

III. Interview

INTERVIEW: *Professor Jeffrey Sachs*

Philosophy, the Love of Wisdom, Counters British Imperial Empiricism

This is part 1 of EIR's interview with Professor Jeffrey Sachs. Prof. Sachs is currently a Professor at Columbia University, has held positions around the world as an economist, and has become one of the most outspoken peace advocates in the United States. The interview was conducted on October 14, 2024, by EIR's co-editor Michael Billington. Subheads have been added. The video is available [here](#).

Michael Billington: This is Mike Billington with *Executive Intelligence Review* and the Schiller Institute. I'm very pleased to be here again today with Professor Jeffrey Sachs.

Prof. Sachs had done an [earlier interview with EIR](#), which got very wide circulation, as this one will as well, given that we're in an incredible moment in history. Professor Sachs is an economist and a public policy analyst of note, who is also a professor at Columbia University. He is director there of the Center for Sustainable Development. He has also served as an advisor to several UN secretary generals, including António Guterres, Ban Ki Moon, Kofi Annan, and has advised many governments around the world, primarily on economic and global economy issues. So, Professor Sachs, welcome.

Prof. Jeffrey Sachs: Great to be with you.

Billington: Let me start by asking you to describe your recent visits to China and your view of the trans-



Gabriella C. Marino, 2022t

Economist Jeffrey Sachs

formation of China over these past decades, and your sense of their mission in the world today.

Prof. Sachs: I go to China typically two or three times a year, sometimes more, but I'm a frequent visitor. I'm an admirer of what China has accomplished, after all. When I first went to China in 1981, 43 years ago, China was an impoverished country. When I go to China now, of course, China is in an advanced economy, very sophisticated, playing a major positive role in the world economy. It is the low-cost producer of many of the things that the world needs, in energy systems, 5G digital connectivity, electric vehicles; it just

does a very, very good job. And this has been a lot of hard work, a lot of good planning, a lot of smart investments, a lot of innovation—I give China a lot of credit for that.

I also think that China's rise in the last 40 years has been good for the world, good for the U.S. economy, good for Europe. It's a general principle in the kind of economics I believe in, that trade is good and mutually beneficial, not a zero-sum game, but a positive relationship that creates a larger world market, more incentives for innovation, more opportunities for specialization. And I think all of those things have happened.

When I was in China this past time, I met with several government leaders, as usual. I went to some companies to look at, this time, at electric vehicles, because China has had actually hundreds of electric vehi-

cle companies fiercely competing with each other, and now they're the world's low-cost producers of high-quality electric vehicles. So I wanted to see. We went to a company to learn about what they were doing, and it was extremely interesting.

The Importance of Philosophy in World Affairs

Billington: You had mentioned you were going to Shandong, and I wondered if that had anything to do with Confucius, that being the home of Confucius. Was it?

Prof. Sachs: It did indeed, because part of what I am doing right now is bringing philosophers and policy makers together in a series of workshops—some in China, some in Greece this year. We're going to have a meeting in 2025, in Cambodia, and will continue to try to reach more of the world. But the idea there is that the great philosophical traditions in different parts of the world can enrich each other. So we went to Shandong Province, to Qufu, which is Confucius' birthplace; Confucius' home is there. It's known because that's where he taught his pupils, and it became a shrine right away, 2500 years ago, and it remained a big temple site as emperor after emperor became Confucian. The courts of the great dynasties of China became Confucian, so the emperors would build new additions to this complex. And now it's a very large center in Shandong Province.

We held a conference there of scholars of Confucian thought and of ancient Greek thought, to talk about the virtue ethics that characterizes both kinds of thought. Confucius lived roughly about a hundred years before Socrates and about 200 years before Aristotle. There's a lot of similarity, actually—differences, of course, but also similarities in the thinking of the ancient Greeks and this great Chinese tradition, because in both contexts, the idea was how to be good people—virtuous people—in order to have a virtuous society.

