



Ukraine, China, and the Global Failure of US Policy:

An Interview with Ambassador W. Chas Freeman Jr.

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The Zambakari Advisory is pleased to present this substantial and wide-ranging interview with Ambassador Chas Freeman Jr. The ambassador possesses a rare breadth and depth of experience in diplomacy and security policy:

- **China and Southeast Asia:** In 1972, having previously mastered two dialects of Chinese, Freeman served as primary interpreter during President Richard Nixon's path-breaking trip to China. From 1979–1981, Freeman was director for Chinese affairs at the U.S. Department of State. He then served as deputy chief of mission and chargé d'affaires at the American embassies in Beijing (1981–1984) and Bangkok (1984–1986).
- **Africa:** During the final years of the 1980s, Freeman was principal deputy assistant secretary of state for African affairs during the U.S. mediation of Namibian independence from South Africa and the Cuban troop withdrawal from Angola.
- **European security:** During 1993–1994, Freeman was U.S. Assistant Secretary

of Defense for International Security Affairs. In this capacity, he received the Defense Department's highest public service awards for his roles in designing a NATO-centered post-Cold War European security system, and in reestablishing defense and military relations with China.

- **Middle East:** Freeman served as U.S. Ambassador to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia from 1989 to 1992, including during the first Gulf war from 1990–1991.
- **Business, venture capital and entrepreneurship:** For the past four decades, Ambassador Freeman has chaired Projects International, Inc., which helps negotiate, acquire, capitalize and implement business ventures across five continents.

Interview panel

Christopher Zambakari (**CZ**), LP.D., founder and CEO of The Zambakari Advisory; Estève Giraud (**EG**), Ph.D., assistant research professor at Arizona State University's Swette Center for Sustainable Food Systems; Dr. Benjamin Abelow (**BA**), author of *How the West Brought War to Ukraine*; and Stephen Des Georges (**SDG**), content development and communications consultant and TZA editor-at-large.

CZ: The conflict in Ukraine has impacted the lives of millions in that region, resulting in both humanitarian and environmental devastation. How did we get to this place, what Russia calls a 'special military operation'?

Ambassador Freeman: There are really four wars going on, at least. The first is among Ukrainians — specifically, between Ukrainians who insist that other Ukrainians speak only Ukrainian, and Ukrainians who like to speak Russian at home and want to educate their children in it, and to use it for official purposes.

After the 2014 coup in Kyiv, which reoriented Ukraine away from Russia, there was a rebellion in the eastern part of Ukraine because the Ukrainian government had declared that the only language for official and educational purposes was to be Ukrainian. This was not acceptable to residents of the Donbas region any more

than it had been acceptable to people in Crimea. So this began as a civil war among Ukrainians, and Russia obviously had an affinity with the Russian-speaking Ukrainians. The primary reason for the intervention began then.

The Civil War rapidly became a second war, a proxy war between the Ukrainian government and the Russians who were assisting their fellow Russian speakers in the eastern part of Ukraine. That went on for some eight years. In the meantime, a larger strategic picture was emerging, and, in 2007, at the Munich Security Conference, Russia registered strong objections to the idea that NATO enlargement would include Ukraine, and to the stationing of American weapons, hostile to Russia, on Ukrainian soil within a very short firing distance from Moscow.

Finally, in 2021, Russia demanded negotiations on the European security architecture and Ukraine's place in it — but was decisively rebuffed. The United States declared that we would not address Russia's agenda. Although we were prepared to talk about the details of weapons placement, we were not prepared to talk about the incorporation of Ukraine into what is, in effect, the American sphere of influence in Europe, called NATO.

So, that was the third war, if you will, between Russia and the United States, with Russia trying to deny the United States a sphere of influence in Ukraine, and the United States asserting the right to establish one.

And the final, the fourth war, I would say, is between NATO, meaning European NATO, and Russia. Again, this is a proxy war, in this case supported mainly by the United States, but with support now from countries like Germany, and with strong support from Poland and the Baltic states.

So, what we have here is a rather strange mixture of different sources of conflict. And it's rather ironic and strange that the United States has arrayed itself against self-determination for Russian speakers in the Donbas in Ukraine and in Crimea, whereas, usually, we align and sympathize with this kind of self-determination.

CZ: Different from our position with China, right?

Ambassador Freeman: If you look at the China issue, we are sympathetic to Taiwan independence, meaning self-determination for Taiwan, but we're unsympathetic to the self-determination of Russian speakers within Ukraine. So this is a rather

stark contrast. Nobody ever asks, ‘What do the people of Donbas want? What do the people of Crimea want?’ This is considered irrelevant. What’s going on here are games that are motivated by a very different factor.

