

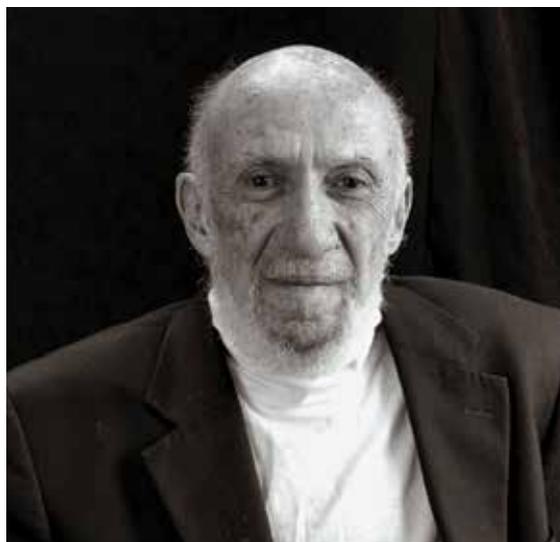
IV. Interview

INTERVIEW: *Prof. Richard Falk*

The Unstable Tension: Geopolitics and National Sovereignty

Mike Billington, representing Executive Intelligence Review and the Schiller Institute, interviewed Prof. Richard Falk on Sept. 5, 2023. This is an edited transcript of that interview. Subheads and an embedded link have been added.

Mike Billington: I'm pleased to be here today with Professor Richard Falk, who has agreed to an interview about current affairs and world developments in this crucial moment in history.



Prof. Richard Falk

Courtesy of Richard Falk

Nations in supporting the Palestinian struggle for human rights and self-determination, and served as UN Special Rapporteur for the Human Rights Council on Occupied Palestine between 2008 and 2014. During this period I was frequently defamed as an anti-Semite and self-hating Jew and otherwise targeted and discredited. Recently, I've continued more quietly to write for publication, including a book of poems, *Waiting for Rainbows* (2015), splitting my time between Türkiye and the U.S.

Who Is Richard Falk?

To begin, Professor Falk, would you please say a few words about your own history, and your role in history?

Prof. Richard Falk: I'm not sure I have a role in history. I've taught at universities all of my adult life, starting with Ohio State in Columbus, Ohio, in 1955, moving to Princeton University, where I stayed for 40 years, retiring in 2001, and since then I have been connected both with the University of California, Santa Barbara, and the Queen Mary University in London.

I've done a fair amount of writing over the decades, including a memoir called *Public Intellectual: The Life of a Citizen Pilgrim* (2021)—along with a stream of commentary on global issues. I have led at times a confusing life, which accounts for the bewildering title, I suppose. I have been active through the United

I suppose this is enough by way of introduction, maybe more than enough.

I would just add that I'm glad to do this interview with you, Mike Billington, although I've had severe differences with the Lyndon LaRouche movement in the past. I've also been a target of what I consider their defamatory attacks connected with my support for the pro-democracy, anti-Marcos movement in the Philippines and the insurgent campaign for the protection of human rights in Iran. Such disagreements persist. Despite this, I feel that those who seek a safer, more secure, more peaceful and just world have to let these bygones be bygones and collaborate in the present for the good of humanity and future generations.

Mike Billington: Well, that's quite interesting. You and I have discussed privately those differences, which we maintain as differences, both in regard to the history and other aspects of things. But those differences don't

necessarily have to come up today unless you wish to bring them up further.

An ‘Unstable Tension: Geopolitics and Self-Determination’

Let me start by referencing the fact that you were a speaker at an event sponsored by my friend Chandra Muzaffar in Malaysia, the head of Just International, organized by an organization called SHAPE (Save Humanity And Planet Earth), along with other speakers

I’ve been preoccupied with geopolitics in the context of the Ukraine War, which ..., due to the intrusive role that U.S. NATO forces played, [evolved] into what I call a “geopolitical war” between Russia and the United States.

from the U.S., from China, from Korea, and from Australia. You referred to what you called the “unstable tension between geopolitics and self-determination,” which I found to be the most profound point of that conference. Could you comment on that and explain what you mean by that?