So, the idea is that we need values—not just force, not just will, not just desire, not just profit orientation. We actually need an awareness of what it means to be a good, decent person; what the Greeks called virtue. And of course, they didn't use that word—they used *arete* to mean that as a kind of excellence of life. And Confucius had a similar idea in Confucian thought; had a similar idea of the kinds of good behavior that people

should have and that lead to good societies. So, it was a fun meeting. We had a few days in Qufu, and then we took the train—fast rail, very efficient, very cutting edge—to Beijing, and met at Tsinghua University and continued the discussion with scholars at Tsinghua University.

Billington: Are you writing that up?

British Philosophical Imperialism

Prof. Sachs: I am. We're not only writing up the conference, but I'm also writing a little book about this, in which I'm arguing that we need a new philosophical approach. I'm Aristotelian in my approach. I think what Aristotle said 2,350 years ago was very, very smart about good societies, good behavior, how a political system should function. I think what a lot of the British thought in the last three centuries, which is our dominant way of thinking about economics and politics, got things a lot wrong, actually. So, I'm arguing that we should go back to some of these more classical traditions to recover some of the real sources of wisdom to help us find our way through.

I find that a lot of the British philosophy, that's much more modern—it's old, still—but from Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Smith and so forth, was really a kind of philosophy that was used by British imperialism, in fact, to justify a lot of bad behavior or to cause us to neglect a lot of things that are wrong and dangerous. And I think Aristotle got things a lot more accurately in his ethical and moral philosophy and political thought. So that's what the conference volume will be about. And it's also what I'm working on myself right now.

Billington: I should probably say that I have written in defense of Plato against Aristotle, which, of course, is another whole area of interesting discussion. But the idea of comparing Greek thought and Confucian thought is absolutely critical in terms of getting the rest of the world to recognize that the roots of European civilization and the roots of Chinese civilization are indeed very, very parallel. Very close.

Prof. Sachs: Exactly. And we have so much that we can do to thrive together. And there's so much admirable in the Confucian tradition, not only Confucius thought and those of leading disciples like Mencius, but also in what China accomplished over a period of 2,000

years—a lot more peaceful international relations than Europe accomplished, for example. And that is very notable, very important, very much not understood in the Western world right now. But there were actually hundreds of years in which China, Vietnam, Korea, Japan never had a war with each other. In the European context, this is unimaginable. Britain and France duked it out for hundreds of years across the English Channel; war after war, hundred years war, battles—they couldn't stop fighting. Whereas, actually, China and Japan almost never, ever, for a thousand years, had a battle—except when the Western world showed up. And then the wars started. And it's an amazing story.

And it's really interesting to understand, because even what China says today has a lot of Confucian elements in it—very clear, conscious, Confucian elements that we should live harmoniously internationally; we should solve problems in a harmonious way. These are really not platitudes. These are ideas that are very deeply embedded in Confucian thought. Whereas in Western thought, the idea that it's natural that there's a war of all against all, as Hobbes put it, is also embedded in our thought, as if that's normal and natural, not weird. But it is weird, actually. And it's certainly not the way it should be.

And so I think the idea that there's a more basic, ethical viewpoint in which you can actually say it would be normal to be at peace, not normal to be at war, is not naive and idealistic, but actually rather realistic; and the experience of East Asia showed that for hundreds and hundreds of years. It ended up being disrupted when the British showed up in their gunboats in the Pearl River in 1839, in what is absolutely one of the most cynical wars of modern history, because the British showed up and demanded that the Chinese open their markets to British sales of opium. The Chinese didn't want to have an addicted population. But the British said, no, no, you have to open up to our opium. And they actually fought the Opium Wars, the first one, 1839 to 1842; a Second Opium War, roughly 1856 to 1860—over this unbelievably cynical idea. And that was the British Empire for you.

Billington: And it's still free trade to the British and to, unfortunately, many of the American financial institutions that have adopted the British approach.

Prof. Sachs: It's whatever makes money—and don't look back and don't ask about the morality of it.

Can Israel Save Itself?

