Crimea to Russia, has to be taken as a genuine expression of the popular will. In the end, the consent of the governed is what determines the legitimacy of government, not what foreign countries think, or what approval they bestow on a government. So I think the solution to this issue in the end will come down to self-determination by the various regions of Ukraine, and whether they are prepared to accept either reuniting with Ukraine, independence perhaps from both Russia and Ukraine, or amalgamation with Russia. So I think the solution lies essentially in the Minsk accords, by which the Donbass region was offered the same sorts of linguistic and other autonomy, or self-governance, that Quebec has within the Canadian federation.

The Minsk accords – you mean the peace agreements that were meant to end the civil war in the Donbass, but were never implemented.

Yes. Those two agreements – negotiated at Minsk with the French and Germans in the lead, the United States was not present – were sabotaged by the French, Germans and the United States. And in fact, as the Russian troops massed on the border with Ukraine in December of 2021, the Ukrainians were preparing a major offensive to retake the Donbass and its Russian speaking inhabitants, those who had not already left for Russia. So I think the solution lies in some process reliant on democracy. For example, I could imagine – if Mr Putin would agree, which he might not – the reinstatement of the Minsk accords. But this time with the Donbass, Crimea, perhaps Zaporozhe, maybe Kherson – wherever the battle lines end – with these Russian speaking areas having a temporary independence from both Ukraine and Russia, with a view to a referendum – let's say twenty years later, whatever the time period – to choose whether they wish to remain independent, become part of Russia, or return to Ukraine. How they would decide would depend on how the ultranationalist Western Ukrainians behaved – those who until now have insisted on the forcible assimilation of these regions to their definition of what it means to be Ukrainian. So I think the essence of the solution lies in recognising that the people who are affected by this war – that is, the people in Crimea, the Donbass, Kherson and Zaporozhe – should ultimately have the power to decide their position between Russia and Ukraine.

Well, that sounds like an ideal outcome, but isn't it kind of too late for that? I mean it's hard to imagine that Russia would ever go along with it. In terms of Crimea it's already been decided – at least from the Crimeans' perspective – and in terms of the other four regions, Russia has officially incorporated them, so don't you think it's too late there as well?

Well, I think it may very well be too late, but you asked what a good solution would be. I stated that I was not at all sure Mr Putin or the Russian elite would agree to this. But I think – just to make the case for it – there is absolutely zero prospect that a referendum in Crimea would lead to the return of Crimea to Ukraine. By any standard that issue is closed. The question of the Donbass is more complicated. Mr Putin accepted the Minsk accords, which involved Ukraine's neutrality and respect for the rights of Donbass residents. Ukraine actually agreed to this in late March of 2022, within about five weeks of the Russian invasion. The Russians agreed to withdraw, the Ukrainians agreed to neutrality. This was in a talk mediated by the Turks and then-Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett. That treaty lacked some detail but was basically complete, and was to be ceremonially approved in a meeting between President Zelensky and President Putin. Enter the West. Boris Johnson, acting for the United States and NATO, flew suddenly to Kiev and talked Mr Zelensky out of doing this, and apparently he said 'You may be prepared for peace, but NATO is not. We want this fight to continue.' To weaken and isolate Russia – that has remained our objective, not the protection of the Ukrainians, who have suffered a catastrophe under this approach. So that was a choice that we imposed on Kiev. And since that time Mr Zelensky has continued to state that he will never negotiate, and even issued a decree making it illegal to negotiate with Russia. The Russians by contrast have continuously affirmed their willingness to enter a negotiation. I've had a career as a diplomat, and for diplomats optimism is the same thing as courage is to soldiers. You have to believe you can succeed. So what is the ideal solution? Let's start from there. And if we can't get that, let's see how much of it we can get. But at the moment nobody is willing to negotiate with Moscow.

But since Russia has already annexed the Donbass and two other oblasts, which it now considers legally part of the Russian Federation, how would President Putin backtrack on that? Wouldn't this be the real sticking point?

Well, I think there's a strategic argument for his doing so. The Russian interest essentially is to have a buffer between Russia proper and a possibly hostile Europe. And I think the interest of European countries, particularly Central European countries like Slovakia where you reside, would be well served by a neutral Ukraine that was a buffer between Europe and Russia. But I think the basic point here is we have come to a moment in which Mr Putin has all the cards. He holds most of Donetsk and Lugansk and he is gaining more as we speak. He has annexed them formally. He could give them the right of self-determination. That would not be unprecedented in other contexts.

