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FRAGILE CEASEFIRE

Will the ceasefire in Iran hold?

For twenty-one hours, American and Iranian delegations faced each other in Pakistan’s capital, the first such direct encounter in decades, under the supervision of a state that had no formal stake in the war yet every reason to prevent its spread. Islamabad became, briefly, the center of the world. Those talks failed.

And yet they also made the ceasefire possible. Just a few days before the American President had hinted at the annihilation of a whole civilisation. Did he really consider nuclear strikes on Iran? Or was it bluff? With Trump, we will probably never know.

Pakistani mediation narrowed differences, structured the outlines of a ten-point truce, and kept channels open when escalation was accelerating. The result was not an agreement but a framework fragile enough to collapse, yet coherent enough to delay collapse.

When the delegations left Islamabad without a deal, the war did not really pause. Within hours, Donald Trump announced a naval blockade of the Hormuz Strait. Then a few days later he said that he would reopen it, and China, which gets much of the oil it needs from the Persian Gulf would be thankful.

For now the current truce cannot be understood as a diplomatic success. It narrowly avoided the war from entering a catastrophic phase. But many of the questions remain open and apparently unsolvable. The contradiction is explicit. The Strait of Hormuz has reopened, shipping resumes, and yet the American blockade remains “in full force,” a reminder that the ceasefire is conditional, reversible, and embedded in ongoing economic warfare.

Islamabad’s illusion?

There is a temptation, particularly in diplomatic circles, to view the Islamabad talks as the beginning of a process: the first round of talks, to be followed by a second, then a third, gradually converging toward agreement. Pakistan itself is trying to sustain that narrative, dispatching envoys, reopening channels, and positioning itself as indispensable intermediary. But this reading misjudges the structure of the crisis.

Islamabad revealed not convergence but distance. After twenty-one hours, the core disputes—nuclear limits, sanctions, control of maritime routes—remained intact. What the talks demonstrated was not that a deal was within reach, but that it was not.

And yet, those same talks made the ceasefire politically possible. They provided a minimal architecture—a list of points, a shared

vocabulary, a sense that negotiation, however fruitless, was still occurring. Without that scaffolding, the subsequent escalation might have led directly to rupture.

This is the paradox: diplomacy failed, but its failure was predictable but still necessary and desirable, at least for heads to cool down. The United States, for its part, has adopted a different logic altogether. The threat of overwhelming destruction is not a breakdown of policy; it is the policy. By compressing time—by turning negotiation into a race against annihilation—the United States has forced movement where gradual diplomacy stalled. But it has also altered the meaning of negotiation itself. Talks are no longer a space for compromise; they are a mechanism for formalizing what pressure has already extracted.

A ceasefire built to expire?

It is tempting to conclude that such a ceasefire is merely temporary, a prelude to renewed confrontation. That may well be true. But it would be a mistake to dismiss what has been achieved.

The alternative to this imperfect truce was not a better agreement. It was escalation under conditions already primed for catastrophe. Islamabad did not resolve the conflict, but it interrupted its trajectory. It reintroduced time into a situation that had been reduced to deadlines.

That is the quiet value of diplomacy, even when it appears to fail. It does not always produce solutions. Sometimes it performs a more modest, but no less essential function: it prevents decisions from being made at the point of maximum pressure.

The current ceasefire may not last. The US, Israel and Iran have found themselves at odds for decades. The 2015 nuclear deals required many months of negotiations. This time the differences between the parties are even more entrenched now that the confrontation went through two hot phases, the first in June last year, the second starting on February 28. Internal contradictions are obvious, and its foundations are thin. But diplomacy has done something that threats alone could not do—it has reopened a space, however narrow, in which outcomes are not entirely predetermined. That space should not be mistaken for peace. But neither should it be underestimated. Because in a crisis defined by ultimatums, even a fragile pause is preferable to apocalyptic rhetoric. .

“People want to choose their own leaders, not be forced into that by Trump or Netanyahu”

Interview with Oxford historian Peter Frankopan

Will Iran emerge as the new dominant power in the Middle East, strengthened, in spite of having been decapitated?

Peter Frankopan: Well, I am wary both of the concept of ‘decapitation’ but also of the supposed nature of what has happened in the last six weeks. While it has been well-publicised that a large number of senior officials have been killed in Iran, it is worth paying careful attention to precisely who has been targeted – and who has not. Likewise, it is not helpful to talk about ‘decapitation’ when all new people have been promoted to take new positions. When you are decapitated, you cannot grow or get a new head. In the case of Iran, there has been no problem in the recruitment process, which means we should be thinking in terms of regeneration, rather than something more final.

All that being said, it is clear that Iran has played its hand of cards well. I don’t mean that as a means of being sympathetic or critical, but rather as a statement of fact. The regime in Tehran has been effective in ensuring it has leverage and has not simply collapsed. It has done so by widening the conflict, by making sure its neighbours have felt pain, and by militarising the Strait of Hormuz it has extended that further to global economies – particularly those in Asia and Africa. That means that Iran still holds some cards, despite Trump saying otherwise. But that does not mean anything in terms of what emerges from this crisis. There are a few ways this could go, and it is premature for now to try to guess what comes next. You need a prophet for that, not a historian.

Does a powerful Iran necessarily have to be a threat for the Middle East, Israel and even Europe? Is Iran bound to remain hostile, a perennial adversary of the West?