Billington: I'm going to switch subjects here. You published an article on Sept. 30 under the title "[Israel's Ideology of Genocide Must Be Confronted and Stopped](#)," which, by the way, you may not know, it was republished today by the website of the International Movement for a Just World, by our joint friend Chandra Muzaffar. In that article you wrote, "Netanyahu purveys a fundamentalist ideology that has turned Israel into the most violent nation in the world." Chas Freeman, whom you also know, this week in a speech that he gave in Massachusetts under the title "[Is the Zionist State Now Doing Itself In?](#)" he warned that "the Zionist state of Israel and the Jews who inhabit it are now in jeopardy. Palestine is where the humane values of Judaism have gone to die." Can Israel save itself?

Prof. Sachs: Well, it could save itself, but it is on a path of self-destruction right now, for two reasons: One is that it's trying to pursue an indefensible course; indefensible in the sense of law, justice, morality, acceptability. And second, it's trying to pursue an indefensible course in the literal sense of not militarily defensible. So, it's doing itself in, in two ways. Let me explain.

The whole history of Israel and the Zionist project, which started with the Balfour Declaration in 1917, has been fraught with the one difficult reality, which is that of two different peoples: the Palestinian Arabs, who were living there when the Balfour Declaration was made by the British Empire in 1917 during World War I; and the Jewish people who came to establish a Jewish homeland. This meant that there was conflict from the very beginning of the Balfour Declaration, because the Palestinian Arabs said this is our land. The Zionists said, well, this is our ancient historical land. And we, of course, are facing banishment and anti-Semitism where we're living in Europe. And conflict arose from the very beginning—from 1917 onward. And the Jews suffered the Holocaust at Hitler's hands in World War II. And, of course, this was the most unimaginable, horrific event that a people could experience. And the refugees after the war, those who survived in Europe, were directed to Palestine. Their numbers swelled.

Actually, it was partly cynical, because even after the Holocaust, in the United States there were people who said, "No, we don't want the Jewish refugees here. Let them go to Palestine." So, after World War II, the tension between the two groups was absolutely stark—already in 1946, 1947 and 1948. And there's a lot of

history that one could tell, but nobody quite knew what to do.

The British were still the imperial overlord. They had the so-called “mandate,” but they wanted to get out, and they announced that they were leaving. And the UN—which was newly established—made a committee to recommend a partition, so that part would be a Jewish State of Israel, and part would be a Palestinian state. There was, of course, a rather pro-Israel point of view in the technical work that went into the partition plan, so that when it was presented in 1947, the Jews constituted about 33% of the population at the time, and the plan gave them 56% of the land, while the Arabs, who constituted 66% of the population, were given 44% of the land. So, the Arab countries in the UN objected, saying this is not fair; this is not a proper way to divide the map.

Jewish Terrorism and the Nakba

The Jews—the settlers who were about to become a State of Israel—used a lot of violence and treachery and terror in 1947 and early 1948, to scare away the Arab population—what the Arabs call the “Nakba.” And hundreds of thousands of Arabs left their homes in what would become the State of Israel. They fled for their lives because there were massacres by the Jewish settlers—by Jewish gangs and so forth—and the idea was to scare people away so that the area assigned to the Jews would be overwhelmingly Jewish.

Then Israel unilaterally declared independence in May 1948, and the Arab countries around said, “We don’t accept this.” They went to war, and Israel defeated the Arab armies with its backing of Western countries. That meant that there was a frozen conflict in 1949. Interestingly, in 1949, the UN voted that those who had been made refugees by the war, the Palestinians, had the right to return to their homes. But Israel was having none of it. Israel was saying, “We’re a Jewish state. We don’t want the Palestinians here. We’re not going to accept the UN call for a return of people to their homes.” And those people and their children and their children’s children became refugees and remain refugees to this day.

In 1950, a UN mediator went to try to find a peaceful way to create a real partition that both sides could live with, and he was murdered by an Israeli gang, it’s presumed, with the Israeli government knowing—but the UN mediator was murdered. And this is how it’s been since 1950.

And I go with all of this to emphasize that Israel created a state; it won a war to do so. It then won another war in 1967 and took even more land. It’s right to say that, basically, all during this period, Israel acted in order to prevent a Palestinian state developing alongside the State of Israel, whereas the world community—meaning the governments in the UN—especially after 1967 and then as events unfolded in the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, increasingly pressed for a Palestinian state to be granted sovereignty and borders and security alongside the State of Israel as the only way to end this conflict.

