

Domino Theory podcast with guest Fyodor Lukyanov
Co-hosted by Christian Whiton and Mark Simon
May 21, 2025
Transcript (machine and manual edits)

Christian Whiton: Welcome back to Domino Theory, the podcast about politics, business, and media, often with a slant toward Asia. I'm Christian Whiton, joined as always by co-host Mark Simon. For this episode, we're pleased to be joined from Moscow by Fyodor Lukyanov, the prominent Russian expert in foreign affairs, research director at the Valdai Discussion Club, editor in chief of the publication "Russia in Global Affairs," and faculty member of the National Research University–Higher School of Economics in Moscow.

Fyodor can provide a unique and insightful view on how things look in Asia, Europe, and America from Russia and how that differs from what our experts here perceive.

But first the lead-in.

How can President Donald Trump put America first in regard to Russia and Ukraine?

It seems to be a question few are asking, even after this week's phone call between Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

For a lot of people in Washington opining about the Ukraine War, this question doesn't seem to matter much. On both left and right, since the war began just over 1000 days ago, most pundits have been trying to outdo each other in sounding hawkish and calling for greater U.S. involvement rather than explaining why this situation matters to Americans—if it does.

Implausibly, they said the United States had to defend Ukraine in order to defend democracy.

For example, Mitch McConnell—until recently the top Republican in the Senate—said "Helping a democratic partner defend its sovereign territory against an unprovoked attack from a common enemy is obviously in America's interest."

Obviously! No further explanation necessary apparently.

We'll overlook the reality that Ukraine isn't a democracy, doesn't respect freedom of speech or religion, tampers with American elections, and may have just assassinated a Ukrainian dissident after he dropped off his kids at the American School in Madrid, Spain.

Imagine a government that wants to be part of NATO shooting dead one of its political opponents with his kids nearby in a NATO country. But the experts say Ukraine is a democratic ally.

From the beginning of the war, those same experts said that ever-increasing sanctions on Russia would work, but they didn't.

They said Putin was supported by oligarchs and that seizing their yachts would cause them to force his hand.

That didn't work.

Then they said that a succession of U.S.-provided weapons systems like HIMARS, ATACMS, Patriot anti-missile batteries, M-1 tanks, and F-16 fighters would be radical game changers.

But they weren't.

They said that Putin not moving his hands in an interview meant he was sick. Then they said that Putin moving his feet in an interview meant he was sick. Ukraine's leader, Volodymyr Zelensky, said of Putin, "He will die soon, and that's a fact, and it will come to an end."

But it hasn't. (Obviously!)

We can afford Zelensky the leeway to deliver a little bit of spin. He is the president of a country that is slowly losing territory in a war of attrition with a much larger power. But the experts back here populating cable TV and other media probably ought to have a little more expertise.

They might perform better if they thought a little harder about vital American national interests.

At least McConnell and his friends in the former Biden administration imagined that real American interests were at stake. They said that China was watching and that the failure of America to practically give Ukraine a blank check would encourage China, which most Americans see as our top adversary.

My take has been that China is indeed watching, but it is more than happy to have the United States distracted by Ukraine. It isn't impressed, it's amused. Beijing will certainly pocket the lessons being learned on the battlefield about drone warfare, but U.S. actions in Ukraine won't change whatever Beijing has in mind to do.

Therefore, putting America first might mean cancelling the blank check, using diplomacy to end the war, and turning over support for Ukraine to Europe which, after all, has more people than we do and nearly as large of an economy.

Putting America first also means reestablishing some sort of modus vivendi with Russia.

The Russians I've spoken with don't particularly cherish dependency on China any more than Americans do. And keeping Beijing and Moscow apart ought to be a top U.S. goal.

Richard Nixon's opening to China was largely about isolating the Soviet Union in the Cold War. Today, we should do the opposite, engaging Russia, if not to isolate China, then at least to cause some sleepless nights in Beijing.

To the dismay of Europeans and hawks in the Washington uni-party, Trump has attempted diplomacy. Both the Ukrainians and the Russians think he is asking too much and promising too little.