Peter Frankopan: This of course depends on what kind of regime emerges if and when there is a settlement. And much will depend, in turn, on the personalities of the individuals in question. From the perspective of the outside world, Iran has played a dangerous set of games in the Middle East since 1979, building up proxies, sowing unrest, using violence and undermining stability. Internally too, Iran has used repression against its own citizens, both against individuals and sometimes indiscriminately too. So the question is why it has done so. There are many explanations. One is that Iran has seen itself as a revolutionary state since Khomeini took power, and, as such, the greatest fear is the

threat of a counter-revolution; another is that fear is a valuable political tool that allows for a constant sense of fear; another is the prison of history where Iranians – and not just since 1979 – feel that outsiders are trying to undermine, exploit and manipulate in order to benefit from the country’s resources. All these have important elements of truth in them. The attacks of last June and then those that began on 28 February reinforce all these narratives. So yes; one would expect that perennial sense of rivalry to endure. There are ways out of this; but I am not confident that the US and/or Israel, the west, or Iran’s neighbours will help find them – nor that the regime in Tehran will want them.

What matters more: sorting out Hormuz, or elections in Sweden and Denmark?

Many in Iran were unhappy with the Islamic regime. Yet when Iran was attacked, there were no mass uprisings to overthrow the Iranian government, like Israel and Trump had auspicated. Why?

Peter Frankopan: It helps that the apparatus of power is formidable; so too does the track record – again not just since 1979 but under the last Shah too. Protesting in Iran requires more bravery than it does on the streets of Oxford, and Iranians know that. It helps too that the internet and communications have been severely curtailed, which helps manage bad news being spread, allows the government to tell its side of the story and, most importantly of all, to make co-ordination of dissent difficult. Even in these circumstances, though, some are surprised – as your question suggests – by the absence of uprisings. There is an obvious answer: people don’t want their country to be bombed into submission from outside. People want to choose their own leaders, not be forced into that by Donald Trump, Benjamin Netanyahu or anyone else. I don’t think that is hard to understand.

Pakistan helped mediate between Iran and the United States, thereby increasing its diplomatic capital. What does this war mean for Pakistan and other countries in the region, including Central Asian countries?

PF: It’s a good question, and one with potentially very long answers. There are overlapping issues as far as Pakistan is concerned. First, it is a neighbour to Iran, so is closely affected by what is happening in

the Gulf and in Iran. Second, it has not been drawn in directly, as many of Iran’s other direct and regional neighbours have been – which provides an arm’s length perspective, which is clearly useful. Third, it is one of the countries that is most in need of a settlement: Pakistan has some renewable energy, but it is heavily dependent on energy from elsewhere, especially the Gulf. It imports 99% of its LNG from the Gulf, as well as 90%+ of its crude oil. All of this comes via tanker, rather than pipeline. So the effective closure of Hormuz presents a very serious problem indeed. Fourth, it has close ties with China; that matters because Beijing is clearly concerned about the effects of the war – especially on markets that matter for China. For all these reasons, plus Pakistan’s geopolitical clout, makes Islamabad an obvious choice to host talks. Whether the government there can bring a settlement between the parties is another story. But we should all hope that it will. Central Asia is a different story; the crisis in the Gulf brings opportunities and challenges for all five former Soviet states, and also for Afghanistan. But these are of a different magnitude to Pakistan and elsewhere, at least for now.

Is this war another episode in the great power shift from the West to the East? Is this process inevitable? What will this mean for the West?

PF: Let’s put it this way. What matters more: sorting out Hormuz, or elections this year in Sweden and Denmark, or the choice of a new president in Portugal or Bulgaria? What matters more, the energy situation that has already closed factories across India and persuaded the government of the Philippines – a country with a population of 115m people to declare a national emergency? The connections that link regions and peoples across Asia have always mattered; the west ‘rose’ by working out how to benefit from and control these. The Dutch, Portuguese, British and others built empires by doing this – not only in Asia, but primarily, as this was where wealth, scholarship and manufacturing were strongest. That is the power of the concept of the Silk Roads – webs of places, cultures, ideas and places that linked the Pacific with Central Asia, the Indian Ocean, the Gulf, Africa and the Mediterranean. Power shifts are reflections of ambition and capabilities; for me, these are not inevitable processes – just a fact of life. And so yes. In a changing world, where power lies matters. And that seems to be shifting rapidly today.

THE NEW POST-WESTERN WORLD ORDER

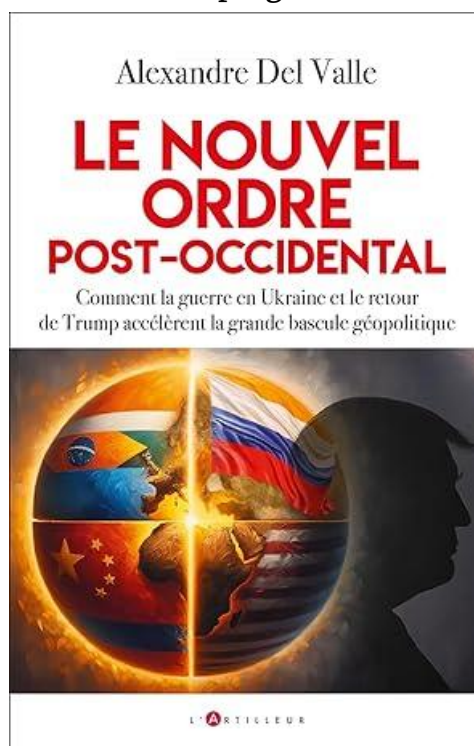
Interview with French geopolitics expert Alexandre Del Valle, author of the book
“Le Nouvel Ordre Post-Occidental”

What was the Western world order, and how long did it last? Was it truly a global world order led by the West?