You mean still within the Russian federation, but having autonomous status?

It could be that way, that's one option. Or he could agree to the more far-reaching arrangement that I suggested, that is to separate them from both Russia and Ukraine on a temporary basis pending a referendum – some democratic process – that would determine where they ended up. And of course at the moment, since nobody's prepared to negotiate with Russia, Russia is still advancing on the battlefield and the Western bargaining position is deteriorating. We're not gaining from delay, we are losing from it. And if I were Ukrainian at this point – even if I were Western Ukrainian and therefore wedded to Stepan Bandera and everything that he represented – I would want to save what I could of my country. Because as time goes on, the prospect is that it's going to be further truncated, maybe deprived of its Black Sea coast – landlocked – and deprived of its Russian speaking population. And under some extreme circumstances, they could face the danger of further partitioning, not necessarily from Russia but from some of the other neighbours – the Poles, the Hungarians, possibly the

Romanians. We also have the Moldova situation, Transnistria, which if this is mishandled could end up as the farthest reaching chunk of Russian territory surrounding Ukraine. Such realities are where things are generally decided. Diplomats can very seldom improve on what has been achieved on the battlefield. Usually their job in a negotiation is to reconcile the parties to what they have done and where they have ended up on the geopolitical chess board.

I have heard a number of commentators recently suggest that the only realistic way now for Ukraine to achieve peace is for its leaders to actually turn their back on their Western sponsors, who are unwilling to negotiate, and to strike a deal directly with Russia. Which would essentially cut the West out of the picture. What do you think about this prospect? Is it realistic?

May 20th is the end of Mr Zelensky's term as president of Ukraine, and there are many people in Kiev who are – ‘plotting’ may perhaps be the right word, but in any case considering – whether that should not mean his removal from power. He is the symbol of intransigence by Ukraine. The Speaker of the Rada, Ukraine's parliament, says that Mr Zelensky's term having ended, he – the Speaker – should be the acting president. And there are others in the military and elsewhere who do not agree with the refusal to reach a compromise with the Russians, difficult as that would be. So I don't think Mr Zelensky's future is assured, by any means. And it is entirely possible there will be regime change in Kiev of one sort or another, and that a different regime will make different choices than Mr Zelensky has made under the influence of American neoconservatives and his own hardliners.

You have argued that what Russia really wanted all along was simply Ukrainian neutrality – and not to keep Ukraine within its own sphere of influence. Many people I talk to here in Slovakia, however, don't believe that. They believe that everything Russia did was in order to keep Ukraine within its sphere of influence – including the Minsk agreements, which, they say, would have given Russia a vote within the Ukrainian Rada, because of Russian influence in the Donbass region. What do you say to those people?

I'd say that the historical record refutes that theory. Mr Putin from the beginning has had three demands. First, the neutralization of Ukraine, possibly along the lines of the Austrian state treaty that I mentioned earlier. The second point was the linguistic and ethnic rights of Russian speakers within Ukraine. Which, you know, it's a reality, they are there – they are entitled to an influence in the Rada. And if they're still part of Ukraine, it's up to other Ukrainians to convince them to compromise. The third point was a European security architecture. Russia accepted the Partnership for Peace as a model for post-Cold War Europe. Boris Yeltsin was enthusiastic about it. Mr Putin, for the first decade or so – right up to 2007 when he warned the Munich Security Conference that Russia would be compelled to react if it extended the US sphere of influence through NATO to Russia's borders in Ukraine and Georgia – was trying to become part of Europe: a kind of extrapolation from the process that began under the Peter the Great by which Russians sought to re-identify themselves as European, even as they retained their traditional culture. When in 2008 the United States nonetheless basically forced NATO to offer membership to Georgia, as well as Ukraine, Putin reacted by attacking Georgia, and detaching two other restive ethnic enclaves from it, which remain under Russian control today. That should have been taken as a clear signal that he was serious about opposing Ukrainian inclusion in NATO. But my basic point is, during this entire period – actually from 2008 onward, but with a vengeance from 2014, after the coup – the United States was trying to incorporate Ukraine into the American sphere of influence, known as NATO. And Russia was not trying to reincorporate Ukraine into its sphere of influence. It did, however, want neutrality. It made that very clear.

What about the argument that Russia would have been able, under Minsk, to influence Ukrainian foreign and domestic policy through its influence in the Donbass region?