Prof. Falk: I will try. I’ve been preoccupied with geopolitics in the context of the Ukraine War, which started as a Russian attack on Ukraine, transformed itself, due to the intrusive role that U.S. NATO forces played, into what I call a “geopolitical war” between Russia and the United States, in which the outcome in Ukraine was subordinated by stages to the strategic goal of inflicting a geopolitically significant defeat on Russia, and at the same time to send a warning signal to China not to attempt, with respect to Taiwan, to do the same thing that Russia has tried to do, at least that it was alleged to be trying to do.

My specific connection of self-determination with these issues arose from my sense of the Vietnam War and its outcome, how the U.S., so predominant militarily, managed, despite a huge investment over a long period of time, to lose the war. That, I think, has been responsible in part for the decline of the U.S., in part the result of many years of over-investment [in] and over-reliance on military solutions and military approaches to international problems, coupled with an underestimation of the forces of national self-determination, which in Vietnam showed they prepared more patiently to pay the costs and devise effective tactics of resisting efforts

of an imperial intervenor to suppress the basic rights of a people in a historical period of decolonization.

What I fear in the present context is a similar exaggerated reliance on militarism as a solvent for international problems and an activation of a variety of nationalist responses dangerously intensifying geopolitical warfare, and posing unacceptable risks of a nuclear confrontation.

Of course, the situation is superficially different in Ukraine because, purportedly, the nationalist forces are supported by the U.S. and NATO. But I think the broader reality is that the Ukrainian people are being sacrificed on the altar of this post-Cold War recalibration of the geopolitical status quo.

Billington: Let me mention that geopolitics, of course, originated with people like Halford Mackinder and Karl Haushofer and other theoreticians for the British Empire. It’s always been the political view of the Empire that the world is a zero-sum game—that to benefit ourselves we have to defeat the others. And that certainly is what you just described in terms of the current proxy war with Russia and the threat to China, and really to the whole developing sector.

Prof. Falk: I distinguish between a proxy war of the sort that has continued in Syria for more than a decade, in which the objective of outside political actors is to exert control over the internal politics of the country that is the scene of violent combat. This is not my view of what the Ukraine War is really about. In other words, it’s not primarily about the internal effects of the conflict, which I believe all three geopolitical actors have come to view as secondary to the impact the Ukrainian political outcome will have on the geopolitical alignments governing relations among the U.S., Russia, and China. I see this realignment agenda as providing my justification for treating this as a geopolitical war, rather than a proxy war.

Billington: Well, generally, the term proxy war is meant to be a way of saying that this is really a war against Russia. It’s being fought with Ukrainian bodies. But the aim, as you are pointing out, is to weaken and undermine, or even destroy Russia and potentially China in the same manner.

Prof. Falk: And to reinforce the unipolar preroga-

tives that the U.S. has claimed and exercised since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Billington: Yes, exactly. You said, at the SHAPE event, that the greatest danger facing the world is the West’s “insistence on keeping the unipolar world in place, using military methods,” which is what you’ve just reiterated, and that this was aimed at obscuring the decline in power of the U.S. and of the G7 generally. China and the BRICS nations, as we saw last week (at the BRICS Summit) and the Global South, are generally no longer submitting to the colonial division of the world, and they are renewing the Spirit of Bandung. What is your view of the BRICS and the Aug. 22–24 BRICS Summit in South Africa?

A Positive View of the BRICS

Prof. Falk: Basically, I have a very positive view of the BRICS role. I think it goes beyond the Bandung Spirit because it’s more about global engagement by the non-West than seeking diplomatic distance from and “non-involvement in the struggles of the North,” which I think was a posture of geopolitical neutralism as the main motivation of Bandung, to avoid getting caught up in the competing, ideologically antagonistic alliances between the global powers—a framework that the U.S. and Soviet Union were developing, which posed threats of a Third World War. The Bandung countries wanted to focus on their own development and to stay uninvolved in this post-colonial struggle for global ascendancy.