The Western world order took shape between 1945 and the 1950s, centred on the power of the United States, which emerged from the Second World War as the dominant player both militarily and economically. The establishment of NATO, the hegemony of the dollar and the creation of major international financial institutions (Bretton Woods, the IMF, the World Bank, etc.) formed the pillars of this system. During the Cold War, it was also defined by its opposition to the Soviet bloc, but it was after 1991, with the collapse of the USSR, that it took on a fully unipolar form. From this “unipolar moment” onwards, when Fukuyama prophesied the so-called “end of history”, the United States and the universalist-global Western system ceased to represent a Judeo-Christian or Euro-Christian civilisation, based on a distinct geography, ethnicity, Greek philosophy, Roman law and Christian personalism, but became an uprooted cosmopolitan project founded on the destruction of identities, on an anti-civilisational globalist utopia, and on Atlanticism and institutions and multinationals controlled primarily by America.

Since then, this Western-Anglo-Saxon order has given the impression of being global, because the Anglo-American elites and their followers in continental Old Europe led people to believe that (neutral) technological globalism signified the end of sovereign nations and identities and was synonymous with “political mondialism”, that is, it would necessarily lead to an internationalist globalist project that would one day become a sort of world empire with planetary “governance”, falsely presented by the Anglo-Saxon elites as the End of History and of Wars and the victory of progressive liberalism. In reality, it was a profoundly Western-centric order, directed by America and its Anglo-Saxon partners in collaboration with major American multinationals, against a backdrop of massive offshoring and the financialisation of economies. Its universality was more

proclaimed than real, and the cosmopolitanism constantly extolled and conveyed by the slogans and songs of pop culture or Hollywood films (“We Are the World”), merely concealed a hegemonic American neo-imperial-globalist project, of which the Liberal International Order (“LIO”, often described as “rule-based”), conceived by John Ikenberry and constantly championed by the Neocons and US Democrats, served as the moral and political justification. But in the meantime, countries such as China and India have managed to integrate economically into the neutral, economic-industrial dimension of this globalisation without ever becoming “globalists” and without becoming perpetual “world factories” at the service of multinationals and Western industries recklessly relocated to Asia, but rather with the aim of one day surpassing the former white-Western rulers themselves. They have used globalisation not to become, like the “European fool”, a “de-sovereignised” and “de-civilised” zone, but rather to build and strengthen their national independence and, at times, to revive their historical imperial claims through a conservative and cultural assertion of identity that is entirely opposed to Western progressive liberalism



and the LIO. These new industrial and geopolitical powers have refused to adopt the Western political principles of the LIO, whilst Russia, after a brief phase of pro-Western openness (quickly dashed by

NATO and EU enlargement towards the East), has progressively rejected integration into the Western system since 2003 (the Iraq War and anti-Russian colour revolutions).

One can therefore speak, at least in part, of a form of strategic myopia: the West has confused its own hegemony with a universal vocation, underestimating the resilience of other civilisations and the possibility of a return to competition between great powers. It has utopianly and blindly conflated political globalism (which caused it to lower its guard regarding identity and rendered it civilisationally “apostate”) with economic and financial globalisation, which was anything but cosmopolitan or peaceful, but rather a realm of ultra-competition for power and mega-rivalry between states and empires, of which the least internally globalised are, paradoxically, the true winners of globalisation.

What does “post-Western world order” mean? Is it an inevitable process? Must a post-Western world order necessarily signify the decline of the West?

A post-Western world order does not imply the disappearance of the West, but the end of its normative and strategic monopoly. It signifies the emergence of a multipolar, polycentric, plurinormative system, in which various powers — China, India, Russia, but also regional actors such as Turkey or Iran — assert their own vision of the international order and, naturally, their own spheres of influence — something the universalist-globalist West has refused to accept since the 2000s, expanding its geostrategic, political-economic and financial institutions across the globe whilst encroaching upon the spheres of influence of its rivals, competitors and partners in the non-Western world.

This process of multipolarisation of the post-unipolar world appears difficult to reverse, and the Ukrainian crisis, which began metapolitically in 2005 and geopolitically in 2014 (Euromaidan), has been its main catalyst, triggering a war least tied to globalisation, Russia, and the Atlanticist powers. But for Russia’s partners, particularly China, which also feels encircled and surrounded by American-Western

