

Q. & A.

JEFFREY SACHS'S GREAT-POWER POLITICS

The economist discusses what the U.S. gets wrong about Putin and the war in Ukraine.



By Isaac Chotiner
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Jeffrey Sachs in a video-link appearance before the United Nations Security Council. Source Photograph by Lev Radin / Pacific Press / Getty

Last week, Jeffrey Sachs, the economist and professor at Columbia known for his work in the fields of poverty alleviation and foreign aid, delivered remarks to the United Nations Security Council about the destruction of the Nord Stream pipeline. Sachs, who was invited to

speak by Russia—but who told *The New Yorker* that it was “important to note” that he was there on his own behalf—called for an investigation of the incident. He has previously suggested that the United States was responsible; so far, no evidence linking the U.S., Russia, or any other nation to the attack has emerged. These were notable remarks for an economist to make, and highlight the degree to which, in recent years, Sachs has become outspoken on a broad sweep of geopolitical topics, from the war in Ukraine (he wants the West to negotiate a solution immediately) to China’s repression of the Uyghur population (he thinks the use of the term “genocide” is mistaken). He has also blamed Anthony Fauci for the role played by the U.S. public-health apparatus in funding research abroad, in part because he thinks COVID-19 originated in “U.S. lab biotechnology.”

It’s an interesting chapter for a man who was best known, for many years, as a member of the American establishment. (Thirty years ago, the *Times* called him “probably the most important economist in the world,” for his role in pushing post-Soviet Russia to adopt “shock therapy.”) Since then, Sachs has advised multiple U.N. Secretaries-General and written multiple books; he has travelled with Bono, and worked with governments with controversial records on human rights, such as the United Arab Emirates. He is currently the president of the U.N. Sustainable Development Solutions Network. In 2020, shortly after COVID began spreading across the world, I talked to him for *The New Yorker* about the pandemic’s economic impact and how Trump was handling the emergency; more recently, he appeared as a guest on the podcast of Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., who has become one of the most prominent anti-vaccine activists and conspiracy theorists in the country.

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I recently spoke by phone again with Sachs. I wanted to talk with him about his evolving views, and some of his recent travels, such as a visit with Viktor Orbán in Hungary. Our conversation, which has been edited for length and clarity, is below.

How did you get interested in wanting to end the war in Ukraine?

The war is horribly destructive and horribly dangerous, and it should never have happened. Not just in the simple sense that wars are tragedies but in the specific sense that this was an utterly avoidable war. I think that the more one knows about the background to this war, the more it is clear how it could have been avoided, and also how it can end.

What specifically about the background?

This is a war that reflects rising tensions between the United States and Russia now for a quarter century. There have been many points on that path that were truly ill-advised.

Tell me what you think some of the missed opportunities were.

The key to this, which is now well discussed, but still not well understood, is the post-1991 vision of strategic leaders in the United States: that we are now in a unipolar world, and that the United States can do pretty much whatever it wants, and that includes basing the military where it wants and when it wants, entering and exiting treaties when it wants and where it wants, without serious consequence. In the mid-nineties, there was a quite ferocious debate over even the first phase of NATO enlargement, where many wise people, including Bill Perry, our Defense Secretary at the time under Clinton, thought that this was a dreadful mistake; many others did, too. And George Kennan, whom I regard as the essence of wisdom, thought that it would lead to a new Cold War.

Clinton chose to move ahead with NATO enlargement. Because that first phase was in Central Europe, I don't think it was decisive, although it definitely made the situation more difficult. And then came the war over Serbia and the bombing of Serbia by NATO forces. This was, in my opinion, a dreadful mistake. And there's lots that we don't know publicly about this. I've been told many, many things by insiders. I don't know whether they're true or not, because I don't see the archives, but I believe that this was a dreadful mistake. Then came 9/11. President Putin offered support for the U.S. efforts at the beginning, but the Iraq war was clearly a major, major blow.

Bush continued with seven more NATO enlargements, getting close and hot under the collar, because they involved the three Baltic states, along with Romania, Bulgaria, Slovenia, and Slovakia, and the pushback was very, very hard. In 2008 came the absolutely dreadful decision by Bush to push for NATO enlargement to Ukraine and to Georgia. That was, in essence, what set us not just on a path of absolutely hardening relations but on a path to this war.

The war began, however, nine years ago, with the U.S. participation in the overthrow of

Ukraine's President Viktor Yanukovich, in February, 2014—the very active U.S. role in that. We'll only perhaps know the full extent of it when the archives are opened, decades from now. We know enough that this was why the war actually occurred.