I regard the BRICS as responding to a different configuration of concerns. As such it is a more creative form of involvement that has its own defensive and offensive ambitions. A primary example of this engagement sensibility of the BRICS is their campaign aimed at the de-dollarization of international trade which, if even partially successful, will have a huge impact on the Global North, and also by giving shape and direction to a new type of multipolarity that is very different than what the North and the G7 want. It’s very instructive to compare the documents emanating from the main meeting of the G7 at Hiroshima, both in their tone and rhetoric and substance, from those emanating from the BRICS Summit, most notably the [Johannesburg II Declaration](#) that was issued just last week. On almost all counts I would rather live in the world envisioned by the Johannesburg II Declaration than the one depicted at Hiroshima.

Lessons from America’s Defeat in Vietnam

Billington: You mentioned a minute ago that the decline of the U.S. began with the Vietnam War. During your presentation at the SHAPE event, you said that the U.S. became depoliticized by the impact of that war and then further depoliticized by the events of 9/11. Do you want to explain that?

Prof. Falk: Your question raises a big set of issues. I think what the so-called “deep state” in the U.S., and the lessons Washington think-tanks and foreign policy advisers learned from Vietnam, were several. One was to make a major effort to co-opt the mainstream media, including independent journalists, making the media more akin to an instrument of state propaganda when it came to public discourse on foreign policy, especially in controlling the range of policy debate. This was one lesson.

Another lesson was to rely on a volunteer armed force, rather than to conscript individuals on the basis of age via the draft, which conscripts and families became the core of the antiwar movement during the Vietnam War. The middle class, parents of children that were either conscripted or suffered casualties and disabilities in the course of their exposure to war in Vietnam, raised influential voices of dissent in a war that made little sense from the perspectives of national security and national interests. An expression widely used by pro-war people was that “the Vietnam War was lost in American living rooms,” which was a part of this attempt to make sure that the media didn’t in the future show body bags and coffins coming back from foreign war zones.

Perhaps the most important lesson of all pertained to tactics and weapons. Future war tactics would rely on “shock and awe” air attacks, coercive sanctions and an array of weapons that shifted casualties to those entrapped in the war zones; most spectacularly, the use of drones of an ever more advanced character. With media control, professionalized armed forces, and minimized American casualties, the result was a depoliticized citizenry, but this actually was a failure in practice if measured by political outcomes, with the Afghan and Iraqi state-building efforts resulting in great economic cost, while damaging to the U.S. claims of diplomatic leadership, with benefits going to the arms merchants and militarists.

These kinds of lessons were accentuated by 9/11, which included [creating] the whole apparatus of

Homeland Security, which was a way of insulating the society from radical protest. Another aspect of these various developments was the degree to which the militarized sectors of government and private society joined forces to depoliticize the citizenry to the extent possible, to, in fact, mobilize the citizenry for a much more active role that involved exaggerating security threats from abroad, even inventing them, as in Iraq 20 years ago. So it was a combination of these various lessons learned. Unfortunately, corresponding lessons were not learned by the peace movement.

So you had a rebalancing of society after the Vietnam War, in which the Peace minded and Justice in-

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clined parts of society were less affected, less active, less effective, distracted in various ways. Even by the kind of populist movements that emerged in America, the kind of Woodstock generation. All of that, I think, was part of the pacification of American protest activity, the modern equivalent of Roman bread and circuses, although somewhat short on the bread dimension.

Billington: The fact that the vast majority, or a good portion—a much too large portion—of the population today seems to concur, both here and in Europe, to go along with this war, together with the demonization of Russia and China, would indicate that they've been quite successful in that effort.

Prof. Falk: Yes, I think they have been. And oddly enough, it's the extreme right that has begun to mount the most coherent opposition to the Ukraine involvement, mainly on economic terms, and accompanied by the regressive suggestion that the U.S.' international focus should be on the rivalry with China, not bothering with Ukraine, because the Chinese are out-competing the U.S. in a number of key strategic sectors, endangering its primacy. From this perspective, the Ukraine engagement by the West is geopolitically wasteful, and risks driving Russia into China's waiting arms.