BA: Regarding these ‘games,’ are you referring specifically to geostrategic games wherein the U.S. is trying to weaponize the Donbas against Russia? Or are you speaking of something different or in addition to that?

Ambassador Freeman: I think the main element was cogently expressed by Lloyd Austin, the secretary of defense, when he said [in April 2022] that the objective is to weaken and isolate Russia. So, whatever the causes of the conflict in Ukraine, I think there was a concerted effort led by people like [Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs] Victoria Newland to detach Ukraine from any positive relationship with Russia. The goal was to enlist it in the ranks of NATO and, therefore, on the side of the U.S. in a U.S.-Russian contention.

In that context, the United States has taken geopolitical advantage of this conflict in an attempt to isolate and weaken Russia, as Mr. Austin said. He was, by the way, chided for having been so open about this. One of the great difficulties in this war is that there is no clear objective. We are told we are going to aid Ukraine for as long as it takes, but ‘it’ is never defined. What is ‘it’? What conditions would satisfy our war aims? We don’t know. So we’re in a war of attrition, it seems, another ‘forever war.’ There are no serious proposals for peace on the table. The Chinese have put forward principles, but that’s not a plan. And it remains to be seen whether it will ever be translated into a plan.

SDG: Speaking of serious proposals, how willing is Russian President Vladimir Putin or his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelenskyy to sit down and seek a way out of this? Or are the U.S. and its allies and NATO such a combined force — such a player, if you will — that they’re restricting or limiting the ability of Putin and Zelensky to get together and say ‘Enough!’?

Ambassador Freeman: Well, it’s a characteristic of democracies like our own — even though, in some respects, it’s a failing democracy now — to demonize the enemy. That’s been the case in every major war that the United States has ever engaged in. And we have demonized Russia to such an extent that your question, which is a very good one, probably would strike many people as odd.

We know what Putin wants; he's evil. He wants to conquer the world, starting with Ukraine. He wants to reconstitute the Soviet Union, etc. etc. etc. All of which is convenient politically, but factually questionable. So, we're dealing with a problem here, which is that the fog of war has become something more than fog.

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There is no information available in the mainstream media in the United States about the Ukraine war that is not derived from Ukrainian sources, or sources sympathetic to Ukraine and supportive of it. The same is true in Russia, by the way. There is no information available in the Russian media, as far as I can determine, that is not derived from sources sympathetic to the Russian cause. So, we live in two different media universes, and both of us, the Russians and the United States — Americans — see this through a sort of virtual reality.

The key to answering your question of whether there could be a negotiated solution is whether there will be dialogue. There is at present no dialogue between the United States and Russia. The 10-minute rancorous encounter in New Delhi [at the March 2022 G-20 conference] between Sergey Lavrov, the Russian foreign

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minister, and Antony Blinken, our secretary of state [in which Blinken said he told Lavrov to end the 'war of aggression' against Ukraine], becomes great news, although there's no result, no progress made during that talk. And so now we don't talk. Everything's in the hands of the military and determined by the military confrontation, and nobody is building an off ramp.

SDG: So, what could bring this war to an end?

Ambassador Freeman: Mr. Putin, from the beginning, has said that he wanted to negotiate. That was how this started. He wanted to negotiate, he massed troops on the border of Ukraine and made it clear there would be some sort of special military

operation, as he put it, if there was not a negotiation. There was no negotiation, and there was, therefore, a military operation. But he has continued to stress that he's prepared to negotiate on the basis of realities on the ground.

Now, that's not unusual. Lines of control where armies stop are the basis for any discussion of how wars end. So, he's realistic. He's open to negotiation, apparently. I'm sure he is a very tough negotiator, and it would not be easy to settle this. On the other side, Mr. Zelenskyy says that he will not negotiate until Russia leaves everywhere, including Crimea, and that he plans to swim on the beaches of Crimea next summer.

This is a model of warfare that the United States developed. We have engaged in four formative experiences of war: our own Civil War, World War I, World War II, and the Cold War. In each case the objective was the annihilation of the enemy — the humiliation of the enemy — followed by the moral reconstruction of the enemy under our supervision. That was Reconstruction in the South, that was the

destruction of Kaiser Wilhelm's Germany, and that was the occupation of Germany and Japan after World War II. And that was our approach to the Soviet Union after the end of the Cold War, after the Soviet Union defaulted on its competition with us. This is a very strange, historically anomalous view of warfare, but one very congenial to the United States and consistent with our traditions.