It's quite correct to say that, had the Minsk accords been implemented, Russia would have had a measure of influence. Probably, in the Rada that would have been the case. But it would not have controlled Ukraine. It would not have had the level of identification with Ukraine that Ukrainian membership in NATO provided, or even the quasi-membership that was contrived between 2008 and 2022. So Mr Putin still today has the same three demands: that is, neutralization of Ukraine, protection of Russian speakers in what was formerly Ukraine – could be again perhaps, maybe not – and finally, a discussion of European security architecture. Now in that connection, if there is a resumed discussion of European security architecture – which we have refused to conduct with Moscow – if we were to agree to that, I think the Partnership for Peace would be very relevant. It would be the basis for a cooperative security arrangement in Europe focused on the management of European security issues, and would involve the Russians as well as the Germans, the French, one hopes the British despite Brexit, the Italians, the Spanish, and others. As well as the Poles, who would play a key role in it. So I think that discussion is overdue, and I hope it will occur.

You just mentioned the Partnership for Peace, which you were personally involved in designing when you were Assistant US Secretary of Defense. It's described as a NATO-centred, post-Cold War European security system. When I spoke with Richard Sakwa from the University of Kent, he told me that the failure to implement a European security system that included Russia was a key factor in what ultimately led to the current war. Do you agree?

Absolutely.

Was the system you worked on, the Partnership for Peace, originally intended to include Russia?

Yes. It included two things, two aspects. One was a special NATO-Russia Council, which brought Russia into an ongoing dialogue with NATO in Brussels. The second was Russian membership in the Partnership for Peace. A limited membership, to be sure, because the Partnership for Peace was based on two notions. First, the reconstruction of the defence establishment in the former satellite countries, so that defence budgets were subject to parliamentary oversight, debate and review, and were transparent, and defence ministers were civilians, not generals. This is the Western European military culture, and part of the content of the Partnership for Peace was the requirement to accept that. The second requirement was that aspirants to membership in the Partnership for Peace agree to master the 3000 standardization agreements that NATO has developed, which provide the software, if you will, the operating doctrine, that enables a Slovak to cooperate with a Greek, even though they don't have a common language and have a very different history and perhaps different values. So NATO produced the first – and to this day, the only – genuine multinational operating doctrine for the battlefield or for peacekeeping, and the requirement was to accept that also. The Russians responded by training a number of their forces to NATO standards. When they intervened in the former Yugoslavia, it was as part of a coalition with NATO and this was part of the concept. Nobody ever imagined that the Russians, with their own distinctive military tradition – which involves having a general at the head of their defence ministry – would ever subject themselves to command from Brussels, or Mons, where the NATO military command is located in Belgium. Nobody ever imagined that. We also never imagined that Ukraine would aspire to join NATO. Why? Because, while it probably would want to train its troops to be interoperable with NATO – so that if there were a contingency that required NATO cooperation they would be able to cooperate – to actually join NATO would be, and here I am quoting people in Ukraine I spoke to early on in this process – would be an unnecessary provocation that would produce a war with Russia. They understood that.

So under this concept Russia wouldn't have joined NATO, but they would have cooperated with NATO through the Partnership for Peace. Why didn't this idea succeed in the end?

What has happened is the result of the abandonment of this concept by the United States and NATO. Why did that happen? It happened because of American domestic ethnic politics. Beginning in the 1994 midterms, and certainly in the 1996 presidential election, President Clinton had his eye on the voters of Milwaukee and other places where heavy representation of the so-called captive nations exists. And these voters, with their strong affiliations with Eastern European countries – who have a well-founded fear of Russian dominance, having experienced it – were hell bent on getting these countries, not into a cooperative security system that included Russia, but into an anti-Russian alliance. And the polls were most adamant on this.

Okay, so that explains why this kind of cooperative security system was abandoned under Clinton, but what about after Clinton? What about under Bush, Obama and Trump? Why this consistent refusal to cooperate with Russia on security, even as we could see things becoming more tense and more dangerous?