I'm a little confused when you talk about 2008, because the full-scale invasion of Ukraine didn't start until 2022, fourteen years later, and Ukraine was no closer to getting into NATO.

In 2008, at the NATO summit in Bucharest, NATO said that it would enlarge to include Ukraine and Georgia. The decision was made by NATO. It was a very contentious meeting, because most of the Europeans objected, but the United States pushed it through. And this led, in my view, to the war in Georgia very soon afterward. I think that was Russia's message to Georgia: you're not going to join NATO. And that was a message for Ukraine as well.

Ukraine was already in a battle in which the United States was heavily participating, between a divided country, east and west divisions, pro- and anti-NATO divisions, and so forth. In 2005, Viktor Yushchenko became President; he [later] called for Ukraine to join NATO. This created the big tensions that led to 2008. And then Yushchenko was defeated and Yanukovich came in saying we should have neutrality. And that, I believe, was viewed as an affront to the U.S. policymakers who were intent on NATO enlargement. In late 2013, when protests against Yanukovich broke out, the U.S. took the occasion to play extremely actively in this and in ways that were rather direct, let us say—paying a lot of money to those who were leading this so-called movement and helping to finance what became a coup.

So you think what happened in 2014 was a coup?

It was a coup, of course. It was an unconstitutional seizure of power when very violent groups, well armed, stormed the government buildings in February, 2014. [*Protesters, angered by Yanukovich's rejection of a trade agreement with the European Union, were killed by security forces after trying to occupy parts of Kyiv; afterward, Yanukovich was isolated politically and fled to Russia with the assistance of the Kremlin. I asked Sachs over e-mail for a source for his claim about the role played by the U.S. He responded, "It is public knowledge that the National Endowment for Democracy and US NGOs spent heavily in Ukraine to support the Maidan. I have first-hand knowledge of that spending." The N.E.D. told The New Yorker that it provides funding to civil-society groups but "does not provide funding to support protests."*]

Let me just go back to 2008. I understand what happened at the Bucharest summit. My point is that fourteen years later Ukraine was no closer to actually joining NATO.

That's not correct. That's not correct, Isaac. At all. The fact of the matter is that, after the overthrow of Yanukovich, a series of governments in both Ukraine and the U.S. have heavily armed Ukraine, heavily modernized Ukraine's Army, poured in many billions of dollars of armaments, and this is what made it possible for Ukraine to resist the Russian invasion in February, 2022.

You're saying once the country was invaded?

No, no, no, no. Starting in 2014. This is important.

Once Crimea had been invaded, you are saying?

This is perhaps one of the things that needs more investigation by the likes of you and your colleagues, to look into the events around the Maidan. This was an overthrow of a government that replaced a government that was calling for neutrality—

Neutrality?

Yes, the Yanukovich government. [*Yanukovich wanted a closer alliance with Russia; it was recently reported that Putin planned to use Yanukovich to help install a puppet regime after the 2022 invasion.*]

I see.

And this is the decisive event. We are told every day that this is the first anniversary of the war. But even the secretary-general of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg, who was one of the biggest hard-liners on this war, says this is the ninth year of the war. That is the fact. This war started in February, 2014. He says it started with Russia's seizure of Crimea. I think you have to dial the clock back about a month, at least. It started with the overthrow of Viktor Yanukovich, in which the United States played a very active role.

You said that Putin offered to help the U.S. after 9/11, and the U.S. kind of shrugged it off.

[They did not] quite shrug it off in Afghanistan. What turned things was the neocon project to invade Iraq and overthrow Saddam. That was incidental to 9/11, I'd say.

Of course. In a different context, Putin could be seen as a dictator who had been brutal with Muslims in Chechnya and was later brutal with Muslims in Syria, and the last thing that America should want is to ally with such a person. But you seem to be criticizing the United States for not wanting to ally with Putin in the global war on terror, of which you yourself

have been a very eloquent critic.

You kind of misunderstood. My point was that Russia was supportive of the U.S. in the aftermath of 9/11—it understood that this was a major shock and wanted to try to address this. I know many European leaders who have dealt with Putin extensively over the years, and it's important to understand that, even after the Serbian NATO bombing, which I regard as rather outrageous, and even after the NATO enlargement, which I regard as provocative, Putin was pro-European in the early two-thousands, was dealing closely with many European leaders, and was not the madman that is portrayed today in our media.