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BA: We often hear from Washington and the media that if Mr. Zelensky doesn't want certain things, we, the U.S., must defer based on Ukrainian agency. Or we hear that this is Ukraine's battle, not ours. Is that a realistic and accurate presentation, or is the situation really one in which,

if the U.S. decides — the U.S. foreign policy elite decides — to bring this war to a conclusion, it can simply impose its decision, using financial or other pressures on Mr. Zelenskyy to basically say, ‘Look, this is what’s going to happen for the sake of everybody, including you.’

Ambassador Freeman: Well, there’s a lot of evidence that Mr. Zelenskyy responds to foreign advice and counsel and direction. The clearest evidence of that was Boris Johnson’s visit to Kyiv [in April 2022], and his [Johnson’s] apparent sabotage of what appeared to be something very close to an agreement between Russia and Ukraine to end this fight.

So, we’ve seen that foreigners can direct Mr. Zelensky away from peace. Whether they could direct him toward peace is another question. Let’s remember, however, that this man, although he is a brilliant actor, is an actor. And there is a considerable reason to doubt that the lines he is delivering are original to him. They certainly serve geopolitical purposes of the sort we were discussing. So, I think the answer is yes, if we wanted to have peace, we could, but frankly, there’s no evidence we want peace.

We seem to be very comfortable with a war of attrition in which our military-industrial complex profits and the president gets to be a war president. Our greatest presidents are always war presidents, and this seems to be Mr. Biden’s aspiration. So, there are lots of reasons on the American side. It will cost us what I would consider serious money, but apparently people in Congress don’t see it that way. There’s no real pain on our side, so why not fight to the last Ukrainian, which seems to be the plan.

BA: Do you see a possible role for an independent proposal coming from the Global South, perhaps something tied to China’s points, or something totally separate, not tied to China, but coming from other countries in the Global South getting together and proposing something? Is that a real possibility?

Ambassador Freeman: I think it could be. It would probably come through the UN. It would find a very sympathetic champion in Secretary General [António]

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Guterres at the UN who's been adamant on the subject of trying to end this war, for many reasons.

Of course, the war is having spillover effects of a very nasty nature on things like food supplies for countries that are dependent on imports, African countries in particular, Arab countries. It has created a massive and, so far, incomplete realignment of many markets, including energy markets, with increased costs there. Fertilizer, which is essential for modern agriculture, is no longer available in many cases because of the mining of Ukrainian harbors, ironically, by Ukraine, and the presence of a Russian fleet in the Black Sea.

So, there are many reasons for other countries beyond Europe to want to end this. And I could see an initiative coming forward, but it would have to have roots in Europe. It could not succeed otherwise. We would have to do what some people believe the Chinese statement of principles was designed to do, namely split Europe from the United States on this war. Many Europeans seem to be increasingly fatigued and discomfited by the war. And although our media, again, are falling down on the job, there are increasing protests and demonstrations in Europe against the war, against NATO. And it's clear that the French, who've always been marching to their own tune within NATO, are again offbeat, if you will.

CZ: I just hope that when it comes to this conflict in Ukraine, that the architects of the solution take that into account, that it has to be European-driven. It cannot come just from China. It cannot just come from the United States. It has to have roots and buy-in among the Europeans themselves.

Ambassador Freeman: There is a basic principle of conflict resolution, which is that those with the capacity to overthrow the solution have to be part of the solution. You have to have buy-in from those who have a stake in what happens, and you have to convince them.

My definition of peace is a very bland one. It is a situation that is sufficiently acceptable to those with the capacity to disturb it

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so that they don't disturb it. That may make peace sound less noble than it is often portrayed, but I think it's realistic. So the question of what kind of peace is established eventually, if one is established in Ukraine and therefore between Russia and the rest of Europe, is the core question.

Europeans have a very bad record of being the bloodiest continent. Actually, they're not a continent. They're a subcontinent rather like India, but theirs is the most bloody-minded and war-like group of societies that the world has ever known. I think they need help, and that help, unfortunately, is not going to come from the United States, which is very much part of the problem. So, it has to come from elsewhere. And I think Ben [Abelow] is correct, in his previous question, to speculate that this might come from what he calls the Global South, meaning I would say the reconstituted non-aligned movement.

CZ: How has the U.S. relationship with China changed over the years. Where have we been relationally speaking, and where are we headed?

Ambassador Freeman: Well, I like an analytical framework that distinguishes forms of competition, and I identify three. One form is rivalry. That can be very healthy because it consists of each side — sometimes more than two sides — but each side striving to improve its own performance, and thereby out-compete, outdo the others. That is a competition which is not a zero-sum game. It is positive in its outcomes. And that is what we had for a considerable period of time in the U.S.-China relationship.