Enter the neoconservatives. Forty three years of Cold War produces inertia. It produces vested interests in having an enemy. If you don't have an enemy, you suffer from enemy deprivation syndrome, which is the sick feeling you get when you don't know which way to point your artillery. [Laughter] The neoconservatives combined Cold War triumphalism, 'we won, they lost' – which is not exactly right: the Russians defaulted on the global contest for hegemony, recognizing they couldn't afford to continue it; they were not militarily defeated, but the common American belief is that they were – the neoconservatives combined this triumphalism with militarism. Meaning they look at everything internationally in terms of its military implications, not factoring in political, economic or cultural factors, which are often more significant. And finally, you had among the neoconservatives a number of people – I think Victoria Nuland has become the kind of poster girl for this group, which may not be fair to her – who are of Eastern European origin, adamantly anti-Russian for many reasons, and determined – as they put it – to isolate and weaken Russia. That's something we have not succeeded in doing. Russia is not isolated. It is reoriented – toward China, India, the Middle East, and Africa. It is not weakened. It has used this war – which I don't think it wanted, at all – to rebuild its military strength and military production capacity, to the point where, in a war of attrition, the Russians have all the advantages. And the West, which has allowed its defence production to attrite, is on the defensive and losing its confidence in its ability to continue.

Do you think that the 9/11 attacks were a kind of crystallizing moment, which kind of reinvigorated the neo-cons to take more charge in Washington and to look at all foreign policy from the standpoint of 'it's us against them and we've got to have the upper hand'?

Yes. That attack on the United States was a turning point. The historical record here is very clear: every once in a while the United States renegotiates the basic ways in which we conduct constitutional government. The American Civil War was a case which greatly expanded the power of the federal government, created new Cabinet departments and changed the nature of the relationship between Washington and the States, as well as between government in general and the populace. The same thing happened, arguably, in the Great Depression under Franklin Roosevelt, who created a new order which we've lived with pretty much ever since. When the Cold War ended, it was reasonable to expect we would once again reorganize our constitutional system, and we did. But it came in response to 9/11, and it was reorganized in terms of the creation of a Department of Homeland Security, the creation of a national security state, the installation of all sorts of security measures for air travel and even train travel, and an atmosphere of suspicion fortified by xenophobia and Islamophobia. And this was the perfect atmosphere, for those who wished to revive the idea of Russia as enemy, to do so. And they did. Now, whether this was a deliberate choice on their part, I don't know. But the national mood shifted, and it continues to be xenophobic, protectionist and anti-immigrant, Islamophobic and Russophobic. And we have added China now to that list.

What effect has all this had – including the war in Ukraine – on the reputation of the United States, on our position globally?

I would say that our posture on Ukraine, in particular, has cost us most of the moral credibility we once enjoyed in the majority of the world's countries. Outside Europe, the Ukraine venture is regarded as a failure of American diplomacy to prevent war, and countries do not wish to take sides in it. They do not agree that Russia had any right to invade Ukraine – that was illegal. But they do not see any reason to align themselves with the West on a matter that they consider to be a fight among Europeans. So we have lost a great deal. This is even before you get to our enablement of genocide in Gaza, which has cost us the final measure of our credibility in most corners of the world, and is even doing so in Europe as we speak.

Has our aggressive posture toward Russia been a factor in hampering any hoped-for process of their transitioning toward full democracy? I mean, it seems to me that for a country to be willing to go through this kind of process, they have to feel relatively secure. They're not likely to do so when they feel under threat, or are facing a serious crisis. In times like that they want a strong leader to stick around long enough to get them through the crisis. So I have to wonder whether US actions in recent decades have actually thwarted any attempts to have democracy take root in Russia. What do you think?

I think you make a very good point. Some measure of national security is essential for the development of democracy. It means self-confidence. Russia has been on the defensive since the end of the Cold War. It's watched NATO expand steadily in its direction, and now proposed to incorporate Ukraine. It sees these things, not unrealistically, as a threat. Everywhere NATO has expanded, US military bases have appeared, US weaponry has been installed – and all of this has now been aimed more or less at Russia. So I think your point is correct, but I would add another point. And that is that the Cold War was unique, in that it combined geopolitical interests – that is, an interest in containing Russian military expansion – with ideological containment of messianic Soviet communism. Normally, geopolitics is a function of *realpolitik*, and ideology is left to a different realm. Democratization is an ideological objective. We are not in an era where geopolitics and ideology coincide anymore. How Russia governs itself is up to Russians to decide. They have traditions which are autocratic, which will not easily be erased. And if they are miserable under these traditions, I'm sorry for them, but that is not my business. So, I think the ideological impulse that we've seen in recent decades is an aspect of post-Cold War triumphalism: we won, democracy proved its value, therefore everybody must become democratic. Well, you cannot ask the Chinese to cease to be Chinese. You cannot ask the Russians to cease to be Russian. You cannot even ask the Japanese, who are democratic but have a functional one-party system, to be like multiparty democracies in Europe, or the two-party democracy in the United States – if what we have is still a democracy, rather than a plutocracy or a shell game. One of the great ironies is, that at the very moment when our own democracy is degenerate and decaying, we choose to insist on its export. I would think it would make more sense to clean up our act at home before we went around the world, with Quixotic intensity, trying to bring down windmills we mistake for giants.

