

II. Interviews

INTERVIEW: *Ambassador Chas Freeman*

‘Military and Strategic Illiteracy’ of the West Threatens Nuclear War

This is the edited transcript of an interview with U.S.-China diplomat and scholar Chas W. Freeman, Jr. (USFS, ret.) conducted May 28, 2024, by Mike Billington of Executive Intelligence Review. Ambassador Freeman is a visiting scholar at the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown University. Subheads have been added.

Mike Billington: This is Mike Billington. I’m speaking here with Chas Freeman, a former ambassador to Saudi Arabia, a China scholar and expert, and a political commentator on many, many subjects, having to do with the current disintegration of the world into a war policy. We heard this morning that there was a second attack on the Armavir radar site, which second attack was not successful. There was an attack on the Orsk facility, 1800 km from the Ukrainian border on May 26. These are very serious attacks on the nuclear early warning radar system of the Russians. What can you say about this?

Amb. Freeman: I think there is a basic rule of statecraft in the nuclear age, which is that no great nuclear power can afford to appear to be undermining the nuclear deterrent, or the strategic defense of a rival. And yet, that is exactly what Ukraine, apparently acting as a proxy for the United States, is doing. It is attacking the Russian early warning system, which is an integral part of Russia’s nuclear deterrent. This is a strategic assault on Russia, and it will probably draw a strategic reaction. The fact that we have not seen a particular action



Courtesy of Chas Freeman
Ambassador Chas Freeman

from the Russians to date is not reassuring. It probably represents the deliberations in Moscow about how to respond without starting World War III—which is not an impossible outcome, if this strategic rivalry continues uncontrolled. So this is a very serious development.

It has, as you indicated, all the earmarks of a systematic effort to undermine Russian strategic security. Two attacks to two sites. I believe there are ten such sites protecting Moscow. This represents an effort to knock out 20% of Russia’s early warning system. It is not insignificant. I

also understand that unlike the United States, which relies heavily on satellite, spaceborne detection systems, the Russians are heavily dependent on these ground stations. The net effect of eliminating these is to reduce warning time very substantially, leaving the Russian leadership with almost no time to make a decision about how to respond to a detected possible attack. This is particularly alarming because there have been in the past mistaken detections of such attacks, and it has only been the actions of responsible officials on the Russian side, given the time to deliberate, that has prevented them from responding to a perceived nuclear attack with their own counterattack on the United States and other targets.

The most remarkable thing, reflecting the strategic complacency and lack of intelligence of much of the West, is the extent to which this danger has not been identified in the mainstream media. I know that your own *Executive Intelligence Review* and the Schiller Institute have issued a warning, and covered this

issue carefully. But that is not true of the mainstream media, which suggests a level of military and strategic illiteracy on the part of the current crop of journalists. That is quite frightening.

Billington: There was apparently one article in *Newsweek*, and that was about it.

Freeman: *Newsweek* is not a highly regarded source of information these days, much to my distress; it was an important publication.

Will the Russians ‘Move the Goalposts’?

Billington: And a related issue. Could you comment on the situation in Ukraine? It’s widely considered now that Ukraine has lost this war already and is just being pushed to continue seeing its population slaughtered by continuing a losing war. What’s your view of this?

Freeman: I think it’s almost inevitable when a country, a smaller country, goes up against a much larger one with a heavier population and a much larger potential armed force, that in a war of attrition, the smaller country will lose. And so from the very beginning, those of us who followed this situation closely were deeply concerned that the United States and NATO had set up Ukraine for a catastrophe. And that catastrophe has indeed, now, begun to unfold in its final stage.

What we don’t know, given the Russian advances in the East and the South, and the difficulty the Ukrainians are having in holding on to basically unprepared defensive positions in many cases, is whether Mr. Putin and the Russians will now move the goalposts. They have, in fact, been fairly restrained and consistent in stating their goals, which have been to protect the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine, to achieve a return to Ukrainian neutrality. Ukraine was neutral when it became independent. That was an important condition for global dealings with it. And finally to achieve a negotiation with NATO and the United States on a security architecture for Europe that threatens neither Russia nor the rest of Europe. That eliminates concerns about the Russian threat while eliminating Russia’s concerns about NATO enlargement expansion, which has invariably been followed by the stationing of American troops and weaponry on the soil of new members. We’ve seen the Russians hold to those positions.

Mr. Putin now says apparently he is ready for a negotiation—the resumption of negotiations which were broken off in early 2022 at the insistence of the West. But we see no receptivity on the western side to any such process of peace, peace talks.

The War Has Nothing To Do with Ukraine

Billington: In fact, you find many voices in Europe and the U.S. who are admitting that Ukraine is losing, but saying therefore we should escalate, we should send in NATO troops, we should allow them to go ahead and use our long-range missiles to attack sites in Russia. This, you would think, would be obvious as something that would lead very quickly to a global war, even a nuclear war.

Freeman: Well, that is of course the case. We have seen pressure on Ukraine from neoconservatives to escalate against Russia. And we are reminded that the stated objective of this war, from the point of view of the United States, has nothing to do with Ukraine and everything to do with weakening and isolating Russia. That has not happened. The opposite has happened. Russia has reoriented itself to China, India, the Middle East and Africa, and away from Europe. And its military production has surged. Its economy has boomed. It now has, in purchasing power terms, a larger economy than Germany and is the largest European economy. So these are all failures. They were anticipatable I think, but they were not anticipated.

And so now we have almost desperate, panicked advocacy of further escalation, despite the fact that every escalation we have conducted—and there have been many—has been countered by counter-escalation from Russia, which has just added to the destruction in Ukraine. The Ukrainian power grid, power plants, infrastructure, industrial base, are all now being ground to bits as a result of Ukraine’s extension of the war into remote locations in Russia—some of them very far from Ukraine. These are not related to anything the Russians are doing in Ukraine, but rather to Russia’s ability to defend itself against a strategic assault by the United States.

Now, I don’t think the United States has any desire to assault Russia directly. But I don’t believe that the Russians can take us at our word on that. I don’t think we would take them at their word if they made statements comparable to those coming from American politicians.