However, there are two other kinds of competition. One I call 'adversarial animosity.' Adversarial animosity is what happens when a runner in a race decides that he or she can win only by tripping up or hamstringing the competitor. Rather than trying to improve his or her own performance, someone who practices this form of competition strives to cripple the opposition. That is where we are with China at the moment.

The third kind of competition is enmity, which implies a desire to annihilate the other side. Perhaps this is the word to describe the total wars that the United States has fought that I described earlier — the Civil War, World War I, World War II, the Cold War — in which the objective was to destroy the enemy and reconstitute the enemy in a form more congenial to the values of the United States.

So, with China, we have moved from rivalry — healthy competition — to a very unhealthy competition in which our basic effort to compete is not to improve ourselves very much but to cripple the Chinese.

I just read an article that identified 144 areas of cutting-edge technology in the world. Such categorizations are always somewhat subjective, and one shouldn't take them as gospel, but they still can tell you something. China's ahead in 137 of the 144. Why is this? Because the Chinese now have over one-fourth of the world's STEM [science, technology, engineering, mathematics] workforce. One fourth. By 2025, China alone will have more scientists, technologists, engineers, and mathematicians than the entire OECD [U.S. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development], meaning the industrialized West plus Japan, Korea, and so forth.

And they are innovating, and they are spending huge amounts of money, which buys more, by the way, in China; there is something called purchasing power parity, which is relevant to comparisons of this kind, not just to the development of technology, but to basic science.

So, you find, for example, that the largest radio telescope is now in China. You find that the Chinese land a vehicle on the far side of the moon, and so forth. They are competing by improving themselves — not by trying to cripple us — and yet we postulate that they are trying to cripple us. So, our response is not very effective.

If you ask Morris Chang, who is the head of the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Corporation, or TSMC, which has been more or less dragooned into investing \$40 billion in Arizona to build a chip foundry, he will tell you that the chips the foundry will produce — if it ever gets around to producing things — are going to be much more expensive than the ones that are produced in Taiwan.

Why is that? It is because of the factors that account for our failing competitiveness, which are numerous.

One is, obviously, protectionism. We have a series of laws that ensure that American oligopolies are kept in place. Oligopolies now dominate our economy because antitrust policy has been neglected; you can go to any mall in America and see the franchises of exactly the same national oligopolies. These are inefficient, as

oligopolies always are, but they're protected from foreign competition by tariffs and quotas and things like that. And they are increasingly protected from domestic competition by laws and regulations.

Is this something that China did to us? All the rhetoric says yes, and I say no. What does hold us down — what slowed us down — are decisions that have been made here.

There are other factors. If you look at Germany, for example, you'll find that in the boardroom — the management committee — there is a representative of the labor union. So, when a question comes up about how to compete with a more efficient foreign competitor the answer that is given is not to go to Bangladesh to search for lower-cost labor, but to retrain the existing workforce and automate, invest in more efficient production processes, and thereby raise productivity.

Here in the U.S., we have an antagonistic labor-management relationship. It is less antagonistic than it was in the last century when it was often very violent, but it is still non-cooperative. Labor-management relations are a problem.

The tax system is also a problem. The tax system favors companies that go abroad, make their profits abroad and keep their profits abroad. We have financialized capitalism, which is the most potent destroyer of corporate innovation that has yet been discovered.

What are our companies doing? They make huge profits because they are often oligopolies, as I said, and they use those profits *not* to invest in innovation or additional production, but to do share buybacks. There is a reason that [the Chinese tech corporation] Huawei, which didn't do share buybacks — because it was cooperatively owned and driven by an engineer who wanted to innovate — totally destroyed the American competition.

So, there are multiple problems here before you even get to the fact that we have a fiscal system which depends entirely on deficit finance. We borrow all the money that we need to operate the government. We accumulate debt and we spend the money not on investing in human and physical infrastructure, but on wars. Eight trillion dollars in forever-war costs, according to the Brown University 'Costs of War Project.'

These are impediments that are self-imposed. And I might add that the educational system has two disastrous elements to it now. One is the lowering of standards for students up to the high school level. Siemens, the German manufacturing engineering company finds that it has to give American workers at least six months of remedial education to match what German workers have coming out of high school in Germany.

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A second problem is that we used to have publicly financed higher education. Now it's all financed by private debt. So students come out of the university experience or professional education burdened by huge amounts of debt, which basically cripples them from the beginning of their professional lives.