What I'm suggesting is that this was not an antagonistic relationship, or a lost relationship, even though, in my opinion, the U.S. had already begun a series of provocative steps that I oppose, which became worse over time. Incidentally, in 2011, the United States decided to overthrow Bashar al-Assad, in Syria, and sometime around 2012—we don't know the exact dates—President Obama signed Operation Timber Sycamore, which assigned the C.I.A. the task of working with the other powers in the Middle East to overthrow Assad.

Assad was an ally of Russia. We often say, ridiculously, in our media that Putin entered Syria, because people don't understand that Obama tasked the C.I.A. with overthrowing Assad, and the U.S. blocked the peace attempts that were very close to coming to fruition in 2012 in Syria. I know this, also.

You're someone who has cared about poverty and less-fortunate people in the world for a very long time. Putin dropped bombs on hospitals and schools in Syria, and you're blaming the United States for trying to destabilize a dictator who killed hundreds of thousands of his own people. I really think if you would listen to yourself—

Isaac, Isaac, you should seriously understand the timing and the facts, because you don't. With all respect, I would be delighted if you learned something about that and looked into it carefully. Because it really is just another case where the U.S. secretly destabilized a country and walked away afterward. It's not quite "walked away," but basically walked away, after many years of destruction. This is relevant because it entailed destabilizing an ally of Russia. That's one reason that it's pertinent for our current discussion. Another reason is that it's another case of covert operations by the United States.

Maybe I should phrase the question in a different way. In the past, when I've read your writing on the sins of American foreign policy, the global war on terror, our role in destabilizing countries all over the world with coups during the Cold War and the war in

Iraq, and the devastation that this has caused abroad, you speak with real passion. Maybe it's because you're an American, and it's good that you're so critical of our country. Now, when you're talking about civilians being killed in Syria or in Eastern Europe, you have this almost clinical lack of passion, and everything seems to just trace back to the United States being the secret power causing it. There's no sense of these people's wishes or desires, there's no sense of Eastern Europeans wanting to join NATO and why they might want that. There's no sense of the human-rights issues involved. Do you think that's a fair critique? And how do you respond to it?

I don't think it's a fair critique at all, and I think maybe you're missing my point completely, which is that I find it horrendous how many innocent people are dying and suffering. I worry about it every day. It's a horrible thing. It weighs very heavily on me personally, but I believe that understanding these events so that the fighting can stop is of paramount importance.

Let me just say a word about Syria. The United States destabilized Syria and, in early 2012, there was the possibility of a peace agreement. One country stood in the way of the peace agreement. That was the United States.

Wait, sorry, Bashar al-Assad was willing to make peace, but the U.S. would not let him, essentially?

The U.S. insisted that Bashar al-Assad must go for there to be peace. The other participants in the negotiation said that a political process could end this, but not starting on the first day with U.S.-backed regime change. [*When asked in an e-mail whether he had a source for the claim that the U.S. was the lone country opposing a peace agreement, Sachs told The New Yorker, "I have first-hand knowledge of the US blocking the peace agreement in Syria from the highest international sources."*]

When it comes to Ukraine, what is so horrifying for me is that this war, even considering the multiple facts I've laid out that were the predicate to this war, could have been avoided at the end of 2021. President Putin put on the table three demands: no NATO enlargement, Crimea remaining part of Russia, and the Minsk II agreements being implemented. The United States refused.

Do you still think, in hindsight, that Putin was being sincere here?

I think that one could have created an enforceable agreement around those points. Sincerity is a strange idea in this. It's not a matter of sincerity; it's a matter of finding an agreement and then the modalities to enforce the agreement, including, of course, withdrawal of forces from borders,

demilitarization, peacekeeping operations, monitors, other steps. So, as Ronald Reagan used to wisely say, “Trust, but verify.” This isn’t a matter of sincerity. This is a matter of understanding the nature of this conflict and how it could have been avoided. I tried at the end of 2021 to say to whomever would listen in the White House and in the Biden Administration that NATO enlargement was a terrible idea. And, if they responded to me, “Well, Jeff, it’s not going to happen,” I said, “If that’s your view, make it explicit and public and thereby avoid the war.” But they didn’t.

What have you made of Putin’s rhetoric in the last year that he’s the new Peter the Great, that Ukraine is part of a Greater Russia, the Russian imperial perspective that he’s put forward as one cause of the war, one of the driving forces of it for him, in his own words?

Yeah, I think your interview with John Mearsheimer covers that well, so I’ll just leave it there. I think it’s accurately described there.

You mean Mearsheimer’s view is accurate?

That was not the cause of the war. This is not the motivation of the war, and you’re basically—

What do you make of Putin saying these things explicitly, then?