powers to the west, south and on its eastern flank (the new “rimland”), the stakes are very high: it is an opportunity to attempt a global geostrategic “Grand Reset”, a new Yalta or “Helsinki 2”, which will aim to make the West accept, through negotiation or through escalating showdowns, a new distribution of global power hierarchies amongst the strongest, established, rising and outsider actors/empires. More broadly, beyond the “second group” — the anti-Western revisionist powers of Russia, China, Iran, North Korea and their allies — this new post-Western Order is the result of profound structural transformations within the “third group”: the powers of the so-called “Global South” such as India, or rather the non-Western world composed of very diverse realities, which I prefer to call “opportunistic multi-aligned powers”. These include India; Turkey; Indonesia; Gulf states such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia; key players in the SCO or BRICS; and the ongoing de-dollarisation process, which may have close ties, depending on the issue, with both Group 1 (the Western powers) and Group 2 (the anti-Western powers). Asia’s economic weight, the demographic growth of non-Western regions, and the spread of technological and military capabilities beyond the West also come into play, within the framework of what I describe in my book as an alternative, “de-Westernised” and “de-universalised” globalisation. The post-Western order is therefore less ideological and more pragmatic, founded on power relations and interests rather than on universalist values. And the powers I have mentioned, members of groups 2 or 3, unlike the naive and morally rigid Europeans, do not favour binding alliances. For them, Article 5 does not exist. Pragmatism reigns. They cooperate; but they are not prisoners of military alliances. This explains why those who regard the Sunni anti-Assad revolution in Syria, the capture of Maduro in Venezuela, or the Israeli-US war against Iran as “defeats” for the Russians and the Chinese are mistaken. Things are far more complex, and the reactions of Group Two are neither symmetrical nor immediate. But de-dollarisation, the de-Westernisation and de-universalisation of the World System (a more realistic concept than Aron’s notions of the World Order) is underway, and it is almost impossible to halt this process, not even with a world war that America cannot win against the Russian-Chinese-North Korean anti-Western axis, which may seem less powerful but possesses not qualitative but quantitative superiority. And in wars, the mass production of ammunition and missiles and the mobilisation of soldiers is decisive. The West remains superior in certain sectors, but has committed the grave error of financing, globalising and deindustrialising its now weak economies, which no longer control the production and

supply chains of rare earths and the most strategic resources, and which no longer hold a monopoly on scientific and technological innovation, nor even on communication routes.

Talking about decline can be misleading if understood in absolute terms. The American West continues to hold a significant advantage in key areas: technological innovation, apps, AI, military capability and cultural influence (soft power), but it no longer has a monopoly on these, and is about to be overtaken by China, and tomorrow by India, the two giants of the future, not to mention the other emerging powers of Asia and Eurasia. North America’s economic appeal still exists, but Old Europe seems to be fading from history. The United States remains the leading global power, and Europe retains considerable economic clout, but the welfare state, the continent’s falling birth rate, Europe’s self-contempt, its division, and its pathological dependence on the United States — despite being insulted, mistreated and taxed (the anti-European tariff war launched by Trump) — remains absolute, through a “global NATO” and through the price of gas being four times higher than in America. The West is experiencing a dual division: between North America and the European Union, on the one hand, and between sovereigntists and globalists in every Western country, on the other. Finally, whilst America has deindustrialised, it remains an empire with the world’s most powerful military and a defence budget exceeding that of all other nations; it remains the largest producer of apps and protects its market in certain sensitive strategic sectors (“Buy American Act”, IRA, etc.), whilst do-gooder Europe does not spend enough on R&D and innovation, and lacks both a diplomacy and an autonomous defence capable of making an impact, let alone the capacity to act as a state — a state it fails to be and cannot become for profound and varied reasons. What is actually taking place is rather a relative decline of America and a strong one of Europe, which is on the path to the “self-erasure” of civilisation, as defined by the US National Security Strategy on 4 December 2025. The West is not necessarily losing power, particularly the US, but others are gaining significantly, from a demographic perspective (Westerners have gone from 25% to 8% of the world’s population in a century). This global dynamic — industrial, geopolitical (BRICS, SCO, etc.), financial (de-dollarisation), demographic and civilisational (the assertion of identity and strategic power by other nations whilst a large part of the Western elite is self-destructing in civilisational terms) — is permanently altering the balance of power without implying an immediate collapse. But the decline of Europe, overwhelmed by immigrationism and do-goodism, and thus

lacking a “will to power” — unlike the other players — is undeniable.

Would a post-Western world order necessarily be anti-Western? What would be the West’s place in such a world order?

I believe that a post-Western world such as the one described in my essay is not necessarily anti-Western; quite the contrary. The book’s main argument is that the globalised West of our ruling elites, with the exception of a few isolated cases such as Orbán, Meloni, Fico, and of course Trump in America, is the antithesis and indeed the enemy of the “rooted” West. What both Western sovereigntists and former colonies hate — or even China, Russia, Modi’s India or Erdogan’s Turkey —, is not the fact that Europe has its own religion and its historical Christian-Celtic-Germanic-Greco-Latin identity, but the fact that it is universalist, neo-imperialist, proselytising and anti-traditional, that is, that it always seeks to extend its liberal-progressive values, customs and political systems throughout the world. What the so-called “Global South” hates is not the desire of European peoples to remain nations and preserve their traditions, rather, it is the fact that the globalist West of the LIO (which American realist strategists call “liberal hegemony”) has become a vast machine for the deconstruction, destruction and dismantling of the sovereignty, identity, values and traditions of peoples. The best example is provided by Viktor Orbán, who, whilst not wanting Muslim migrants in his country but being a multipolarist and nationalist, maintains the most cordial relations with Erdogan’s Turkey, which he holds in much higher regard than Trump and Orbán do all other Western leaders. Another example is provided by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, who is viewed far more favourably across Africa, in Arab countries, and even in Turkey, Brazil and Pakistan than any other European leader. Many international actors do not seek to oppose the West head-on, but rather to reduce its globalist-proselytising influence, its political interference and economic-ideological pressures, and to assert their own autonomy within a multipolar world that European nations can accept without danger, because the end of globalist-liberal interference and arrogance will be perceived as a new path towards win-win relationships between non-aligned and autonomous powers. I should point out that many anti-unilateralist countries are not anti-Western in the geo-civilisational sense, but are anti-globalist and non-aligned or multi-aligned, not bound by coercive collective alliance systems such as our NATO, whose eastward expansion is one of the sources of the terrible civil war pitting two fraternal Slavic peoples against one another (Ukraine-Russia). Countries such as India or Brazil adopt strategies of balance, of “multi-alignment”, maintaining relations