These are things that call out for reform in the United States, and do you hear anybody talking about them?

That is a very long answer to the question, but let me encapsulate all this by saying our differences with China, the so-called competition with China, is not driven by strategic reasoning, but by psychological factors.

You will find that while we greatly outnumber the Chinese in the number of insurance salesmen and tax accountants, China's industrial production is twice ours.

We became number one internationally sometime around 1870, and we're disturbed by not necessarily being number one anymore. It would be very useful *not* to take GDP, gross domestic product, as a comparison of U.S. and Chinese economies, but, instead, look at sectors. If you do that, you will find that while we greatly outnumber the Chinese in the number of insurance salesmen and tax accountants, China's industrial production is twice ours. I think we are just not facing up to what is required to be the competitor we once were.

EG: Why is it that Americans seem unable to tolerate a world in which the U.S. would not always be number one, a world in which there would be multiple forces, for example equals? Where does this need to be number one come from?


Ambassador Freeman: Well, I'm not sure about all of the factors involved in it. People like to be king of the mountain, I guess, and to push other people off the mountain in order to be that king.

Our relationship with the outside world was once deferential – we actually prospered greatly in our national development by looking for best foreign practices and adopting them.

We no longer do that. In 2016, there was a moment in the U.S. presidential debate between [candidates] Hillary Clinton and, I think, Bernie Sanders, in which Sanders suggested we might learn a few things from Denmark, which is a very orderly, progressive society with apparently low stress levels and low crime and so forth. And, as I recall, Ms. Clinton sneered at that. 'Denmark?!' she said. 'That pipsqueak country, we could learn something?' Anyway, this is emblematic of a problem. Perhaps I'm being unfair to her, but I don't think so. I think she represented a broad American view: 'We are the best.' Actually, we're not. If you look at comparisons, I think we're still slightly above Cuba in terms of the quality of our healthcare, but maybe not. We're not the richest country in the world, although we imagine we are. We have more of the richest people, that's true. Plutocracy has become the reality.

I think we're not prepared to make comparisons with other countries that show us up. So, we are operating a bit like the famous cartoon character Mr. Magoo. He wandered around blind, destructive but self-congratulatory. So that's one thing.

And second is, of course, the ascendancy of the military-industrial complex in our foreign relations. We have spent billions of dollars — billions and billions of dollars — during the period of the Cold War and, to date, on university faculties devoted to the study of coercive influence, you know, game theory. Nobody spent any money on persuasive influence.



**We don't do
diplomacy
anymore.**

I take it in our society, if you have a neighbor who is doing things you don't want him to do — like letting his dog drop garbage on your lawn — then you have several choices. I suppose you could wait for him to emerge from church on Sunday, stand on the opposite side of the road and give him the finger just to show your displeasure. Or you could draw a gun and hold it to his head and say, 'Control your dog or else.' But the more effective method is to invite the guy to have a cup of coffee and explain to him why there's a problem and why he has to shape up.

We don't do diplomacy anymore. If you doubt that, look at the [March 2021] Anchorage [Alaska] meeting between Anthony Blinken, [Chinese officials] Wang Yi and Yang Jiechi, and [U.S. National Security Advisor] Jake Sullivan back at the start of the Biden administration. What was the nature of that meeting? We went in there and we said, 'We don't like you. We think you're moral reprobates; if we can pull you down, we will. We're certainly going to try to block your progress, but there are a few things we need you to do for us, and could you help us?' That was the approach. That was remarkably inept, and the result was entirely predictable — an exchange of diatribe rather than anything constructive.

So, I think there are a lot of issues here. I'm not suggesting for a moment that foreigners are benign or adopting the idealistic view that human beings are born noble and pure and that we are all naturally good. I don't believe that. I think human beings need to be trained to be human and to be good, and that's what childrearing is about. So, there are a lot of people out there in the world who are pretty nasty, and we have to live in that world.

But I think we've carried it to the point of psychosis. The reaction to the Chinese balloon, I think, can only be described as psychotic. Of course, it may be that the equipment that balloon carried was indeed deeply injurious to our national security, although there's no evidence of that at all. And the FBI has not said a word about all the nasty things that we suspected were on it, which raises a question whether it really might not have been mainly a meteorological device. There's no empirical basis for doubting the Chinese statement. I actually don't believe the Chinese statement, but that's just because I'm somewhat paranoid. But I don't like to see my country become paranoid. I'd like to see us retain our sanity, our balance, our judgment. I'd like to see us remain empirical in our views, rather

than engage in *a priori* reasoning and psychotic hallucinations. ‘Balloonacy,’ as I call it.