Leftwing Bloomberg news snidely reported the snide comments of European officials, writing that, "On a call [last] Friday, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, France's Emmanuel Macron and the UK's Keir Starmer tried to make it clear to Trump that Putin has been stringing him along... They are hoping that Trump will realize that he risks looking like a loser if he forces a bad deal on Ukraine..."

Certainly these men know a lot about looking like losers. But they might consider a third option between their endless war and Washington forcing a deal on Kiev.

Earlier this week, Trump said, “I think something’s going to happen, and if it doesn’t, I just back away and they’re going to have to keep going. This is a European situation. It should have remained a European situation.”

Trump famously vowed to end the Ukraine War before he even took office. He later said he was exaggerating. But ending the war was always going to be a tough job and will take more than a ceasefire and the right mixture of word salad. As a friend observed, the Russians are playing chess and the Americans are playing twister.

Prolonged war would be an unfortunate outcome since it would prolong killing. Even if Trump does not resume Biden levels of support for Ukraine—and he won’t—it could mean continued U.S. sanctions on Russia that raise the price of energy for Americans and push Russia closer to China and Iran.

However, Trump’s statement is a recognition of the reality that putting American interests first might mean U.S. statecraft should move on from its hyper focus on Ukraine and the Biden era’s de facto Europe-first foreign policy. Who knows if Trump would then be willing to set aside the war to explore areas of cooperation with Russia, or if Moscow would even be willing to talk about much if Washington is still selling or giving arms to Ukraine and furnishing it with targeting information and other intelligence.

A peace deal would be better. But as is so often the case in wars that always seem to last longer than expected, the fighting may have to go on in Ukraine. And Trump will have to decide to what degree he wants his second term’s foreign policy to be dominated by the Ukraine War.

Christian Whiton: And that's the lead in. We're happy to welcome Fyodor Lukyanov to the program. Mark, do you have a first question for Fyodor?

Mark Simon: First of all, thanks for joining us. I'm just going to ask the very basic question. I. What do you think Putin is thinking now about a peace deal with the Ukrainians?

Fyodor Lukyanov: Yeah. First of all, thank you for this invitation.

That's a very big honor of to me to be with you. First of all, I don't know what Putin [thinks], because Putin is a very special leader. On the one hand, he is extremely consistent and whatever commentators in the West say--they used to say that Putin is chaotic, that he changes a mind, that he lies and that he never says truth and so on--that's not correct because if you follow, if you take this

episode, the war episode with Ukraine, if you take the whole period, starting from not just the beginning of the military operation, but even before, in December 2021, when Putin ordered a foreign ministry to issue a memorandum with the with the list of demands to the West about security in Europe.

Starting from that, and then throughout the whole period until today, actually nothing changed. Same package, same set of conditions, which Putin wants the West to take into account. The wording changed because we started, two days before the war, he started with this big statement with the formulas, which were not exactly clear to many people, including myself about the [crosstalk], the militarization, and so on.

Quite vague. But now we know the explanation. The change of nature of Ukrainian political system, limitations on Ukrainian military capacity. And military non-intervention by NATO and Western countries. Inside this fear of sphere, which Russia believes is important for its security, and that's never changed.

And when the Istanbul Process, the initial Istanbul Process started in March 2022 actually they discussed exactly those issues and they discussed relatively productively this, those issues. And then it was interrupted and disrupted by some outside forces. And then I must say that again. Putin was very consistent and Russian officials were very consistent. They said many times at different occasions that all cards are on the table. All demands are on the table. We will discuss it again and again over and over again, but each next time situation will be worse for Ukraine.

And that sounded a little bit arrogant in 2022, it sounds pretty credible now and when. Now Russian delegation in Istanbul says exactly the same as then. But now we have this territorial issue, which was not that severe three, three years ago. But it is exactly what Putin said, that if [Ukraine] doesn't want to discuss it today, you will discuss it later, but under worse conditions.