I would be remiss if, before we finished, I didn't ask you about your role as chief interpreter during President Nixon's historic visit to China in 1972. What were your impressions during that visit, for example of the way President Nixon and Chairman Mao communicated with each other?

I was not present during the visit with Mao Zedong, because he did not take anybody from the Department of State with him. And there was, in fact, no Chinese-speaking American in that meeting, so we have no idea what Chairman Mao may actually have said, as opposed to what his interpreter said he said. So I don't have any impression of that meeting, except from the transcript. I think probably

many of your readers don't know the normal pattern of summit meetings between adversaries – and the United States and China were adversaries at that time. Normally, the chiefs of state or government – Nixon was both – have a discussion with their counterpart about pleasant things they've seen and done, and plan to do. The Secretary of State or the Foreign Minister has a separate meeting to discuss all of the ways in which we disagree and oppose each other.

Why focus on these negative things when the purpose of the visit is to start a positive relationship?

It was essential to have that discussion during the Nixon trip, because both China and the United States had relationships we wished to preserve: the United States with South Korea, China with North Korea; the United States with South Vietnam, China with North Vietnam; the United States with Pakistan and India, China with Pakistan alone. And we both had different views, different recollections, of Japanese imperialism in the region, where the Chinese had lost – by their own count – perhaps thirty million people in the fourteen years of the Japanese rampage through China. So I was a principal interpreter at the negotiating table for the Secretary of State and his Chinese counterpart. And we did not talk about pleasant things we had seen and done – we talked about the war in Vietnam, the war in Korea, the situation in Kashmir, different views of Japan, and so forth. So that was an intense and lively discussion, which got nowhere because we wanted to put into the Shanghai Communique – unlike any other communique – a long recitation of irreconcilable differences between the two sides, so that we could show that to our friends in Korea, and the Chinese could show it to theirs. So that was an interesting diplomatic innovation.

One strategic purpose of that trip, as I understand it, was not only to open up China but also to divide it further from the Soviet Union – in contrast with the actions of today's US administration, which seem to have driven Russia and China together. How did the Nixon administration decide on that strategic purpose, and how did it play out?

It's normally a sound principle of statecraft to try to divide your enemies rather than unite them. The Nixon administration came to office in 1969 believing, contrary to the conventional wisdom at the time, that there was a genuine Sino-Soviet split, a split between Moscow and Beijing that could be exploited. There had been battles between Soviet and Chinese troops. Nixon reacted by saying to his Cabinet, which was stunned by the statement, that we could not allow China to be overwhelmed by Russia, because that would fundamentally change the geopolitical balance. So he recognized the advantages to the United States of an independent, if cantankerous and ideologically opposed, China. So he went to China to ensure that China joined the effort to contain the Soviet Union, and to protect China from the Soviet Union. He also hoped, forlornly as it turned out, to divide China from North Vietnam. That did not happen. Beijing and Hanoi continued to have a cordial relationship. There were some 300,000 Chinese troops in North Vietnam, mostly protecting the railways and doing other work on infrastructure, and they remained there. And right after the Nixon visit to Beijing, we briefed the North Vietnamese leadership in detail about the discussions, reassuring them that there had been no change in China's position. So the main objective was indeed geopolitical. And I think it was a surprise to everyone that when we opened to China, and they to us, we found we had a great deal in common. And we found Americans and Chinese worked well together. Everybody had their own ridiculous view of China. I treasured the moment when American right-wing figures arrived in China, and discovered that Chinese schoolboys sat upright in their chairs rather than slouching, had crew cuts, and regularly saluted the teacher. This was some kind of ideal that had disappeared in the American classroom. And so forth and so on. We go through periodic swings of the pendulum with China, we consistently misunderstand it. But in one direction or another, I think the Chinese actually understand us a great deal better than we do them.