I don’t like when he says these things, but I don’t think this is the point of what’s happening right now. Anybody that has watched this carefully—day in, day out—for twenty-five years knows that the number of times NATO enlargement has been discussed is in the hundreds or the thousands, and in all sorts of documents and in all sorts of contexts. So I think it’s a little bit of a game of the Western media.

To quote Putin is a game?

No. The job should be to help people understand what’s happening.

I was reading a long article in the *Financial Times* this morning, and the piece was essentially reporting that, among the Russian military, business, and political élite, Putin was pretty alone in wanting this war. Does that suggest that maybe structural reasons, such as NATO enlargement, were less causal—if all these other actors in Russia would not have actually carried out the war? I agree that American policy toward Russia after the Cold War is absolutely a legitimate point of inquiry, with many errors. But, if Putin is dropping bombs and trying to invade a country when most of the other élites in Russia don’t want that, maybe it’s more about Putin himself, no?

I think that this is the Western trope, and I must say I think that the *Financial Times*' coverage has been very poor on this. We should understand the British media. The British media have been Russophobic since well before the first Crimean war, which was 1853 to 1856. The *Financial Times* is playing its role, as is the rest of the British media. It's very familiar, it's very typical, it's very rhetorical, and I would urge people not to so personalize this. I see it in *The New Yorker*, too: this is viewed almost as a war of one person. This is really a serious misunderstanding, and it also can lead to very strange ideas. *Well, if he goes, then the war's over.* Many strange and simplistic ideas. This is not a war of one person. This is a war that has reasons and, like von Clausewitz said, it is a continuation of politics by other means, and we should understand that as clearly as possible, so that we can end the war now, as fast as possible, because people are suffering every day.

I also just read something today that said, "It's fine. Ukraine's going to win. We just need to hold on. Yes, there will be a few hundred thousand more deaths, but in the end it will be a great triumph." That truly makes me shudder. I think the naïveté and cruelty of that argument are extraordinary, and the absolutely substantial and real risk of nuclear escalation is profoundly overlooked.

What would convince you that you were wrong?

Well, if the war ends quickly.

About the motivation for the war, I mean.

It's not so interesting, in my view. What I believe to be the point is that we should try negotiating. That's my point. We should try negotiating.

You recently wrote, "The basis for peace is clear. Ukraine would be a neutral non-Nato country. Crimea would remain home to Russia's Black Sea naval fleet, as it has been since 1783. A practical solution would be found for the Donbas, such as a territorial division, autonomy, or an armistice line." Again, I agree that negotiation is absolutely necessary, but to say that "the basis for peace is clear" and then to say that Ukrainians who may want to join NATO should not be able to, and that chunks of their country should now belong to Russia—again, the way you write suggests to me a certain lack of interest or emotion about a country being annexed and invaded. I understand that there are also larger geopolitical issues, but do you not see the point I'm making? Or does that seem unfair to you?

Let me put it this way. First, stopping NATO enlargement is not a concession. It's both a necessity and a matter of prudence for the United States. It was a terrible idea, period, for the U.S.

Why do you think countries in Eastern Europe want to be part of NATO?

I can understand why they would want to be part of NATO, but I cannot understand why the United States would think it's safe and prudent to push NATO into Ukraine, into Georgia. It's completely reckless. The questions of Crimea and the Donbas arose after the U.S. participation in the coup against Yanukovich, because before that Russia wasn't taking Crimea. What Yanukovich was negotiating with Russia was a long-term lease so that the Russian naval base would be in Sevastopol, and it would be there until at least 2042, with options for renewal. In the Donbas, there was an ongoing twenty-year heavy debate about autonomy and about languages, but there was nothing like war.

You've been a very eloquent critic of some of the worst aspects of American foreign policy. Let's take the Iraq War as one example. You've described everything Russia has done during the past twelve years—bombing civilians in Syria, bombing civilians in Ukraine, annexing Crimea, supporting separatists in eastern Ukraine—as essentially forced on them. If people described the Iraq War that way, by removing responsibility from the United States, it would make me cringe. Every Russian action you've mentioned is just described as the result of American behavior.

Again, I think you're really misunderstanding and mischaracterizing me. Let me describe what I'm saying about American policy, what I would like the readers of *The New Yorker* to really appreciate for a variety of reasons, because I've been an adviser economically all over the world, and I know leaders all over the world and have known leaders all over the world for many decades. I've seen a lot, and what I'm trying to convey is something very basic about American foreign policy, and that is that it is devastatingly based on lies and covert actions, and I see those lies all the time.