Billington: The Schiller Institute has initiated and led an effort to create an International Peace Coalition, which now has more than 30 sponsoring international organizations that are committed to peace, often coming from very different and opposing political outlooks. But they have joined forces in order to stop what is increasingly apparent as the danger of the possibility of a full-scale NATO war on Russia, very likely a nuclear war, coming out of the apparently failed NATO efforts in Ukraine. Do you agree with this sentiment?

Failure To Address Other Global Challenges

Prof. Falk: Well, I agree with the collaboration, because I think there is what one might call a planetary emergency that is being largely ignored by civil society. We are living with the danger of an intensified second Cold War without the kind of constraints that prevented World War III from occurring during the first Cold War.

And secondly, in this earlier period, the severity of global challenges such as global warming did not complicate the nature of the conflict. The failure to give the attention that global warming should be receiving is a threat to all of humanity and especially the security of future generations. This attention along with adequate resources are needed, as is equity in the distribution of the adaptive burdens that must be borne if the human interest is to be served.

There are also present the war dangers as dramatized by the nuclear danger, that you pointed out, very real aspects of the current global setting. There is also the failure to address other serious global challenges of an ecological character. All this attention and investment in a new arms race which is taking place throughout much of the world. It is emblematic of this alarming development, that Japan recently announced the highest increase in its military budget since World War II. A general heightening of the worst features of the state-centric world order—at a time when global cooperation for pragmatic reasons would seem to be the rational priority of political leaders—summarizes the overall picture.

There is also a leadership gap, which seems unable to comprehend the national interests being globalized in these menacing ways: the persistence of overinvestment in the military, underinvestment in coping with climate change, migration, and biodiversity—a series of social protection challenges.

Misjudgments in the Ukraine War

Billington: Regarding the war in Ukraine, you said—again, this was at the SHAPE event where you spoke, which I monitored—you said that both the U.S. and NATO, on the one hand, and Russia on the other, that both miscalculated in starting this war.

But this appears to leave out the fact that the Russians had agreed to the Minsk agreements, which would have prevented the war, but which were intentionally ignored and sabotaged by the NATO nations. Russia had also negotiated directly with Ukraine through Türkiye in the first months of the Special Military Operation, which resulted in a signed agreement which would have stopped the war in May of 2022, even before the referenda which were held in the four Donbass regions to become part of Russia. But again, this agreement was just completely ignored and sabotaged by NATO. So that makes me question whether you can really say that Russia miscalculated, or whether they were left with no option. So what's your view on that?

Prof. Falk: Well, I plead guilty somewhat for misleadingly using the word “miscalculation.” What I had in mind was that I think the Russians underestimated the NATO response, and therefore didn't calculate in a persuasive way how their military operation would succeed at an acceptable cost to themselves, as assessed by the level of casualties and economic costs.

When it comes to context, the provocations as you enumerated them were very great. Whether there was any alternative for Russia other than this recourse to a military solution, is a difficult question, because I think it was a part of Putin's mindset to reestablish, as he had in Crimea, the Russians' traditional sphere of influence in their so-called near abroad or borderland territories. And in the course of doing this, to challenge U.S. “unipolarity,” which is best comprehended as, in effect, an un-proclaimed “Monroe Doctrine for the world.” Its geopolitical claim amounted to an enforced declaration that only the U.S. could use military force outside its own territory for security or other purposes, and if any country dared challenge this purported red line it would be met with retaliatory force.

It was a unilateral denial of geopolitical status to Russia and China, the signature global policy agenda of

U.S. foreign policy after the Cold War, reinforced by a new set of alliances. Overall, the U.S. response to the Russian attack was an illuminating disclosure of what was meant by Washington's insistence of “a rules-governed world.”