So coming--sorry for this long expose--coming back to your question, I think that Putin is very much serious about what Russian official position says. That's more or less what Russia wants to achieve. That's it.

Christian Whiton: Fyodor, what you scope out is, I think, something that's been consistent throughout this conflict, but also it leaves us where we are today, which is that there's not an imminent deal.

That there still are very hardened positions on all sides. As I mentioned in the lead-in, President Trump said he would solve this before he even took office during his transition and I think has discovered that's not so easy to do that. One question: With people still at loggerheads and assuming there's no long-term peace deal with Ukraine do you think Moscow and Washington can discuss other matters of consequences?

Trump probably was just making another tactical move when he said basically, "Hey, we may just leave this to go on and the Europeans can deal with this and we'll move on." But I'm just curious if you think that, Russia is in a place where it can discuss things. Assuming the U.S. side is that you can discuss things with Americans outside of Ukraine or if, just as long as the war goes on and as long as the U.S. is supporting Ukraine to one degree or another, that's very difficult.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Yeah. That's a very important issue. Important question. It depends on what it would mean what Trump means when he says that United States will walk away. Because walking away might mean total disengagement. It's not my business. You guys, you might kill each other. As long as you believe it's necessary.

Not my business. I go to other issues. I don't want to have anything to do with this war. If it means that this engagement includes both diplomatic and political efforts and military support to Ukraine, then to put it bluntly, Russia is fine because without American support--and this support still now is very significant when it comes to intelligence and several issues--without this support Ukraine will have much tougher time.

And for Russia it's fine. In this case, I think for Russia it's absolutely okay to discuss whatever United States would like to discuss. Other issues, be it Middle East, be it Iran, be it Arctic economic cooperation, whatever, why not?

We bypass Ukraine and we do it. This is the difference because one, previous administration indicated sometimes that probably we need to discuss with Russia--not frequently but couple of times--it sounded a little bit like we can discuss, for example, nuclear arms with Russia disregarding what is happening in Ukraine.

And then Russian response was, no, first Ukraine and then anything else. But that was because we were in the situation of the de facto proxy war with the United States. If Americans will withdraw, why not other option. If Trump says, okay, politically and diplomatic, like disengage, the military support would continue as it is.

That's a little bit more troublesome, but I think still, if it is no increase of support, probably it's doable, still doable with other discussions.

Mark Simon: I would say, I would agree with you. I'll tell you a quick story. One time Xi Jinping asked Donald Trump in his first term, Why do you're supporting Taiwan so much, why are you supporting Taiwan?

And Trump just looked at it, and this is--John Bolton told everybody—Donald Trump just looked at Xi Jinping and said, “They're a very good customer.” So my point being is...

Fyodor Lukyanov: Honest. He's honest.

Mark Simon: My point being is I think one of the big complaints from the Europeans. It is not that the U.S. will not sell weapons.

I don't, I'll be honest with you, I don't see Trump not doing that. I think first of all, just the weapons industry in the U.S. will put pressure on Congress that will be significant, but I just don't see him doing it. It's not in his nature. But by the same token, the real reason the Europeans are so upset is because basically Trump's going to say you're buying my weapons.

In other words, it's not coming. \$60 billion grants aren't coming anymore. So that can slow it down a bit. But let me ask you. In the areas and I think there's going to be significant disagreement. I'm old enough to have followed Putin from the day, his days on, on running up and things like that coming up.

And I tend to agree with you, I don't think there's much change in Vladimir Putin. He's pretty much, he is what he is and, a lot of guys like him. They tell you what they're going to do and you can go off and play your imaginary games thinking what he means. But actually he means what he means.

He doesn't have that, he doesn't have that gene in him. That's all that sophisticated is my point. And not, I don't mean that in a negative sense. I just mean he's just not, he doesn't feel the need. But my question to you is what areas? In other words, if we start to say. These are the areas we need to work with the Russians on, and Ukraine is not the be all to end all.