with both the West and other powers. If we are not aligned with the expansionist, woke, liberal arrogance of the globalist elites, they see us as respectable partners and have nothing against our civilisation; quite the contrary. In this context, the West remains a central pole, but no longer a dominant one, which will only survive if it renounces its universal-globalist proselytism. It will have to adapt to a logic of coexistence and competition, accepting that its values are no longer universally shared and that other models can coexist.

Has the war in Ukraine strengthened the BRICS countries? Why, paradoxically, does the West appear to be more united in its support for Ukraine, whilst the BRICS remain divided?

The war in Ukraine has strengthened the countries of the BRICS group (which has since become BRICS+, expanded to include five additional full members and around fifty observers, friends and candidates), particularly in geopolitical, economic-financial and political terms. They are increasingly presenting themselves as an alternative to the Western globalist and Atlanticist order, and thus to the LIO and Anglo-American global hegemony, for example by promoting the use of local currencies in international trade and opposing unilateral sanctions. However, this apparent cohesion masks deep divisions and differences. The BRICS+ group is not a “counter-NATO” or a geostrategic alliance, but rather a multipolar, plurinormative, polycentric global forum in which states — not always friends or allies — come together to build a new global economic and geopolitical system no longer bound to conform to the old liberal order conceived and controlled by the Americans and their allies. The BRICS bring together countries that are sometimes even strategic and military enemies, such as India and China, but which have an interest in cooperating economically and in building a non-Euro-American-centred order. This forum is not a binding political-military alliance like NATO: China, for example, maintains a cautious stance, avoiding direct military support for Russia so as not to jeopardise its global economic interests, whilst helping Russia to circumvent sanctions and counter the NATO blockade. And it takes advantage of discounts on Russian crude oil and gas that Europeans no longer wish to buy. India, for its part, has exploited the situation to purchase Russian energy at low cost, without severing ties with the West, whilst selling Europe refined petroleum products at high prices but based on Russian oil bought at discounted rates. Tensions between China and India, which had already emerged in the 2020 clashes along the Himalayan border, demonstrate the absence of any real strategic unity. The BRICS+ is an organisation of multi-aligned and pragmatic states. This highlights that the post-Western world is no longer divided

into rigid blocs, but into fluid and variable configurations. But I do not think the Western bloc appears more united than ever: Donald Trump’s threats to abandon NATO, the US tariff war against European Union countries, divisions over the war against Iran and the refusal by Europeans to participate in the war launched by the US and Israel or even to intervene militarily to secure navigation in the Strait of Hormuz, and the increasingly strong opposition between Trumpian or JD Vance-style imperial neo-nationalism and the -do-gooder-federalism of old Western Europe demonstrate a growing intra-European divide that could intensify if and when British, Spanish, German, Portuguese or French sovereigntists (backed by Washington) come to power and strengthen the pro-Russian Hungarian-Slovak bloc. In the book, I explain first of all that the notion of the “West” — reinforced during the Cold War and during the post-Soviet “unipolar moment” of the 1990s and 2000s, when the US became unilateralist and had no rival — is largely an artificial construct. Secondly, I explain that the divisions between the US and the EU on the one hand, and within all Western countries torn between do-gooder globalism and anti-globalist sovereignty, constitute an unprecedented rift that is weakening all these countries as never before, with some even at risk of civil war, such as France or Britain. Furthermore, the war in Ukraine, just like the war in Iran, has forced the West to concentrate vast stocks of missiles, ammunition, artillery, aircraft, radar systems, etc., which will be in short supply for Asia and the “Indo-Pacific” pivot zone, where Xi Jinping’s China, America’s true systemic and strategic adversary, will soon be able to definitively seize the island and the Taiwan Strait. The war in Ukraine has shown that the ultra-financialised and deindustrialised Western countries are at the cutting edge of technology, but are unable to mass-produce the weapons, ammunition, drones, missiles and anti-missile systems needed to win a high-intensity, protracted war. And they have demonstrated that their elites have neither a common nor a long-term strategy. Finally, the war in Ukraine has shown that the 32 NATO countries and all the weapon systems of the wealthy Western nations have failed to enable their Ukrainian ally to regain either Crimea or the Russian-occupied parts of the Donbass and “Novorossiya”. What appeared to be a Western “victory” will be seen in history as a defeat if Russia manages to secure a peace treaty or a negotiated status quo directly with Washington, behind the backs of the European “fools”, who pay for weapons purchased — and no longer supplied — by the Americans and take the risk of handing them over to the Ukrainians. Trump’s strategy consists of “offshore balancing”, a concept of American realists based on

“balancing from a distance”, that is, allowing middle powers to compete and act amongst themselves, delegating to some the burden of imperial responsibilities, and no longer intervening directly except when necessary. Trump adds to this the fact that the Europeans must assume the risk of all-out war with Moscow, and if they want soft, indirect American support, it must be in exchange for buying more weapons from America, more shale gas, and spend 5% of their GDP on defence, with no future promise to honour NATO’s Article 5 in the event of an invasion or a new Russian attack against a NATO or EU country. This is hardly cohesion and a strengthening of the West as a result of the war in Ukraine; quite the contrary.