Without a State of Palestine, There Will Be No Peace

My own view, quite strongly, after more than 50 years of pretty intensive thinking and visiting this region, and knowing lots and lots of people and living in Israel decades ago and watching this unfold, is that there will not be peace until there’s a State of Palestine. And I believe there needs to be a State of Palestine and a State of Israel, and they need to live next to each other. I would like them to be living next to each other and in normal ways. But if it can’t be normal ways, then living next to each other and separated by peacekeepers. But the point of this current war—and it goes back decades, decades!—is that Netanyahu, the Prime Minister, and his political allies, absolutely reject the idea of a State of Palestine.

But that’s a problem. It means that Israel is ruling over about eight million Palestinians who have no political rights. So, it is said to be, and I think it’s accurate to say [that Israel is] an apartheid regime like the South African regime was under Apartheid. And when confronted with this, Netanyahu has never had an answer, except the hope that, oh, well, those people should go someplace. They should leave their homes, and Israel should control all of this territory.

In 1967, Israel won a war, another war. It expanded its territory, and it came to occupy the Palestinian lands that were still those lands of Palestine after the 1948 war, and it took over those lands. Netanyahu said, basically, from the beginning of his political career, we’ll never give this up—it’s too dangerous for Israel; he said we’ll never give this up. But what does that mean for the Palestinians? Well, they [the Israelis] never cared. Go someplace else. Who cares? And what Netanyahu thought for decades was, “Well, we’re powerful enough, and the U.S. backs us, and the Palestinians—it’s just tough. If they want to live there without

rights, okay, fine—but even better, leave.

Over time, Israel became even more radicalized. Netanyahu's not the most radical in this, because what happened was that Netanyahu is probably motivated overwhelmingly by power and by the claim that Israel's security demands domination. He got joined by increasing numbers of his Israeli religious zealots who read the Bible and took it literally and said, "God promised us this land, so we have absolutely the right to do whatever we want. This is our land." And there are people in the government in Israel now, like Bezalel Smotrich, who is the Finance Minister, and Ben-Gvir, who is the Security Minister, who represent a radical religious nationalist biblical view, who say, "We don't care at all about the Palestinians, not even about security; we are redeeming the land that God promised the Jewish people 3,000 years ago"—or whatever their chronology of the Bible. And that's just how it's going to be. So, it's zealotry.

Now, what this means in practice, is that Israel is waging what I do regard as a genocidal war right now. That's a technical term, by the way: It means violating the 1948 Genocide Convention. The government of South Africa has launched a lawsuit in the International Court of Justice making that claim. The Court has not yet ruled. So, when I say that it's a genocidal action, it's my prediction that the International Court of Justice will say, "Yes, Israel is violating the 1948 Genocide Convention." I believe it is. There's a mass slaughter of innocent women and children going on in the name of Israel's right to control Gaza, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, all of these occupied lands.

Palestinians Have a Right to Self-Determination

So, Mike, the basic point of what I am writing is that Israel is pursuing a radical ideology which says we have the right to dominate. And international law, public opinion, world opinion, morality rejects that and says, "No, there are millions of Palestinians. They have the right to political self-determination. They have a right to a state," which is overwhelmingly what the world community says—it's even what the U.S. government says, though it doesn't act upon it. I believe that what Israel is doing is carrying out an expanding war to try to defend the indefensible. And as I said, it's indefensible in two senses: what they're trying to defend, which is an apartheid state and continued dominance over Palestine, and permanent control over

captured lands that international law says belong not to Israel, but to Palestine—to the people of Palestine. Israel is trying to defend what is in violation of international law, international ethics and the views of virtually all countries in the world.

But there's a second point, which is that Israel believes that it can do this by murder, by ethnic cleansing, by military dominance. Netanyahu spoke at the podium of the UN General Assembly a couple of weeks ago, and he said, "The long arm of Israel reaches across the Middle East, and we will win," he said repeatedly.