What are the areas that, what are the areas that come for? Is it Islamic terrorism? Is it drugs? Is it, what is it that, that, what are the areas that the Russians would be interested in? In other words if you came, you said, okay, you're gonna do something with this, what would the Russians bite on?

Fyodor Lukyanov: Islamic terrorism? Yes. But let us be realistic. Is it such a big issue in the international agenda just now? No, it's not. I. We see a lot of troubles everywhere connected to this, but it's completely different from what we had say 15, 20, 25 years ago. And I think that interaction between security services should be, resumed because that's what both sides need. We know that previously unfortunately not on the regular basis, but we remember a couple of episodes of pretty useful, exchange of information. Americans gave something to Russians and Russians gave something to Americans, which helped to discover some terror threats.

But in general, I don't see it a big possibility, a big chance for this issue to become so to say, a late motive in our cooperation as some people envisage 20 years ago, I can imagine that the Middle East might be. Much more productive area, not because interests coincide certainly not on many areas and on many issues.

It's not the same, we are not on the same page. But those interests are not necessarily contradicting each other. Russia might be pretty flexible when it comes to the whole package of issues connected to Israel Palestine, Syria, Iran. All this is a conglomerate of different but interrelated topics, each of which is extremely difficult and pretty dangerous.

But I don't see a huge confrontation on this. And again, if United States will not be on the other side in Ukrainian situation. It does mean Americans need to be on the Russian side, but at least neutral or distant. Then I think that middle East is not that high priority for Russia that it would require to be totally, without compromise and so to say struggle for interest against Americans, whatever happens so that, I think it's this negotiable and some things might be doable and we see that Trump despite the rhetorics, which was very harsh at the beginning and Iran and many issues. But we see that in fact, he is much more flexible, actually be it on Syria, be it on Iran even, and so on.

And even with the Israeli issue, we see much more of flexibility than people expect. So again I think that's an interesting area to, to work, to discuss. Arctic, which is interesting for Trump based on what we saw about Canada, about Greenland. And so I think, again, actually there is not such a huge discrepancy between Russia and the United States.

We both countries are interested to explore Arctic possibilities, resources to work to use it. Not to use, not to have Arctic as a, an area for confrontation. It's not easy because there's no trust there. And we have unfortunately legacy of decades of very severe con controversy, but still, I think it's doable.

So in terms of regions, I think those two regions might be on the agenda.

Christian Whiton: One thing I've been critic, I was critical the Biden administration for, was basically what I called a Europe-first foreign policy. And you saw this with just the amount of attention that President Biden gave to Europe, the amount of emphasis he put on the G7, which originally was a gabfest to get together in the late 1970s, after economic crisis, of countries that were democratic and had money. It's turned into something else now, I think. And I think Trump has changed that, and we just saw this on his trip to the Middle East, how much emphasis he puts on that. We see with the trade agreements coming together that there's a focus on China, Japan, Taiwan, Korea.

Also the UK, but not a huge rush to get to “Yes” with Europe. So I think in the United States we're seeing something which I want, so maybe I'm just dreaming here, but there are some signs of a decision or an acceptance of a shift from Europe to Asia and the Middle East as our focus.

And in some of the discussions I've had with Russians, which granted have not been numerous, but a few discussions over the past several months, it seems like there actually is, first of all, recognition that Europe is not going to be as accommodating or willing to discuss things as the United States.

And that. They're going to be very unwilling to drop sanctions even if the fighting in Ukraine comes to an end. And basically, I seem to detect almost a willingness to divorce from Europe and really try and focus elsewhere in the world, which would be a change. I think the U.S. perception of the Russian elite, certainly in, in Moscow and St. Petersburg was that it was very interested in Europe. Wanted to do business there, wanted to travel there, wanted to send kids to school there. So I guess, long question I'll try to make it short here is, which is, let me try and make my question short, which is, is Russia ready for a divorce from Europe and a focus elsewhere?