From the outlook of Moscow and Beijing, this must have seemed a new double standard inserted at the base of this post-Cold War geopolitics. Putin, I think, wanted to act in defiance of this challenge. But he didn't estimate the depth of the commitment by the Biden presi-

Putin's mindset [is] to challenge U.S. “unipolarity,” which is best comprehended as, in effect, an un-proclaimed “Monroe doctrine for the world.” Its geopolitical claim amounted to an enforced declaration that only the US could use military force outside its own territory..., and if any country dared challenge this purported red line it would be met with retaliatory force.

gency, and its capacity to mobilize NATO countries and their publics around a defense of Ukraine.

There is also the racial factor, being that Ukraine is a white Christian country, at least Western Ukraine, which is what is being defended. The U.S. shares an affinity with popular sentiments—[in] a large number of European countries, including Poland—that were particularly militant in their spontaneous opposition to the Russian attack. In such an atmosphere, further inflamed by the complete erasure of the background provocations by a geopolitically compliant Western media, reporting only the way that Biden and [Secretary of State Antony] Blinken presented the case for a military response to a supposedly pure instance of international crime of “aggression.”

Such absolutism was further manifested by the absence of any indication of a readiness to allow a political compromise to go forward, especially after they came to the belief that Ukraine had the capabilities, including the political will, to mount an effective resistance.

The miscalculation on Washington's side, which became more evident in the second year of escalating combat, is that the NATO West was failing despite massive investments in assistance to produce a Russian defeat. It also became clear that pressing that course of action raised to intolerable levels the risk of nuclear war. These developments amounted to a serious miscalculation, actually a repetition of past misjudgments

going back to Vietnam.

I think another explanation of the Russian miscalculation resulted from their experience in Crimea, which succeeded without generating much pushback. Putin likely interpreted Ukraine through the lens of the Crimea experience and probably believed that the comparable justification in Donbass would be accepted. And as you suggested, given the violation and repudiation of the Minsk Agreements, Putin felt he had a strong justification for acting as [he] did, and could accomplish Russia's goals in Ukraine in an acceptable time period and acceptable cost.

Billington: Do you see that as still a possibility, that Russia will succeed in essentially consolidating the results of the votes of the several oblasts to join Russia?

Prof. Falk: Yes, I think to some extent that it is likely that [there] will be elements of an eventual political compromise in the course of a much overdue peace diplomacy. And I think that political compromise, as you previously suggested—even Zelensky seemed to endorse such an approach early on—I probably would have included, at least in part, such an element.

Billington: Some sort of sovereignty or autonomy, at least.

Prof. Falk: Autonomy at least. And maybe given some added assurance of stability by deploying peace-keeping forces in Ukraine and near to the Russian border.

Tectonic Shift: Aspirational More than Determined

Billington: You've already answered this, but I wanted to bring up the fact that in your earlier presentation you ridiculed Blinken, who had claimed that "the concept of spheres of influence has been delegated to the dustbin of history." I found that to be quite interesting. It's clearly not true for the U.S. position and its treatment of other nations. And this is certainly one of the reasons that the Global South is now looking to the BRICS and not to London and Washington for their choice of friends and collaborators. Helga Zepp-LaRouche has described this as a "once in a thousand years" shift. One of the top BRICS people called this a "tectonic shift," basically the end of the 600 years of modern colonialism and neo-colonialism

dominating mankind. What do you think of that?

Prof. Falk: Well, I still think that projecting a geopolitical alignment in such dramatic language remains at this time aspirational rather than descriptive. I have the sense that the U.S.-led NATO countries will react in coercive ways to the BRICS challenge, which is undoubtedly being perceived as a bigger challenge to unipolarity than is being acknowledged. What this interaction will eventually lead to, is difficult to anticipate. In other words, I don't think the BRICS can mount a really formidable challenge of the sort implied by that language without encountering significant Western resistance of a major character. For these reasons, the future management of the world economy and global security will exist under storm clouds of uncertainty for some time to come.