But we have to understand, first of all, it's not Israel who has the long military arm—it's the United States. Israel could not do this for one day without the U.S. backing. So, Netanyahu presumes that the U.S. will do his bidding. But my view is, well, why should the U.S. go to war so that Israel can control Gaza, or so that Israel can control the West Bank, when it's our official policy that we want two states? Why do we go to a widening war, that could even escalate into a nuclear war, to defend an indefensible illegal claim of Israel? So, I think Netanyahu's wrong to think he just has the U.S. in his back pocket so he can do what he wants.

The Failure of U.S. Wars in Modern History

But there's even another matter. If one watches the real events militarily, and take Ukraine also as a case, the U.S. can't just defeat anyone it wants anymore. In fact, it has lost most of the wars of modern history. This is something that's hard for a lot of Americans to understand. But we were defeated, in effect, by the Vietnamese, who suffered unbelievable deaths and casualties, but in the end could not be defeated by the U.S. bombing and the U.S. Air Force and the U.S. troops on the ground. And Afghanistan: We didn't have a cakewalk there. We were there 20 years and ended up leaving, and the same government that we thought the U.S. had overthrown in 2001 is back in power right now—the Taliban.

All of America's wars turn out to be a little optimistic. And right now, Ukraine is being defeated by Russia on the battlefield. So, Netanyahu thinks two things: He thinks "I can get the U.S. to do my bidding, and if I do, well, we'll just crush Iran." But that's rather unlikely. Israel has around 10 million people. Iran has about ten times more than that—I'm just using round numbers. It's a lot of arrogance, a lot of hubris, and I think a lot of miscalculation, to think, "If

I can just bring the U.S. into the war with Iran, we'll crush the enemy.”

Israel could get absolutely destroyed by this, because when we see Iran sending its missiles—and there do seem to be some hypersonic missiles there—they penetrate the so-called Iron Dome of Israel's air defense. So, Israel is not so secure, even if the U.S. is engaged on Israel's side, which I think is a terrible calculation for the U.S. to begin with—something we should not do. We shouldn't be fighting for Israel's right to control occupied Palestinian lands. It makes no sense, especially when we say that our policy is a Palestinian state living alongside the Israeli state. We know that that's not Netanyahu's policy. So why are we giving a blank check to Netanyahu when he's fighting for a political aim, which we don't even agree with?

Billington: Let me ask you something more on the historical side. When you think about Netanyahu's relationship with Smotrich and Ben-Gvir, for instance, you probably know that Netanyahu's father was the number two man to Jabotinsky, and Jabotinsky was recognized even by Israel's founders as basically a Hitler figure.

Prof. Sachs: I wouldn't put it that way. But I would say, kind of a terrorist figure and an extreme hardliner. But I think the point is right, that this is a very hardline faction that has never been able to see the real human side of what's happening in this very small part of the world, where there are millions of people who do not want to be ruled by a Jewish state because they're Palestinian Arabs. It's simple.

Is It Possible To Reform the UN?

Billington: On another subject: I just had an interview with Doctor Mahathir bin Mohamad, somebody whom I've interviewed in the past, and my late wife, Gail, also did an interview with him way back in 1999, and I interviewed him in 2014. This is an extraordinary interview. He's 99 years old now, but in excellent shape; sharp as a tack. He said that one of the fundamental causes of the current danger of global war is the failure of the United Nations, due primarily to the veto power used over and over by the United States, essentially, to prevent any effort to rein in Israel's genocide. His quote was, “I think this confrontation between East

and West should stop. We should not divide the world into two, and we should have a workable United Nations that has no veto power.” It needs to be dramatically reformed, he said, or a brand-new institution must be created. I know you've been involved in efforts to reform the UN for a long, long time. In particular, I saw recently that you were a participant at something called the Summit for the Future just a couple of weeks ago at the UN, whose purpose was to address the question of the reform of the UN, among other things. So, is there any progress in that event? Do you see a way forward on any of this?