Fyodor Lukyanov: Russia was not at all ready or divorced with Europe. But Europe decided to divorce from Russia, and that happened overnight in 2022. That was extremely painful, and I must say unexpected on this side. I remember some speculations among people who allegedly had to do with this decision making about Ukrainian operation.

And the expectation was that, of course, relationship with European Union will deteriorate sharply and very significantly for a short period because no one here, almost no one could imagine that Europe would act in such a destructive way

for itself, economically devastating, cutting economic ties, which were mostly favorable for Europe, even more favorable for Europe than for Russia.

But they, they did it for reasons which we can discuss. And that was I would say that was a shock for many people here, but that was three and a half years ago. And now willingly or unwillingly, but people got used to that. Europe is economically, culturally, and in many regards, Europe is not with us and we are not with Europe.

I wouldn't say everybody's happy about that, but it's fact of life. As for the U.S. and Russia vis-a-vis the U.S vis-a-vis Europe and Russia vis-a-vis Europe, I think there's one very interesting new circumstance which is unique, which has never happened before for absolutely different reasons, but both United States and Russia now and probably.

Later for the future are not interested in keeping European integration going. European integration as a very unique phenomenon, which for quite a long period was considered both in Washington and Moscow as something positive for them, for United States, for one reason, for Russia for another reason.

But both, big partners of Europeans, they believe that European integration, European Union, deepening widening of integration might be might be good for us for Russia and for the United States. Now, again, for different reasons, completely different reasons, but both Americans and Russians came to conclusion that actually it would be much, more comfortable and efficient to deal with particular European countries, Germany, France, Britain Poland, whoever, Slovakia, any, but not with the European institutions and European Union as a big institution. And I think it is a huge change. This is not because of war with Ukraine.

This is because of changing nature of the European integration, which is now something different than it was say 25 years ago. Changing nature of Russia, changing nature of the United States, and completely changing nature of the whole international system and this new system, European Union. This integrated entity is, I would say is not an asset anymore.

For us. For you and maybe even for Europeans, it's not an asset is a liability anymore.

Mark Simon: I would tend to agree with you heavily. I. I've always been a believer, largely not on my own idea, but of Bob Mandel, the father of the euro, who actually I knew I, I'd call Bob a friend before he passed away.

And he often said that, if Europe was ever confronted with really harsh circumstances and radical divisions, he said that could be the break. They're still very different peoples in different countries. I'm not really on the same thing there, but I have a question for you because it's very frustrating to me in the terms of the people who are pressing constantly for these principled stands.

There, there's a new type of activist on the world stage and. In other words, it tends to the old saying we used to have in America is it's a not to be crude—Christian you can bleep this--is “writing checks with your mouth that somebody else has to cash with their ass.” And what that means is basically, you're running your mouth and somebody else has to cash the check.

I see tremendous death on this battlefield in Ukraine on both sides. I've talked to friends who've gone to Russia. They are seeing, basically young men in their thirties or late twenties who are walking around dismembered. That one guy is very involved with the charity trying to get, prosthetics for these individuals.

And my point is we have a different set in Europe, especially politicians in the U.S. take principled stands with “No we can't let Putin win.” “We can't let the Russians win.” “We can't let this, we can't let that,” and I don't sense that on the Ukrainian side on the ground. I think Zelensky is being pushed as hard to negotiate.

Is there a reason [not] to have what I would call a Track Two [dialogue] like we have with the Chinese? Americans have, I mean we're basically, the Americans are a lot closer to getting into a fight with the Chinese in my book than we are with the Russians. Is there a reason that there shouldn't be a Track Two, in America, we have these groups that go to sit with the Chinese and have these long discussions in these long talks.

Is there not a reason for the Americans over here to start going to Russia or Russians to start coming here in a more. A little bit open manner. I know these groups do meet, I know people go to the Middle East and things like that. But in other words, more of a thing like we have with the U.S. where basically, we have former diplomats, we have a lot of different people that show up.