I happened to be on a talk show the night that Colin Powell presented the U.N. testimony. There were six panelists. They went around the table, and they finally came to me. I said, "It's lies. It's clearly lies," which it was. It wasn't just wrong intelligence; it was lies cooked up to justify a war. Then I happened to know about the lies of the U.S. in Syria. You keep talking about Putin bombing people in Syria; the United States both provoked the disaster and stopped it from ending. I know that.

O.K. The idea that people—

Quite the contrary, I am telling people that the narrative that we have is leading to an escalation of deaths, and it's putting us on a path to nuclear devastation.

I know, but you're also talking about people being "provoked" into slaughtering civilians.

The United States armed the opposition to Assad with the instruction to overthrow Assad. That's a war.

He was a dictator who was slaughtering his own people. Are you aware of that?

No.

No?

I'm aware of a lot more than you are aware of about Syria, because I know a great deal about the day-to-day events from the spring of 2011 onward, and I urge you to look at that, Isaac, seriously.

O.K. Let's move on to your meeting with Viktor Orbán, a happier subject. What did you guys discuss?

We discussed the Ukraine War.

Why did you go see him?

I was invited to the National Bank of Hungary to give a talk, and I paid a courtesy call on the President.

As one does.

You do if you have known him since 1989. Yes.

What do you make of his current rule?

We discussed the war in Ukraine, and I believe that he has the right point that this war should end with negotiations.

I see. What do you make of his rule, generally?

This is what we discussed, and I very much agreed with his position.

I'll just ask one more time. I'm curious what you think of Viktor Orbán, generally.

I know. You can ask a hundredth time, but we discussed the war in Ukraine.

O.K. So, you don't feel comfortable weighing in on that. You're just staring at the camera; you're not interested in talking about that. Is that accurate?

Don't play games, Isaac. Let's talk about the subjects that we agreed to talk about.

I never agreed to only talk about any specific subjects.

Are we at the end?

Do you have to leave?

I have to leave if we're not going to continue to try to understand more deeply how to get out of this war.

Well, you said that you talked to Orbán because you thought that he had the right ideas about the war. More specifically, what do you think those ideas are?

The ideas are that we need a negotiated settlement of this war.

And you think he sincerely wants that?

I hope so.

You mentioned in an e-mail to me that you thought China could play an important role in maybe bringing an end to this war. How would that function?

China, India, Brazil, South Africa, Indonesia, and a number of other major countries that are not party to this war and have normal relations with Ukraine, with Russia, and with other countries are saying that there should be an end to this war through negotiation. This is important, in my view. These countries constitute a significant part of humanity and a significant part of the global scene. What China has said all along, that the security interests of all parties should be respected, in my view, is a basis for saying that Ukraine's sovereignty and security need to be protected. And, at the same time, NATO should not enlarge, because that threatens the security of Russia. That, to my mind, is understanding properly the structural

challenge that we face in reaching peace.

You've been criticized for some of the things that you've said or written about China a couple of years ago. You said, "The Chinese crackdown in Xinjiang [had] essentially the same motivation as America's foray to the Middle East and Central Asia after the September 11, 2001 attacks: to stop the terrorism of militant Islamic groups." Do you still feel that's the purpose of China having concentration camps?

What a ridiculous phrasing of a question. The article was about one thing: was there a genocide in Xinjiang? I pointed out that the U.S. government had provided no evidence for that.

I am just curious if you think—

And that there should be a U.N. investigation, but I think we probably reached the end of the time, because this is about Ukraine, and I think we should keep the focus on that. This is the key issue that the world faces. I think there's more to say about that, and if you had questions about that, I'd be happy to answer them.

We've been talking about it for forty-five minutes. I just wanted to ask you that.

No, no, no. If we're at the end, it's fine. It's fine.

I would just end with one final question. Do you feel that you've changed in any way? I was listening to you on Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.,'s podcast talking about how excited you were to read his book, and I thought, Is this the same Jeff Sachs I've been reading for twenty years?

I'll say the following: Thirty-four years ago, I was inspired by President Gorbachev's vision of a peaceful world and of a common European home. I still believe that is our goal. I believe it is what we should be working toward. I believe that we could still achieve that goal, and the first step to achieving that goal would be ending this war at the negotiating table immediately. And I believe the basis for that would be prudence by the United States and withdrawal of troops by Russia with the agreement that NATO will not expand to Ukraine. This is the crux of the matter, and I believe that the vision of a common European home is still vital for our well-being and our survival, and, in this sense, I've been inspired by that idea for more than three decades. ♦

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