Is it possible for the transition to a post-Western world order to take place without a world war? Does the so-called “Thucydides” Trap’ really exist?

Historically, shifts in hegemony have often been accompanied by major conflicts and world wars. The Thucydides Trap theory suggests that rivalry between an emerging power and a dominant one may lead to war. In “Destined for War”, Graham Allison argues that when an emerging power challenges a dominant power, a very dangerous structural tension is created, which often leads to war. Allison analyses 16 historical cases using Thucydides’ method: 12 resulted in war, 4 were avoided (e.g. the management of the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War). Obviously, the modern debate concerns the United States (the dominant power) and China (the emerging power). Allison warns that the rivalry is multifaceted — economic, technological and military — that strategic misunderstandings are growing, and that local crises such as Taiwan could trigger a conflict, even if neither side desires it. This is the trap: no one wants a global war, but the mechanisms and structural-technological spirals lead us to fall into it. The Thucydides Trap theory does NOT say that war is inevitable, but that the risk increases dramatically and that very careful political management is therefore needed to avoid it.

Today, of course, nuclear deterrence makes direct conflict between major powers extremely risky, whilst economic interdependence creates incentives for stability. It is therefore plausible that the transition will take place without a world war, but through prolonged competition consisting of regional crises, indirect conflicts and technological rivalries, as is already evident in the tensions between the United States and China. That said, I explain in my essay that the war in Ukraine has drastically and dangerously altered the perceptions and strategic doctrines inherited from the Cold War and the global balance of power of that era: Ukrainian President Zelensky, in his strategy of direct

attacks against Russia, increasingly deep into its territory and against strategic targets (bombings/missiles and drones launched towards Russia to capture the Kursk Oblast in the summer of 2024, or against Russian strategic aircraft and nuclear bombers 5,000 km away in the summer of 2025), has demonstrated to the imprudent West that a country's nuclear force does not guarantee "sanctity" if one dares to challenge it, because a nuclear military power will not dare to use nuclear weapons until it is existentially threatened, and because the nuclear weapon is a weapon of "non-use". This almost religious conviction is extremely dangerous. Throughout the Cold War, US strategists never dared to challenge Russian spheres of influence with weapons within the borders of the USSR, and never allowed any actor to directly attack Russian territory, which was then "sanctified". Since 2024, Russia has adapted to this dynamic and has changed its doctrine and its thresholds for the use of strategic and tactical nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, the latest nuclear non-proliferation and arms control treaty between the US and Russia, New START, has expired, meaning there are no longer any treaties, agreements or mutual trust between the two sides to maintain the certainty of the balance of terror and the conviction that neither side will use nuclear force. The fact that Ukraine struck Russian strategic aircraft capable of carrying nuclear missiles — which were visible in the name of transparency and the mutual verification processes between the US and Russia provided for by the Open Skies and New START treaties, both of which have expired — and the fact that Ukraine was able to do so using British and Western satellite imagery and radar data, and therefore with US approval, means that Russia no longer believes in any cooperation on mutual risk reduction with the American side. The situation and the risk of a mutual lowering of the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons, as a direct consequence of the fact that the West — not directly targeted by Russian aggression in Ukraine — has fully sided with the Ukrainians and acted there as a de facto co-belligerent, has made the risk of a nuclear confrontation more likely (albeit still unlikely) than ever before, and more likely than during the Cuban Missile Crisis itself.

Will a multipolar world order lead to more chaos and wars than the Western order?

The idea that the Western order has guaranteed peace for eighty years is incorrect; it is a narrative that is historically and geopolitically flawed. Whilst it is true that it prevented direct conflict between major powers during the Cold War and the early years of US unilateralism, it did not prevent numerous regional wars, from Korea to Vietnam and the Middle East, and the American hubris of Clinton, Bush Jr,

Hillary Clinton-Obama, Biden and now Trump has made the world far more unstable because all the liberal values, the promotion of human rights, the LIO, the fine progressive and democratic ideals of Western countries have been discredited and contradicted by Anglo-American and Western wars waged in permanent violation of the rules of multilateralism, the UN Charter, and international law — that is, by the very "rules" of the liberal international order. This inconsistency and these betrayals of their own values by Western countries and unilateral America have prompted and fuelled a harsh, progressive and profound reaction from the Russian, Chinese and even Indian, Turkish and other "outsiders", who now also want their own spheres of influence and their "share of the pie", and so they too want a geopolitics of power relations and are relying on their new realities and capabilities to demand a new distribution of global power amongst the major powers, which are very different, less Western, and more numerous than when there were only the European colonisers and then the single, unilateral American empire.

This new order will be based on a plurality of centres of power, flexible alliances and interdependent economic networks.