SDG: As you look at the next generation of leaders, or people who will be in the positions that you’ve been in, are we properly preparing them for what’s ahead?

Ambassador Freeman: No, we’re not. The symbol of this is that the House of Representatives is seriously considering a bill to remove China from the G20. Does the United States control the G20? I don’t think so. So, delusions of grandeur, perhaps, but more importantly, a worldview that is totally out of date.

The world is now composed *not* of a dominant, single, unified domain dominated by the United States, as it may have been briefly after the Cold War. The world is composed of multiple competing regional centers — and we’ve done a good deal to bring that about. For example, we knee-capped the World Trade Organization, made it ineffective by blocking the staffing of its appellate function. So much for

international law and regulation! That’s been replaced in our minds by something called the ‘rules-based order,’ in which we make the rules and decide who they apply to and who is exempt from them. That’s not very persuasive.

We need to rediscover the merits of diplomacy, which begins with empathy. Where is the other guy coming from? You can’t persuade anybody effectively, you can intimidate them, but you can’t persuade them, if you don’t address their concerns and their worldview.

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SDG: What will the result be if we don’t make changes in how we relate to China?

Ambassador Freeman: We have framed this competition with China, conveniently for the military-industrial complex, as a military competition. There’s a problem with that, because last time I looked there were no Chinese aircraft patrolling the U.S. coasts. There are no Chinese submarines off San Diego. There are no Chinese bases in Mexico. We are in their face. They’re not in ours. Well, a balloon blew over the United States; I’ll have to factor that in.

We're projecting our power across 8,000 miles of ocean. And we are conducting three to four reconnaissance flights every day along their coast, looking deep into China. That is why so many Chinese found our hysterical reaction to the balloon so laughable. I would add that we are at war in 82 countries around the world as part of our so-called 'global war on terrorism,' much of which involves drone overflights. And if countries don't have air defenses, they either don't know that we're overflying them with drones, or they can't do anything about it.

So, who is the military threat here?

China is a country divided by civil war, and the civil war was suspended by U.S. military intervention at the time of the Korean War. We put the Seventh Fleet in the Taiwan Strait to protect Chiang Kai-shek from Mao Zedong and vice versa. And there were good reasons for that. We didn't want the Korean War to spread beyond the borders of Korea. That was sensible.

However, here we are. We made an arrangement with the Chinese 50 years ago by which we gave them every reason to regard the Taiwan issue as not urgent, not military, resolvable by peaceful means, so that they could be patient about it. We didn't solve the Chinese Civil War; that continued. Now we have violated all of the understandings we reached [with China] back then. We have an official relationship with Taiwan in all but name. We've sent cabinet officers there. We have their foreign minister in Washington engaged in public negotiation with the deputy secretary of state. Our Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, goes to Taiwan, makes a big deal of it. We have a building in Taipei that cost \$230 million to build, that flies the American flag and has [U.S.] Marine guards and looks a lot like an embassy, whatever we've determined to call it. We agreed [with the Chinese] there would be no official relations. We've broken that agreement.

We agreed there would be no military installations or troops in Taiwan, but we're back. In fact, we're about to put another 200 troops in Taiwan — with the stated purpose of training Taiwan against a possible invasion by the Chinese on the other side of the Taiwan strait.

Which brings me to the third agreement we made, which was to have no defense commitment to Taiwan. But now we have a president [Biden] who on four occasions offered just such a commitment. He doesn't have the authority to make

such a commitment under the Constitution. But the Congress doesn't provide any check at all on executive authority to make war, as we've seen with numerous presidentially authorized interventions recently.

So, the military dimension now no longer has a manageable framework, and we are headed for confrontation. And the Chinese do not believe anymore that a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan separation from the rest of China is possible, because they believe the United States will block that resolution. And if you listen to all of the language in Congress you would have to say they have a basis for that disbelief. So, we're headed for a war.

And what is this war about? This war is about whether something that was always part of China — legally, it is part of China in the view of all but a handful of countries internationally — is or is not part of China.

The Chinese position still is that they want to negotiate an accommodation with Taiwan. And in the past, they've been quite flexible about how that would work. For example, under President Jiang Zemin at the end of the last century, they put forward eight points. And one of those points was that no Chinese officials would be sent to Taiwan after reunification. No Chinese troops would be sent to Taiwan. There would be no military presence in Taiwan. Taiwan would retain its own armed forces to defend its part of China. Against who? I'm not sure: the Filipinos, perhaps.