They don't agree to agree, but they have these open conversations where things can be floated with the understanding that senior leaders back home will listen, at least take the briefing from you.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Yeah. First of all, I fully agree with you about the big tragedy which happens because from the beginning, that was the very fact that

we arrived to this was a huge, tragic failure of everybody including Russian Federation.

So that, that's no doubt about that. The very fact that we came to the war with people like us. It's to, to large extent the civil war. At least a big element of what happens. It's a civil war, and we know, from American history, we know from Russian history that civil wars are the worst ones, the most cruel ones.

And so in this regard that's unfortunately being specialist in strategic affairs, I have to be, so to say, distant and to analyze it in a very, very cold way, but of course this is what happens to my people. And that's of course extremely tragic. And yeah coming mentioning Europe, it's even worse if you listen to some politicians, especially in the Baltic states, but not only there, in, in Germany, in France, and in many countries, they say openly, we need this war to continue because if it'll stop, that would mean that Russians will prepare for war with Europe. And we will need to fight ourselves, let Ukrainians fight as long as they can. Openly stating.

What to say about the second track. Yeah, absolutely. There are some attempts to establish it. The problem is, the problem is that we had some, I was involved in a couple of attempts as long as we had to do with the people, very respectable, very smart, but those who belong to this how to say it, liberal establishment, it was: okay, debrief each other, yes, but it was no discussion, no dialogue.

It was the talking past each other stating some slogans on our side and on, on their side, and that, that was it. What happened now with the arrival of President Trump? For the first time since very long period, not even during the war, but even before we have Americans on the other side who are not bound by certain mantras, which should be repeated.

It does not mean that those Americans are pro-Russian. It does not mean that those Americans understand Russia well, but they are not so to say. Put in the in the road, which has no other way. So there, there is just a linear movement, end of history. That's it. And because of that the all previous attempts to establish something like a second track were not very efficient.

I think now it's better because we see on the American side, people who are at least interested to understand why Russia is doing this. And, look at Trump people, Witkoff and Rubio and those who, who are involved directly in negotiations quite recently. So after several weeks of discussions and negotiations both: "Now we understand what Russia means." Now, it does not

mean that they will accept what we [want], but they actually understood and that's why they stopped saying that this conflict can be solved easily.

Mark Simon: Your problem was the last White House we had, the cleaning lady was running things because whoever brought Joe's ice cream at the end of the night was the last one he listened to.

Christian, let me ask you a question on the U.S. side. I had some experience with this with Saudi Arabia after the killing of Khashoggi, which was awful. And it was, I always believed it was an accident. I believe, in other words, not an accident. I believed it was manslaughter. In other words, I think he went in there... I don't, I think if they really wanted to kill him--they shoot you in the back of the head as you're letting your children out of the car, as we just perhaps saw in Spain with the Ukrainians—but my point with Khashoggi was, is that, we essentially almost destroyed a relationship with somebody who really wanted to be an ally.

And like I said, all right, these things happen. It's a huge mistake. It's evil. The people who did it need to be punished. But how far up the chain are you going to go? My question is, do you think we can find reasonable people on the U.S. side who would participate in this?

I actually believe the Russians would probably send people, I think the room would be very contentious and I think it would be a lot of arguing going on. But can we send people over here that like, we always have to have a bipartisan group. Could we find people that could go over?

Probably would be able to deal with the Russians from a U.S. perspective. And it would probably be I hate to say it, it'd probably be some of the gentlemen of my era of the Cold War guys, what do you think?

Christian Whiton: Fyodor, let me jump in and then I'll bounce [to] you. Yeah. I think, Fyodor I really appreciate what you said that so many people who just want to take an independent view of what's going on are told, “Oh, you're using Putin's talking points” and are instantly demonized. And you're right too. I don't want to excuse or support the commencement of hostilities, but what passed for diplomacy at the beginning of the conflict wasn't actually any sort of interaction or attempt to find the middle ground or understand the other side. It was basically repeatedly stating again and again the U.S. position or the European position. Mark, to answer your question, yes, I think there are people who would be willing to speak realistically. I think it's important.