The BRICS, despite what I feel is an overall positive development, have incorporated some new members. And even the original five are not fully on board with a scenario of challenging the West, that is, of creating a new world order in effect. India, for instance, is very aligned in several contexts with the West and plays a regressive role in Israel with respect to the Israel-Palestine conflict. What one can say about Saudi Arabia being part of BRICS, is important, of course, for the energy dimension of soft power, but it's a horrible example of repressive theocratic governance.

In Africa: Colonialism After Independence

And what's going on in the West African countries, the former French colonies, Niger, being the most recent example of military coups with an anti-foreign agenda, suggests that there is still a lot of potency to what I call "colonialism after colonialism"—in other words, post-independence colonialism, which I find a more graphic term than neo-colonialism.

Billington: Yes, this is a description of the unipolar world, basically—under IMF, World Bank domination of the economy.

Prof. Falk: I've studied a bit the situation in Niger. The French colonialists made it impossible for the Nigerien elites to govern their country in a competent way, because they forbade education above a high school level, and made sure that an independent West Africa would be completely dependent on French assistance in order to survive as a viable independent po-

litical entity. The resource agreements pertaining to uranium and gold, together with the French management of the financial system in Niger, are extreme examples of colonialism in operation, even after political independence and national sovereignty have been achieved.

Billington: But it would appear also that this series of revolts by the francophone countries is an expression of the general sentiment throughout the entire Global South, that “this is it.” They’re not going to tolerate colonial policies any longer. It’s liable to lead to war, and that’s the problem. As you were saying, the colonial powers are not going to stand back and give up easily. And they could very well start another war in Africa of the sort that we’ve seen already in Europe, the Mideast, and are threatening to do in Asia.

Prof. Falk: Yes, and of course, in Africa, as you know, there’s also the so-called Wagner Group and a growing Russian factor. Russia has increased its influence. Its earlier influence was somewhat anti-colonial, but mainly competitive with the West, and its interactions with China in Africa are ambiguous. It may be seen as another form in the geopolitical war, whose main arena is Ukraine.

What Russia seeks to do, other than to counter the West, the French, European, and American influence and presence, remains uncertain, and yet to be determined. Since these coups, Russia has still maintained a kind of political distance from the new leaderships in West Africa. The African Union and ECOWAS [Economic Community of West African States], both supported, initially, a military intervention in Niger, as did Nigeria, to restore what was called “civilian rule,” which is more realistically viewed as a puppet government serving French interests in Niger. There is obviously a good deal of complexity underneath the superficial reporting of these events. And that’s partly why I feel that we should view this larger vision of the global future as still at an aspirational stage, not yet a determined outcome, much less a consummated reality.

Billington: It’s not over. But the impulse is unmistakable.

World War III and War Avoidance

Let me approach the Asia issue on that. The conference that I monitored, where you spoke with Chandra

Muzaffar, Jeffrey Sachs, and others, was actually called to discuss the issue of NATO moving into Asia: the AUKUS agreement [Australia, UK, U.S.] and the Global NATO, Global Britain spreading the anti-Russia military operations into an anti-China operation in Asia.

What is your view of why the leaders in the West are so hysterically trying to demonize and perhaps go to war with China? What is China’s actual role in the world today, in your view?

Prof. Falk: First, let me clarify my presence on that webinar. I’m one of the three co-conveners of SHAPE, and SHAPE, as its Call makes clear, has largely similar goals to the Schiller Institute initiatives, as I understand them. I’ve worked with Chandra Muzaffar and Joe Camilleri for maybe the past eight or nine months to put SHAPE together as an organization. In this spirit, we’ve had this series of webinars of which the last one was devoted to Asia, and was, I think, one of our most important.

I think that what is at stake really is the control of a post-colonial era of world history, which is entailing regressive moves by military means, and a sense of inability [of the West] to really compete with China except through military means. Wars in the past have often occurred when a rising power has much greater potential than the dominant power. And I think China is seen as a rising power, overtaking the U.S. at least in the important domains of trade and technological innovation, and maybe even global influence....

Billington: The Thucydides Trap, it was called.