But theoretically Taiwan would have kept its own armed forces. There were suggestions that, in that context, American arm sales to Taiwan would become acceptable, which they're not at present. All that was ignored. I'm not even sure it's on the table anymore. It looks to me like we are headed inexorably toward conflict.

SDG: Are there comparisons that you see between China and Taiwan and what is happening between Russia and Ukraine?

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Ambassador Freeman: The Taiwan imbroglio has something in common with Ukraine, although I noted the irony that we support self-determination for Taiwan, but not for Russian speakers in Ukraine.

The point in common is this: the Ukraine war is, in one dimension, about spheres of influence. Would Ukraine be in an American sphere of influence or not? The Russians didn't want it to be in an American sphere and were prepared to see it neutralized. Taiwan is in an American sphere of influence. China does not want an American sphere of influence on what it regards as Chinese territory. It finds that both threatening and humiliating.

So, there is something in common. But at the moment there is no diplomacy. Blinken was going to go to China [in February] to do three things. One, to demonstrate to the world that we could talk to the Chinese, despite our differences. This is important because everybody wants us to deal with the Chinese; they want us to manage the Taiwan issue, they don't want a war over it. Not a single country has signed up to join us in any war over Taiwan. Not one. Although some are sympathetic to that.

The second thing Blinken was going to do was put in what he called guardrails, which I presume are a replacement for the broken promises that once enabled the management of the Taiwan issue. There was no indication that he had anything specific in mind and/or any concessions that he would make. So, this replicates the history of the run-up to the war in Ukraine, where the United States said we would not make concessions to the Russians. We won't make concessions to the Chinese.

And the third thing Blinken wanted to do, apparently, was to posture for the benefit of an American audience, to show that the Biden administration is just as tough on China as the Trump administration was.

When the 'balloonacy' happened, he canceled his visit. That was a great mistake, and it had three results. First, we showed the world we couldn't talk to the Chinese in times of crisis, and, in fact, we were quite hysterical and looked really foolish. Second, that we don't know how to manage the relationship with China and have no real ideas for doing so. And third, in domestic politics, that Mr. Biden can't stand up to political pressure or lead — leadership involving setting new directions rather than responding to the pressure that you're under.

The Blinken cancellation of his trip, until ‘circumstances permit,’ was a grave error, especially because the circumstances that canceled his trip were a domestic political hysteria that shows no sign of abating.

BA: How would you address the concern that if a more peaceful or peace-oriented policy was implemented, that the U.S. would thereby not be supporting a type of freedom that I think many of us believe in.

Ambassador Freeman: Well, the Taiwan situation exemplifies the conflict between foreign policy realism and values-driven foreign policy.

Taiwan for many years — certainly when I studied Chinese there, and I learned both Taiwanese dialect and Mandarin there — was a totalitarian society, or perhaps authoritarian verging on totalitarian. So, it was very easy for the United States to say, well, as between Taipei and Beijing from a strategic point of view, Beijing is vastly more important in the context of the Cold War and globally and for the future, and really there’s not that much difference between the two systems.

They were both Leninist, which the Kuomintang regime of Chiang Kai-shek was. They were both violators of human rights, but that has now changed. Taiwan has developed a robust democracy, a very high level of respect for civil liberties and human rights, and it is in many respects an admirable society. I would say that in the broad course of roughly 5,000 years of Chinese history, this may be the best society that has ever existed on Chinese soil, but it is on Chinese soil. And people in Taiwan speak either Mandarin, which is the official language still, or a dialect of Chinese. They write using Chinese characters, and they eat using chopsticks, and they cook Chinese food.

On the other hand, there’s nothing consistent in the American position regarding realism versus a values-driven foreign policy. We champion human rights when it’s convenient, and we don’t, when it’s not. Ask yourself about self-determination for the Palestinians or what’s going on now with pogroms officially sponsored by this particularly loathsome new Israeli government. There is a lot of silence in the mainstream media. The demonstrations in Israel are not about the Palestinian plight, but about the creeping authoritarianism of Mr. Netanyahu [Israeli prime minister] and the other ‘yahus’ he has surrounded himself with.

So, that is one example. Look at India and Kashmir. There's no consistency about where and when we champion human rights, civil rights, and independent self-determination. For example, in Hungary, when faced with the choice of aiding the Hungarian revolt against Soviet occupation and intervention, we shrank away. And we've done the same thing with the Kurds.

I come down this way. The United States has to make a very difficult choice. Do we want to engage in a struggle with another country over where its territory begins and ends, when the outcome of that struggle could well be a nuclear exchange that destroys us as well as probably the planet? Or do we want to try to find a solution that is perhaps not the best, but not the worst, aiding Taiwan to negotiate some accommodation with the mainland that preserves the freedoms we value so much, which, by the way, was the idea in that eight-point proposal I cited that the Chinese made at the end of the last century.