Prof. Sachs: You know, it's easy to be cynical about the UN because it doesn't stop wars—and that's what its main purpose is. It hasn't solved the Ukraine war; it hasn't solved the Israel-Palestine crisis and many other wars as well. And people say, “It's a talk shop and it doesn't function.” And there's truth to that. But I take a somewhat different view, which is that we've had wars throughout human history, and it's only one century that we've tried to have an international institution that would prevent or stop wars.

The first attempt at that was the League of Nations, which was established after World War I, and it closed its shop after World War II because it had failed. The UN is the second attempt, and the UN will be 80 years old next year. It was established in 1945—and it's not working very well. I've spent most of my time and most of my professional life trying to help the UN because I believe in it, and I think it's still a kid from the point of view of human history. We're just 80 years into this venture of trying to make an international system, a global system, really work. And why doesn't it work? Well, the main problem is the great powers. There are only a few major powers in the world.

On the surface, the UN is supposed to be a group of equal, sovereign countries. And in a way, that's true in the UN General Assembly, with 193 states, each with one vote. But, in fact, as you point out, in the UN Security Council, which is the place where war and peace issues are acted upon—deliberated and acted upon—five countries—the U.S., China, Russia, France and Britain—for historical reasons, at the end of World War II, as the UN was being created, they took it upon themselves in this new creation, in the Charter, to give themselves the power of veto.

‘Catch-22’

They actually not only gave themselves the power of the veto in the UN Security Council, but even a veto over changes of the UN Charter itself! So, this is a kind of a catch-22. How do you reform the UN against the abuses of great powers if the great powers, each one by itself, can veto any change in the Charter? We’re a little bit stuck on this right now.

Now, my argument would be the veto system, where each of these so-called P5 members, or permanent five members, can stop the functioning of the UN by an individual veto, as the U.S. has done in the case of Israel and Palestine just recently—in fact, on a number of occasions— That’s not serving the real interests of the U.S., or the real interests of any of the major powers, because the wars are becoming extremely dangerous. We’re moving closer and closer to nuclear war, actually, because this is a great power confrontation, and it’s escalating before our eyes. It’s very frightening.

So I’m trying to argue through reason, and through evidence and through logic, that it’s in the interests of even the great powers to make this system work before we all blow ourselves up—or they blow us all up, to put it a little bit more accurately—because we’re not even asked our opinions about this. If we were asked, we’d say, “Don’t blow us up, stay away from nuclear war.”

But we need a pretty deep change. And if it’s going to work, inventing a new structure isn’t going to solve this problem. If the U.S. says, “Well, I’m not part of it,” or “I’m not going to abide by the rules,” and so forth, then inventing a new one doesn’t solve any of the problems that we face right now.

Why a New Mindset of ‘Collective Security’ Is Needed

What we need is a change of mindset. We need a different approach. We need a different idea. We need the idea of collective security. We need the idea that we are trapped in this together; we’re all on this planet. We are all extremely vulnerable to this escalation of war, and we need to reason our way through this before we get blown up. And this, I think, is the main point of all of this. So far, the U.S. isn’t buying it. The U.S. approach— And this is a deep issue, because if we step aside from the immediate issues of Israel and Palestine, there’s a deeper problem, which is that the U.S. has been trying to run the world for decades, including how it acts in the Middle East.

But it’s what has gotten us into the Ukraine war. It’s what’s gotten us into countless wars: in Vietnam, in Afghanistan, in Iraq, in Syria, in Libya, in Ukraine, and many others that I could list. And these are wars of choice that the U.S. security state has made because the U.S. security state—really starting in 1945, by the way, but especially in hyperdrive starting in 1991—said “We run the world, and no one can tell us what to do.” Of course, this is absurd on one level, but it’s tragic at another level. It’s completely delusional. The U.S. is 4.1% of the world population. How could we run the world? We’re one country out of 193. How could we run the world? But this has been the U.S. attitude. And the U.S. deep state, the U.S. security state views the UN: “Okay, sometimes it can be helpful, but sometimes it’s a nuisance, because it’s trying to tell us what to do.” The U.S. views the UN with a lot of disdain actually, much of the time: “Don’t tell us. We don’t even need to ratify treaties that all the rest of the world has signed on to” and so forth. This is very dangerous, this way of thinking.