Prof. Falk: Yes. The so-called Thucydides Trap, which Graham Allison wrote an important book about. There is a good deal of evidence that having nurtured this image of being number one in the world, and having that image threatened, is a source of provocation for the militarists in the West. And, through NATO, in trying to turn back the clock of history, so to speak, they seem prepared to pay this heavy price.

It is worth taking account of the underreported diplomatic success of Russia, at its July St. Petersburg Russia-Africa Conference. Russia seems to have been learning from China about how to forge win-win relationships with countries of the Global South, which seems more sensible than trying, as the West is doing, to devise ways to fight China. I think if left on their own, Putin’s Russia would not orient its foreign policy

around the military sources of power, as much as creatively develop diplomatic and economic sources of power.

The West is in systemic decline. It has no alternative to its military dominance, if intent on sustaining the post-Cold War status quo. This is a costly, risky path as shown by the Ukraine crisis. The West's hopes may fail for intimidating China by confining its boundaries, [and China may continue] to accept the kind of economic warfare that has been waged against it, without retaliation. Chinese retaliation would be treated as aggression, triggering a Western response. It would be treated as a *casus belli*—a justifiable cause of war.

So it's a very dangerous situation, more so than the international situation after World War II.

No precautions have been taken; no geopolitical fault lines have been agreed upon. Compare this with the [wartime] Yalta and Potsdam conferences at which the division of Europe and even Berlin was agreed upon in the course of creating geopolitical fault lines. It is instructive that these arrangements were respected by both sides throughout the Cold War. If they had not existed, for instance, the 1956 intervention in Hungary by the Soviet Union might have served as a pretext for World War III, regardless of the foreseeable catastrophic results for both sides. Or at the very least, an intensified confrontation with the Soviet Union.

Since 1989 when the Berlin Wall fell, we have been living in a world without those geopolitical fault lines, and risk stumbling into a mutually destructive war as happened in World War I. And that's one of the reasons I think the aggressive posturing of the NATO West is so extremely dangerous. One line of interpretation is to consider that these geopolitical challengers are trying to establish new fault lines fit for an emergent multipolar cooperative world order.

One way of looking at the Ukraine war and at the BRICS' muted reaction to that war is [that they seek] to put limits on what the NATO powers can hope to get away with in the future. Just as NATO seeks to deliver a geopolitical message to China and Russia, the BRICS have decided to send their own cautionary message to the West.

NATO, of course, is an anachronism. It was established in 1949, supposedly as a defensive alliance against Soviet expansion. But it's been converted into a political instrument of global scope far beyond the language of the treaty and the motivations behind it. When the Soviets dissolved the Warsaw Pact [in 1991], it

should have been the occasion for dissolving NATO instead of trying to revive and expand its role, first in Kosovo, then in Afghanistan, and now even in the Asia-Pacific region. And of course, Ukraine. The identity of the alliance has morphed from its origins as a defensive shield for Europe into an offensive sword for the world.

Billington: You mentioned the Russia-Africa Summit in St. Petersburg—a phenomenal event in which literally hundreds of agreements were signed between Russia and the African countries, including the building of a nuclear power industry and several other industries. And of course, China's Belt and Road Initiative has been doing exactly the same thing for many years across Africa, bringing the Chinese miracle—which lifted 800 million Chinese people out of extreme poverty—to the developing sector, to the former colonized nations of the Global South, through a focus on infrastructure development to create modern industrial nations where once there was only vast poverty. It's clear from the BRICS meeting that the Global South has made the determination that it's not going to accept the West's denunciation of China, that they must “decouple” from China, or that they must join in sanctions against Russia—they're simply rejecting that.

Your comments on that, and, how do you interpret the demonization of Russia and China across the West?

Prof. Falk: Well, I interpret this dynamic of demonization as a reaction against the perceived threat they pose to this geopolitical primacy that the U.S. has exercised since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and as a way to build domestic support for a renewal of geopolitical rivalry on a global scale. I think we're in a transitional moment in international affairs which will be characterized either by the end of the post-Cold War era and the beginning of something new—I suppose that's part of your comment on the magnitude of the change we can anticipate—or we're experiencing the moment when, unfortunately, unipolarity is being reinforced—at least temporarily.