I've heard from senior U.S. officials that they're surprised to the extent that there isn't any of that Track One, or Track Two, or "Track 1.5" discussions between either officials in office or officials out of office or media or public intellectuals who have some background in this issue.

It's interesting. We may actually talk less to the Russians now than during the Brezhnev era. It's gotten that bad. So turning it around I think would be useful. Just to finish your question, Mark, "Are there people who would do this in and out of government?" Yes. But they, it's, they have to be at the top and at the vanguard of the New Right.

There are people in government who are still unabashedly pro-American, tough negotiators, like Michael Anton at the State Department or Andrew Peek at the National Security Council, and Fyodor, you mentioned Rubio and Witkoff, who are I think willing if not to forget to the past, a willing to try and be pragmatic.

But yeah, the path forward is a little bit is a little bit hard. Fyodor, is that sort of your take on the situation too?

Fyodor Lukyanov: I am so absolutely sure that there are plenty of American specialists, officials, non-officials who might be interested and very insightful to participate in this kind of talks.

Of course no one says that it'll be easy. Of course on, on this side, on the Russian side, you will not find you will find all possible kinds of people, including those who have how to put elegantly very strange views on the United States because, the, maybe Russia is the last country which believes in "American Almighty."

And believe that whatever Americans do, it's extremely, deeply thought conspiracy or something. And Americans are much, much more clever than anybody could believe. Yeah, I guess it's a little bit exaggerated but people believe, yeah. And that, that is the problem with the mutual reading, so to say, mutual understanding.

Same on the American side, on the European side, especially when I listen about, when I hear about how efficient Putin is to, in destroying democracy worldwide. I'm proud. I'm really proud to hear it. I don't believe it, but it would be great if he could. Anyway of course I think that this current situation, of course, we are now in a, in some kind of turning point.

It depends on what happens in, in the next couple of weeks probably if we will be able to start to walk away from this crisis. I don't mean Trump only, but Russia. Russia as well. I think that the new agenda, completely new agenda will be needed because one of troubles with previous people, administrations and experts was that we tried to recycle the same agenda for decades, which didn't work.

Now we need something else. And fortunately the whole world is changing, so now it's no need to convince anybody that we need new approaches. I think everybody understands that.

Christian Whiton: Speaking of those new approaches, we talk a lot on this program about Asia. In some of those few talks I've had with Russians, I think there is a concern about the same concern that Americans have about China becoming too prominent in the economy.

No one wants to be beholden to China, really anywhere in the world I don't think--maybe in Cambodia, but that's about it. There's a lot of talk in the U.S. though about, it's funny: On the one hand, they say we have to continue this war because Beijing is watching. But on the other hand, they, there is some recognition now that, that the war may have brought Moscow closer to China a little bit to Iran. That's a little harder to argue I guess, with some of the materiel coming in. Pyongyang--as someone who worked on North Korea at the State Department--this isn't actually a surprise to me. People who remember history actually remember that North Korea is more of a product of the Soviet Union than it is of China. I think it's unfortunate that the North Koreans appear to be learning a lot about hybrid warfare, drone warfare, which is not a great thing, I don't think. But just from the prism of Asia, do you think, is Russia moving closer to China and other Asian powers out of necessity?

And are there, is there some discomfort with that among average Russians?

Fyodor Lukyanov: Yeah, that, that's a very important issue two aspects of that necessity. Yes, of course. Yes, of course. After what happened in in February, March '22, when the whole relationship with the West has collapsed completely, has been decomposed to the 0.0 level, Russia had no choice but to turn to those who can help, who could help to sustain, to survive, actually, and in this regard, China was, absolutely crucial for Russian economy to keep going. No doubt about that. More than that the very fact that U.S. pressure and the West's pressure on the rest of the world to join anti-Russian coalition, sanctioned coalition has been rejected by all except formal allies of the United States.

Those who are formally obliged to follow the American line, they, they joined all the rest refused, including Israel, for example. Israel never introduced sanctions against Russia and so on. That encouraged Russia and it showed that the world is really changing and the United States is not that almighty as we thought.