And it’s increasingly out of touch with reality because, also, what the United States deep state or security state has not noticed is that China has caught up, and other countries are catching up. The U.S. is not so dominant in any sphere—in technology and economy and military power—that it can make this extraordinary claim that it’s the sole superpower and it can do what it wants. So, Mike, my point is we need to think this through better and then understand this has to change.

There are many proposals. For example, that these five countries could have a veto, but it could be overridden. There are 15 countries on the Security Council: five permanent, ten rotating. You could imagine that if there’s a veto by one of the P5 that, say, 11 or 12 of the Security Council could override the veto; say, “Yes, you vetoed it,” but just like a presidential veto in the U.S. Constitution can be overridden by a supermajority of the House and the Senate, well, the same thing could be true in the Security Council. This would be completely reasonable. What happened, for example, when the vote came up to give Palestine statehood—which would be a crucial step to ending this war! Of course, Israel objected. It’s not on the Security Council, so it had no say in this, actually, by international law. But the U.S. on the Security Council said we will veto this on behalf of Israel.

It’s a pathetic example of U.S. foreign policy, because we say we’re in favor of a State of Palestine. But

then when it comes for a vote, we say, “Israel, what do you want? Oh, you want us to vote it down? Okay, we’ll vote it down.” And we vetoed it. And there was no override. There were 12 votes in favor of Palestinian statehood; there was one vote against, the United States; and there were two abstentions, because U.S. allies didn’t want to cross the United States—but they didn’t want to vote against Palestine either. What a mess. We stopped peace. There could be peace in the Middle East, but we stopped it.

The ‘Will of the World’ Must Not Be Vetoed

That’s the sense in which the UN isn’t working right now. But the vast majority of humanity is not the United States. The vast majority of humanity does not want the U.S. to lead. It wants the world to operate according to the UN Charter and international law, without one country being able to veto the will of the world. So, there’s a call for reform. But there is the catch—22 that the U.S. can keep saying no. And I think as an American, I’m trying to say to other Americans, this is not in our interest; this idea of “go it alone” is not making us safer—it’s making us a lot less safe. And I’m trying to say to the U.S. government, all your foreign policy over all these decades—it’s not working.

The United States is distrusted all over the world. The United States is regarded as a danger all over the world right now. What a terrible situation to be in. The so-called gains from all this power—where are they? We’ve spent maybe \$7 trillion on these wasted, useless wars that have brought no results; that have raised the U.S. public debt from a third of our national income to 100% of our national income, in just 25 years. We’re less secure now than we were in the past. We have competitors that can fight us on the battlefield and fight us to their advantage. The whole idea of U.S. foreign policy needs to be rethought. We should be looking to the Security Council for collective security. But we’re not right now, actually.

Now, the Biden administration has been awful, in my view. It’s been one of the worst governments in terms of U.S. foreign policy. That’s saying a lot, by the way, because they’ve all been bad for decades. This idea of U.S. dominance and being the sole superpower has been pretty consistent through Clinton, through Bush, Jr., through Obama, through Trump, through Biden. This has been a deep state foreign policy, not something that’s Democrats versus Republicans. We need a complete change of viewpoint, because what

we’re doing right now just is not working.

Billington: Doctor Mahathir pointed to the idea of non-alignment as the equivalent of saying, we can’t have this East versus West—

Prof. Sachs: It is a fascinating point, by the way, if I could just interject one point. All Ukraine needed to do and should have done to stay safe is to say, “We’re neutral.”

Billington: The March 2022 deal.

Prof. Sachs: Exactly. What happened was they had a government that wanted neutrality in 2014. Viktor Yanukovich was President, and the U.S. helped to overthrow him precisely because the U.S. Deep State can’t stand neutrality. They say, “Oh, if you’re neutral, you’re against us.” But neutrality just really means “leave us alone.” It doesn’t mean we’re against anybody. It means we want to have decent relations on all sides. And if Ukraine today—just today—would say “We’re neutral, we don’t want NATO,” Russia would stop the war.