Both of the major conflicts the US is currently involved with are having an impact on Saudi Arabia, where you served as US Ambassador. The war in Ukraine seems to have had the effect of warming relations between the Saudis and the Russians, while the war in Gaza seems to have cooled relations between the Saudis and Israel, which had otherwise been improving. How do you see things developing in both these cases?

American hegemony, if you will, in the Middle East has been in steady decline, for multiple reasons. 9/11 entrenched Islamophobia in the United States, and meant that there was a values issue between us and the adherents of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula. That was seized upon by Israel to propagandize and vilify Saudi Arabia, which they did successfully. So we had a deteriorated relationship. In 2011, in the so-called Arab Spring – misnamed after the Prague Spring – something very different occurred. And the United States, far from protecting its proteges like Hosni Mubarak, the president of Egypt, was gleeful as he was overthrown. This goes back to the point about what I think is our largely futile and insincere effort to democratize the world. What we want, for the most part, is people who are our lackeys, not people who are independent minded democrats. The Saudis concluded that exclusive reliance on the United States, which had been their policy for decades, was too dangerous, and they began to diversify their relationships internationally. They reached out to India, to China, and ultimately to Russia. And of course they discovered in Russia a major oil producer that could be brought to cooperate with OPEC, in which they are the major factor. So you have an OPEC+ agreement now, which very much serves both the interests of Russia and Saudi Arabia, and it's continuous.

So is their relationship based mainly on cooperation on oil, or is there more to it than that?

The Russians have also demonstrated in Syria their ability to go in where the Americans cannot. If you recall, the chemical warfare hoo-ha in Syria was resolved by an initiative from Sergei Lavrov, and the Russians became, in a sense, the go-to diplomatic power in the Middle East for a while. China may have overtaken them now, with the arrangement of Saudi-Iranian *rapprochement*. Anyway, the Saudis have been on a diversification campaign for some time. The Russians welcomed that. They have found common cause in several arenas. The Saudis do not want to become involved with the American push into Ukraine. Their main interest in Ukraine has been the cultivation of grain there, for their market – food security, in other words. That has been disrupted by the war, and it is not welcome.

What about Saudi Arabia's relationship with Israel, which seems to have cooled off now after a period of warming?

Having broken with a foreign policy driven mainly by Islam, Saudi Arabia is now practicing *realpolitik*. The United Arab Emirates really pioneered this, but the Saudis are very much in that mode. They are prepared to deal with Israel on a transactional basis. That is to say, where there's something in it for them, they will deal with the Israelis. They do that now quite openly in the intelligence sphere, where Israel and Saudi Arabia have some common enemies. These enemies include Iran, and they include Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood. And for different reasons. Hamas, the movement of Islamic resistance to Israeli control of Palestine, is also a democratic movement, and the basic principles of Hamas conflict with the Saudi monarchy's very basis for legitimacy. Hamas says: we do not need kings, princes, generals, dictators, thugs at the head of government. We can legitimize our government at the ballot box, which is what they have done. People forget, they won the elections – the last time there were elections. So the Saudis don't like Hamas because of its democratic character more than anything else. The Israelis don't like it, obviously, because it resists the encroachments of Israel on Palestinian territory. So, prior to the October 7th Hamas breakout from Gaza, the Saudis and the Israelis were talking.

What was the nature of their discussions?

The Saudis in my view were essentially asking for the moon, just trying to see what they could get, given the American commitment to advance Israel's interest in normalisation with them. So they asked for a mutual defence treaty, which in my view had no chance ever of getting through the Senate. They asked for uncontrolled nuclear fuel cycle, which both the Israelis and their supporters in Congress adamantly opposed. They asked for an open door to technology transfer, including weapons transfer, which has never happened. So they were asking for these things as the price for normalization with Israel. Failing that, they were prepared to go ahead on a transactional basis. So they invited the minister of tourism from Israel to come to Saudi Arabia. Why? Because, whereas in the past they were in many ways more closed to the world than Tibet, now they are trying to develop tourism, with major infrastructure projects in the northern Red Sea. And Israeli shekels – Israelis coming there to spend their money and enjoy a resort existence – are very much in their interest. This is all off the table now. 96% of Saudis now believe that the Arab world, including those who have relations with Israel, should break them over the Gaza genocide. And when this ends, Israel will have made so many enemies in both the Arab and Islamic world, that it will have two billion people who consider it morally beyond the pale. Israel is doing huge damage to its moral authority and reputation, and becoming a pariah state. And because of the intimacy of the American embrace of Israel we are suffering the same fate.