In this kind of transition—accepting the idea of [Antonio] Gramsci that in moments of societal transition, morbid things happen—we're living through this sort of interval. It's our historic moment. We have very poor leadership with which to navigate these turbulent waters even from a self-interested point of view. And one suspects that the belligerent stance being supported in Washington is as motivated by Biden's calculations

about the 2024 presidential election as by the dynamics of what's going on in Ukraine and elsewhere in the world.

Billington: The irony of this election cycle is that the leading candidates in both parties, if you consider the Republican Donald Trump and if you think of Robert Kennedy, Jr. as the leading Democrat candidate (even though the party leadership is trying to ignore that he's even a candidate, refusing even to have any debates, treating him as a kook rather than as a serious person), but both of those candidates, Trump and Kennedy, are openly and quite strongly opposed to the Ukraine war, to any further war in Ukraine, which certainly is a measure of the general mood of the population, despite the fact that the media and the parties are completely ignoring any kind of opposition to this war, as if it's unanimously supported, which it's not.

Let me make one point and see what your response is.

Causes of and Constraints on World War

Helga Zepp-LaRouche has made the point that the move from a unipolar world to a multipolar world is on everyone's lips who is involved in this process, but if a multi-polar world does not end the division into two separate blocs, then you're still going to have a war. In other words, if you don't break down the division where the U.S. and the Europeans see themselves as part of a bloc that has to unilaterally oppose the rise of the Global South, then it's going to lead to war. Therefore, you have to get people in the West to stand up against this division, against the threat of war, which was the idea behind forming this International Peace Coalition—to get people to come together from different political views, but to recognize that you have to sit down and talk with Russia and China and the Global South rather than going to war with them, or it will lead to nuclear war. Your thoughts.

Prof. Falk: Essentially, I find the language of Helga LaRouche too causally determined. I think there are constraints on going to war at least on the scale of World War III, nuclear war. These constraints are too weak to [enable us to] feel reassured, but at the same time, the view that unless drastic change occurs soon, that war is inevitable, is in my view an overstated interpretation.

I think that major war avoidance remains something

that even these inferior or limited leaders seek to ensure. I think what a failure of geopolitical clarification will do, though, is to produce a dangerous, militarized competition that the world can't afford, and such a course would aggravate these other global problems, and not just the problems associated with the environment and with other forms of public dissatisfaction. I see this challenge [to] unipolarity as basically a positive move to encourage a reorientation of the outlook of the West in the direction of the Schiller Institute proposals, as well as the SHAPE proposals.

But I think it will require a very deeply motivated and mobilized effort, because the entrenched, private sector forces and governmentally embedded forces have lots at stake, including the career and monetary benefits of militarization, media inflated threats, exaggeration of security requirements, confrontation, even limited wars. All these things help arms sales, promote the military and governmental sides of the elite structures in the West.

So, I'm not hopeful. I do think there's one factor that you haven't mentioned, and I keep trying to bring up in various ways. That is, the pressure from these new kinds of challenges: global warming, causing severe heat, extreme weather, deterioration of ocean quality—all phenomena that adversely affect human well-being, thereby creating a pragmatic basis for a cooperative multipolarity.

What would benefit the people of the world is a non-adversarial form of multipolarity. Or at least a subdued, competitive multipolarity that makes political space for cooperative solutions to common problems in the global interest. These problems seem bound to grow more severe in the near future. And failure to practice a solutions-oriented geopolitics affects society in ever more detrimental ways. Even Canada, burning for the whole summer of 2023 in unprecedented fires, produced pollution of a very health-destroying character for much of the population. I think that such occurrences are of planetary relevance and should be woven into any kind of constructive vision of the future.

Billington: Okay. Do you have any last thoughts?

Prof. Falk: Not now. We have had a rather comprehensive conversation because you have posed truly important questions. Thank you. Thank you very much. I appreciate this opportunity to express my views on this range of topics.