A multipolar world in the process of taking shape may appear more unstable because it is less predictable, but it may also prove more balanced, insofar as no single power is capable of unilaterally imposing its will, and insofar as negotiations can take place "between adults", cool-headedly and pragmatically, the new redistribution of global powers and the new hierarchies within this post-Western world order or system. Everything will depend on the ability of international actors to establish shared rules, however minimal, to manage competition.

On what might a post-Western world order be based?

Unlike the Western order, founded on relatively clear pillars such as the dollar and American military supremacy, the post-Western order will likely be more fragmented and complex, but far more decentralised, "plurinormative", pragmatic and "multiplex", as conceived by the great Indian analyst Amitav Acharya. The renowned Indian Minister of External Affairs, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, has developed a very interesting concept to define India's national strategy: "multi-alignment" and "plurinormativism". We are already witnessing attempts to reduce dependence on the dollar, the development of alternative financial

systems and growing competition in the technological sphere. But it is not just about that. The new post-Western order can and will only be peaceful and stable if all actors are pragmatic and capable of thinking in terms of well-defined regional poles and spheres of influence, rather than as centres of global domination or globalist proselytism. Rather than a single hegemony, this new order will be based on a plurality of centres of power, flexible alliances and interdependent economic networks. In this sense, the emerging world is not so much a new stable order as a transitional phase characterised by uncertainty and continuous adaptation. Historically, shifts in hegemony have often been accompanied by major conflicts. Despite this, it can only lead to a new peaceful multipolar global system if the established American power has the wisdom to accept a redistribution of regional spheres of influence with competing and rising neo-imperial powers. Today, however, the context is different. Nuclear deterrence makes direct conflict between great powers extremely risky, whilst economic interdependence creates incentives for stability. It is therefore plausible that the transition will take place without a world war, but through prolonged competition consisting of regional crises, indirect conflicts and technological rivalries, as is already evident in the tensions between the United States and China.

In this sense, the emerging world is not so much a new stable order as a transitional phase characterised by uncertainty and continuous adaptation. We are in the phase I call "pre-Yalta" or pre-New Yalta. Either this new redistribution will take place according to indirect power dynamics, as is currently seen in Venezuela, Syria, Iran, Lebanon, the Gulf states, the Caucasus, the Balkans, Eastern and Central Europe, Greenland, Panama, Ukraine, etc., and the balance of power and the signing of the new Yalta will occur when all these rival actors have maximised their spheres of influence and their mutual "strategic depths" as far as possible where they can, and will pragmatically stop there, or they will fail to reach an understanding and be caught up in the machinery of total war, ending as on previous occasions in a world war. I believe Trump is rather in favour of the first possibility, as are China, Russia and India, but everything will change depending on who wins the next US presidential election: a true isolationist like J.D. Vance, capable of implementing the multipolarism that Trump promised but betrayed, or a new interventionist Democrat or a unilateralist neo-conservative "cowboy". Only the future will tell, even if no one wants the second scenario; but world wars are always the result of mechanisms and cogs that can never be controlled and are almost never desired.

ORBÁN OUSTED

After 16 years in power Viktor Orbán was removed from power, much to the delight of the EU

Hungary's election last Sunday produced a clean break. Péter Magyar's Tisza Party won an outright majority in the 199-seat National Assembly, ending sixteen years of Viktor Orbán's rule. According to official results, Tisza secured roughly 137 seats, while Fidesz collapsed to 56. Turnout was high by Hungarian standards, close to 80 percent, suggesting this was not an apathetic vote but a deliberate political rupture.

Orbán framed the election as a defence of national sovereignty and cultural continuity; on the other, Magyar campaigned on corruption, institutional stagnation, and the economic cost of long-term political concentration. Orbán lost, but the loss came from within his own political genealogy. Magyar is not an external liberal challenger in the traditional sense, but a former insider who re-framed the language of conservatism.

Pre-election polling had already shown volatility, but the scale of the result still surprised many observers. Some polls had suggested a narrow contest; others even expected Orbán to hold on.

EU institutions moved quickly to open channels with the incoming government, seeing both risk and opportunity: risk, because Hungary remains a structurally significant member state; opportunity, because a Tisza-led government is expected to end years of institutional conflict over rule-of-law conditionality and frozen EU funds. Early signals from Budapest suggest the new government intends to move fast. At the same time, there are already reports of tension around the transition itself, including allegations from Magyar's camp about the destruction of sensitive government documents.

Orbán's defeat removes a long-standing reference point for European nationalist

politics, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, where his model had been explicitly studied and partially imitated. The result also weakens a network of informal alliances built around shared positions on migration, sovereignty, and scepticism toward EU institutional authority.

But it would be simplistic to read the vote as a full ideological realignment. The electorate did not necessarily endorse a new consensus. Magyar won mainly because he was not Orbán and was more friendly towards the EU. But Hungary has not become a different political country overnight. Magyar's recipe of conservatism may be less radical and embittered than Orbán's but he is no woke liberal. He already said, much to the dislike of the EU who put much hope in him, that Hungary will continue to buy Russian oil. He may sound more presentable than Orbán to the Brussels cosmopolitan class, but he may turn out to be not very different from his predecessor.

This Week in History: April 18–May 1

On 19 April 1775, the **Battles of Lexington** and Concord ignited the American Revolutionary War, transforming colonial unrest into armed rebellion.