And that, that created this quest for new partners for reasons which were very practical. We had to replace many things which came from the west. Trying to replace it with something else from China, from India, from whatever, from Turkey. And that was, yes, that was out of necessity.

But at the same time, having said that, of course, much bigger perspective shows us that a Russian Western centrism, which was utterly obvious after the Cold War, basically the whole energy went towards the West, Europe and United States—the United States, politically and strategically, Europe economically--that was actually against trends, which started to emerge in, in, on the international scene in the 21st century because this reconfiguration with rising Asia, growing importance of Asia in any regards.

That was not because of Russian conflict or Russian friendship with the West. That was an objective trend by the way caused by globalization because globalization helped and Americans helped those countries to become much more successful.

And in this regard, what happened was out of necessity, but that was that, that push. That stimulus impetus for Russia to finally start to reconsider priorities, not only because the conflict of the West, but because of the changing environment. So now we have this situation that, of course many here, many people here understand that excessive dependence on China, economic dependence on China is not okay.

It should be, counterbalanced. And in this regard, a relationship with the West would be very very useful and very sound for the Russian economy, for Russian positioning in the world. And that's why I think that when President Trump is saying that America has a huge potential for economic operation with Russia.

That's very right thing to say. Frankly, I doubt that this potential is dead huge. But it is some, and that's very important that I think that Trump himself or people around him, they understand that it's no way to, to cut Russia from China. That would be for Russia, it would be totally crazy to do just to say now, bye-bye.

We, we will work with Americans, but to widen space for everybody, for Russia, for China, for America, and give more options to consider. That would be very right for everybody, for all.

Mark Simon: Let me, I know we're getting ready to wrap up here, let me just ask you real quickly: Russia and China have that border up in Vladivostok, etc..

We used to talk about the Amur River and all those things. Is there much worry, there's a lot of Chinese that have flooded across the border. You come to some border towns. Now Chinese are 25, 30% of the population, if not more. Is there a security concern? I know this seems like a very (macro,) micro question.

Are there security concerns about China in the west or do the Russians figure, "We can just handle that if it ever comes up." In other words, as they come in, is, are there security concerns? The Chinese are a little bit too powerful. In other words, there used to be, I used, that used to be part of the U.S. equation actually, that the Chinese would, and the Russians had like tensions on those borders.

What do you think?

Fyodor Lukyanov: Not now. At least now, there is not on the agenda. There are not so many Chinese who come. That's one of stereotypes which we have in our country. And partially it has been projected, extrapolated to the West that Chinese will come to scarcely populated areas of Russia.

And first occupy by living and then occupied by something else. It doesn't happen. For Chinese to live in Siberia, that's not the best option for anybody. And paradoxically Chinese don't like to live there either. Of course there are other areas along alongside the border.

You are right, but still it's not at all the problem which many people expect. It might happen. But that would need actually, in case that area of Russian Federation will start to seek, really develop, economically, develop, then Chinese will come. Now, unfortunately, it's not the case. So it's vicious circle.

We need Chinese, we need much, but we need also Chinese money and people to come to develop those areas. But without developed areas, they don't come. And so it's a big it's a big problem, but it's entirely internal Russian problem. How to develop the Far East and Siberia. As for the political influence, no.

So far, absolutely no sign of that. There are some concerns about, and now we have, just these days, we have a discussion here, how to limit presence of

Chinese cars. In Russia because after all Western producers went, Chinese came, and now we have in Moscow, I would say maybe 70% of cars are Chinese.

In three years it came to this level. So now there is discussion about how we can limit this and partially Russian producers, car producers, they're not happy, but it's not political. It's simply market share.

Mark Simon: Okay.

Christian Whiton: Alright, that's about all the time we have. I'd like to thank Fyodor Lukyanov, a prominent scholar from Russia for his time today.

And thanks also to my co-host, Mark Simon, as always.

We'll be back soon with another edition of Domino Theory. Thanks for watching.

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