So, we have a choice to make. It's pretty clear to me that we are going to make the wrong choice. What I consider the wrong choice is one that results in the possible devastation of our homeland.

That's a complicated waffle around a difficult question. And it is difficult. It is not easy to reconcile one's moral judgment with one's realistic judgment about the consequences of one action versus another.

BA: What would you envision as the ideal U.S.-Chinese relationship, and how could that be brought about, or what steps could be taken that would increase the chance of bringing it about?

Ambassador Freeman: We have everything to gain by piggybacking on, by leveraging, rising Chinese prosperity to benefit ourselves.

Let us not forget that for millennia China was not only the largest, but the wealthiest, best-governed, scientifically most-advanced society on the planet, and it seems to be resuming that position. The fact that it was those things lends plausibility to the possibility it may resume that position, as do the advances in science and technology that I mentioned in general terms at the outset of this

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discussion. So, we should be finding ways to work with the Chinese. If we can't do it directly, we should work with them in parallel, coordinate our policies on global matters — none of which can be addressed without Chinese cooperation — climate change, nuclear proliferation, international conflict.

Look at the Russia-Ukraine situation. The only country that has put forward a set of principles for ending it is China. And it's very easy to say, well, that's cynical on their part, they don't mean it. But I think it deserves to be tested.

I would rather deal with selfish people who know what they want and understand their own interests than with people who don't know what their own interests are, and who engage in lofty talk about ideals that they neglect in practice.

In any event, China is now the largest trading partner of virtually every country in the world. It manufactures one-third of the world's industrial products; we do about one-sixth now. We ignore it at our peril. We should be trying to find ways to see how we can benefit from what the Chinese are doing to benefit themselves, because they're very selfish. I would rather deal with selfish people who know what they want and understand their own interests than with people who don't know what their own interests are, and who engage in lofty talk about ideals that they neglect in practice.

The Chinese are very pragmatic. We ought to be equally pragmatic instead of engaging in loony tunes, or ideological gyrations, which is what we're doing at the moment.

CZ: Is there a place for non-West, Global South countries in the future? What will their role be?

Ambassador Freeman: Well, I don't think blocs are really the wave of the future. I don't think that's what the BRICS [Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa], the SCO — the Shanghai Cooperation Organization — the other groupings that are emerging want.

I think what the so-called Global South — some of which isn't very far south — wants is their own self-determination, building their own societies to match their own aspirations, not being subjected to outside dictation or interference.

Let's take Africa for example. Nigeria is going to be one of the great powers of the world, one way or another, if they can just figure out how to apply their enormous talent to something other than stealing from each other, which is what they mainly do now. These are the cleverest people in the world, and if they would apply themselves to something constructive, it would be awesome, literally.

You also see Africa at the end of a century with perhaps two billion people, the largest labor force, the youngest labor force on the planet, and currently very robust economic development. Unfortunately, not in Sudan; they suffer from the biblical playbook of plagues of frogs, gerbils, droughts, floods, and so forth. But look at Ethiopia, look at Ghana coming up. Look at model democracies like Botswana. Look at Kenya. These are countries that are succeeding, and that are going to be far more important internationally.

This raises a question related to your question, and that is: How do we embody the new constellation of international power in structures? Clearly, the United Nations Security Council is a very important institution for harmonizing global views, but it's one that's vitiated by the fact that the permanent members are still the victors of World War II, some of them much diminished in power. Post-Brexit Britain is not anything like pre-Brexit Britain in terms of level of international influence. France is still a global power in many ways, but not on a par with China or Russia or India or Japan or the United States.

So, how do we bring a more representative set of institutions into being? I think the process is going to proceed in stages, and what we're in now is one in which China has been a leader: the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank; the New Development Bank headquartered in China, which is the BRICS-preferred alternative to the World Bank; new currency arrangements to reduce the monopoly that the dollar has held on trade settlement internationally; a whole series of things that are coming out that eventually will lead — I think these are 'splitists,' if you will; they are hiving off parts of the global economy from the Bretton Woods post-World War II institutions led by the United States.

But, as these countries grow there's still going to be a need for international global cooperation. And I suspect we will find a way to, for example, give countries like India or perhaps one or more African countries, certainly Japan, perhaps the EU instead of Britain and France, a role in global governance that they don't have now. That's a requirement. But that's for somebody to work out long after I'm dead. So I'll not croak on about it.