On 21 April 1967, the **Greek military junta** seized power in Greece, suspending democratic life and reminding Europe that authoritarian ruptures remained possible even in the postwar era.

On 22 April 1970, the first **Earth Day** mobilized millions, signaling the emergence of environmentalism as a mass political force. That trajectory found global expression on 22 April 2016, when the **Paris Agreement** was signed, an attempt—still contested—to impose coordinated limits on planetary degradation.

On 24 April 1915, the **Armenian Genocide** began with arrests in Constantinople, inaugurating a process of deportation and mass killing that would claim over a million lives.

On 25 April 1915, **Allied troops landed on the Gallipoli Peninsula**, beginning the Gallipoli campaign—a failed operation.

On 26 April 1937, the **bombing of Guernica** during the Spanish Civil War announced the arrival of total war against civilian populations, later immortalized by Pablo Picasso. Nearly half a century later, on 26 April 1986, the **Chernobyl disaster** revealed the latent dangers of technological systems meant to guarantee progress.

On 27 April 1994, South Africa held its first multiracial elections, bringing **Nelson Mandela** to power and formally ending apartheid.

On 28 April 1969, **Charles de Gaulle** resigned after a failed referendum, closing a dominant chapter in modern French political life.

On 29 April 1992, **unrest erupted in Los Angeles** following the Rodney King trial, exposing deep structural tensions within American society.

On 30 April 1975, the **fall of Saigon** marked the end of the Vietnam War and a major geopolitical realignment.

Did former NATO Secretary Jens Stoltenberg discuss “buffer zones” with Russia?

A political dispute has erupted in the Baltic region after claims circulated suggesting that former NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg had been willing to consider turning the Baltic states into a “buffer zone” between NATO and Russia in 2021. Lithuanian officials have dismissed the interpretation as a distortion of NATO diplomacy and part of a recurring disinformation pattern targeting alliance unity.

The immediate trigger was commentary on Stoltenberg’s memoir *On My Watch: Leading NATO in a Time of War*, which describes late-2021 diplomatic contacts with Russia, including discussions around reviving NATO–Russia Council meetings.

Lithuania pushes back: “No such proposal existed”

Lithuania’s presidential National Security Adviser Deividas Matulionis rejected the claims, calling them “typical disinformation” and stressing that NATO never considered any rollback of allied forces from the Baltic region or other post-1997 members.

According to Matulionis, Russia’s late-2021 demands — delivered ahead of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine — included proposals that NATO withdraw forces from countries that joined after 1997, effectively covering most of Central and Eastern Europe. Those demands were rejected outright and never entered formal negotiation.

That rejection is also consistent with NATO’s internal decision-making structure, which requires consensus among all members for any strategic repositioning of forces — making unilateral concessions de facto impossible.

What Stoltenberg actually described

Cross-checking available excerpts and summaries of the memoir shows a narrower and more technical diplomatic context than some media interpretations suggest. Stoltenberg describes advocating for renewed NATO–Russia Council meetings in autumn 2021, partly to manage escalating tensions and explore whether structured dialogue could reduce risks. Within that context, he refers to discussions around Russian ideas of “buffer zones” and previous historical examples of arms-control arrangements.

However, he also reiterates that a unilateral NATO withdrawal from Eastern Europe was never on the table and would have been incompatible with alliance principles. The controversy appears to have developed through a chain of reinterpretations: A review of the memoir highlighted Stoltenberg’s reference to discussing “buffer zone” proposals in a NATO–Russia Council context. Secondary

commentary merged this with Russia’s separate 2021 ultimatum demanding NATO force withdrawals. Further reporting framed the episode as a willingness to negotiate territorial security arrangements. Political actors in Baltic states responded strongly, interpreting the narrative as implying sidelining of allies

Independent analysts of the episode argue that this blending of separate passages has produced a “composite claim” that is not supported by the text of the memoir itself.

The broader geopolitical background is crucial. In December 2021, Russia issued sweeping demands to the United States and NATO, including:

- Withdrawal of NATO forces from all states that joined after 1997
- A halt to further NATO expansion
- Restrictions on allied military infrastructure in Eastern Europe

These demands were rejected by NATO as incompatible with the alliance’s founding principle of collective defence.

Shortly afterward, Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, fundamentally altering European security policy and leading to a permanent NATO reinforcement of its eastern flank rather than any reduction.

In Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, even speculative discussions of “buffer zones” are politically sensitive due to historical experience of Soviet occupation and forced demilitarisation.

This has made the region particularly reactive to interpretations suggesting that NATO might have considered geographic compromises in Eastern Europe, even hypothetically or in diplomatic dialogue.

Security officials in the region argue that such narratives often reappear in cycles and tend to amplify public concern about alliance reliability.

Several defence analysts in the Nordic-Baltic region note a recurring analytical problem: diplomatic engagement is sometimes misread as policy intent. In NATO practice, discussing adversary proposals in formal channels — including rejected ones — is standard diplomatic procedure and does not imply endorsement.

The Stoltenberg memoir episode appears to sit precisely in that grey zone: describing exploratory dialogue during a period of escalating crisis, but not policy formulation or agreement. While Lithuanian officials frame the claims as disinformation, the underlying source material points more narrowly to internal NATO discussions about how to manage Russian pressure in late 2021 — not any willingness to redraw alliance borders or create buffer zones.

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