BRICS: The Alternative to U.S. Hegemony

Billington: I think you’re right. The other thing that Mahathir said was—I brought it up, but he responded—he said, that’s really what the BRICS is trying to do. The UN has failed to create a non-aligned situation, so that’s what the BRICS is trying to do; it’s attempting to create some sort of a non-alignment process in the world. Do you think so?

Prof. Sachs: Essentially, what’s happening is that the U.S. has its allies, and those allies, by and large, remain pretty closely tied to the U.S. Who are they? It’s Canada, it’s Great Britain, the European Union, it’s Japan, [South] Korea, Australia, New Zealand. That’s pretty much what the U.S. calls its friends and allies. Now, there are also places not on that list where the U.S. has military bases. And that tends to scare the wits out of the host country. Those bases got there for some historical reason, but now those bases are where the U.S. military and often the CIA operate, and the host governments are often afraid: “If we cross the U.S., they’re going to overthrow our government,” and that’s a pretty frequent occurrence. So, the U.S. has its allies. If you add up the population of the U.S. and its allies: Europe has about 450 million people in it; the U.S. is

about 340 million people—so that’s about 790 million people; Britain, another 60, so that’s 850; Japan, roughly 100 million; South Korea, 50 million—so a billion. If you’re rounding it up, the U.S. and its allies are maybe around 1.2 billion people. The world has 8 billion people in it right now. So, it’s a little more than an eighth of the world population.

China, India together are 2.8 billion people. So you’re already talking about nearly 40% of the world population—just the two. And they’re in the BRICS. You add in Russia, you add in the other countries that have newly joined—Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa were the original five—and now there’s Egypt and Ethiopia, Iran, the Emirates, makes nine. Saudi Arabia is kind of on the fence; I’m not sure whether they’re in or out. And then there’s a long, long list of wannabes. Türkiye has applied to become part of the BRICS, which is really interesting, because Türkiye is a NATO country. But Türkiye’s been rebuffed for so long—treated so badly by Europe—they say, “Okay, we’ll join the BRICS.” So, there’s a long waiting list.

My view is what the BRICS are basically represent-

ing is what you said: it’s the world that is “not the U.S. and its military allies.” So that’s most of the world. And the U.S. keeps saying “We lead the world.” But you look at who’s following the U.S. in this parade: maybe it’s an eighth of the world population, and it’s a terrible miscalculation. The U.S. thought, “Okay, we’ll put sanctions on Russia, and we’ll crush the Russian economy.” What happened? Well, most of the world said, “No thank you. We’ll continue to trade with Russia. This isn’t our war. This is your war. We’re not interested.”

So, this idea that the U.S. leads the world is really out of date. It was never right; it was always delusional. But it’s way out of date right now. And what the BRICS represent by themselves, by the way, just with the nine or the ten, depending on whether Saudi Arabia is in or out, is about 46% of the world population. It’s about 36% of the world GDP, compared to, say, the G7 countries—the U.S., Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Britain and Japan—which is 29% of the world GDP.

So the BRICS is a major group. It’s nearly half of the world population. There’s a long waiting list to get in right now of other countries. It’s basically the countries that are not the U.S. military allies. And I have to say, even the members of NATO are looking around right now saying: “Are we really, really in this for American hegemony? Are we really in this for American dominance? Is this why we want to have these wars?” And this is why we have the Ukraine war. The United States wants to have military bases on Russia’s border. Russia said no. It eventually turned into a war, not surprisingly. And so far, the other NATO countries, by and large, have said “Yes, yes, the U.S. is right, Russia is wrong.” But in fact, you know, behind the scenes, they’re saying this is ugly.

Billington: Hungary today, even before the scenes, just said we will never allow Ukraine to be part of NATO.

Prof. Sachs: Yes, Hungary and Slovakia and the President of Croatia, and the winners of all the recent elections across Europe, by the way, are parties, so-called right or so-called left—it’s not even clear what these labels mean anymore—but against the war and anti-NATO, because they don’t want to fight world wars for U.S. hegemony, just like the U.S. should not be fighting wars for Israel’s ownership of occupied lands. These wars make no sense.



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