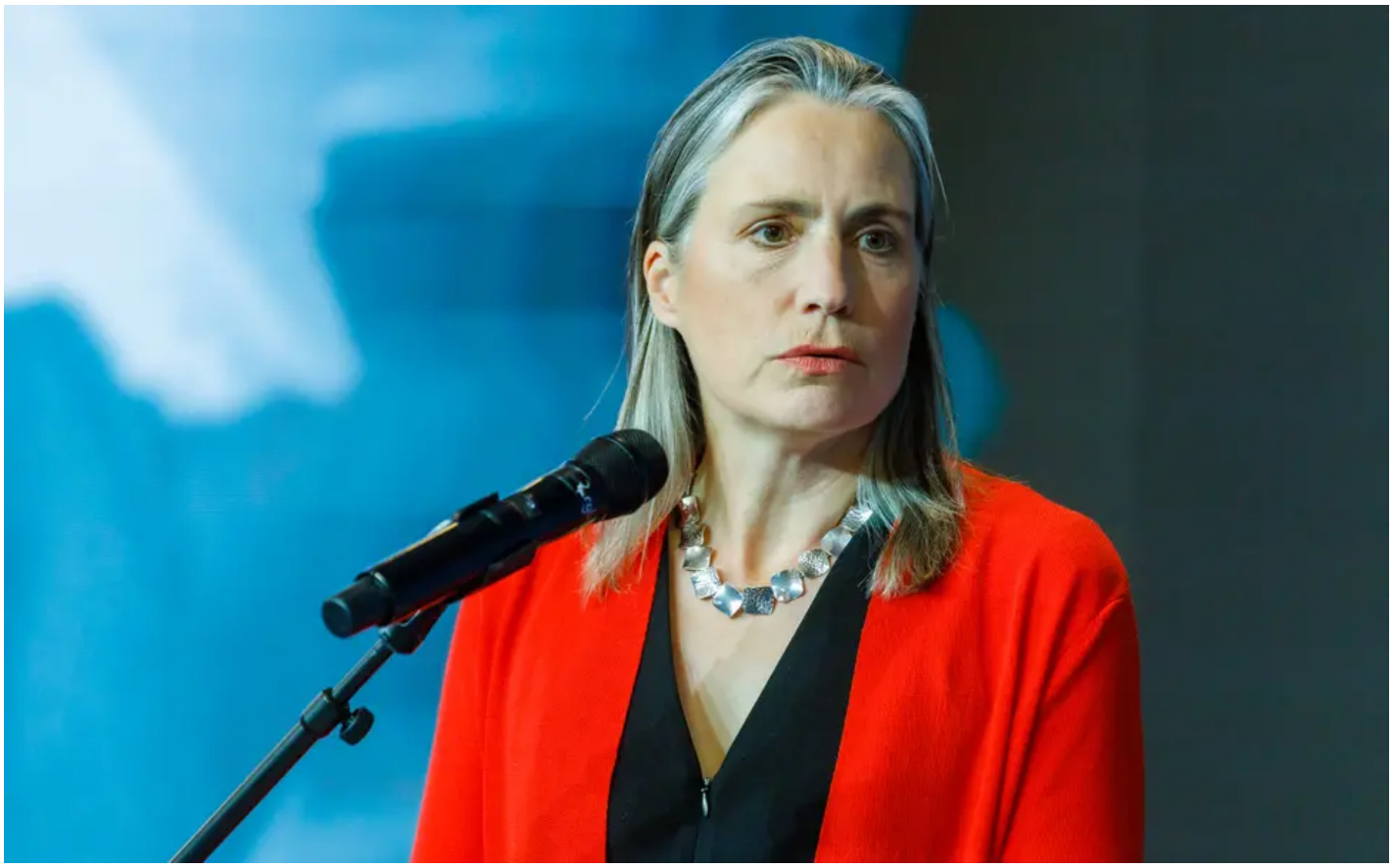
news

Fiona Hill: Ukraine in the new world disorder



Fiona Hill at the Lennart Meri Conference. Source: Arno Mikkor

OPINION

Fiona Hill
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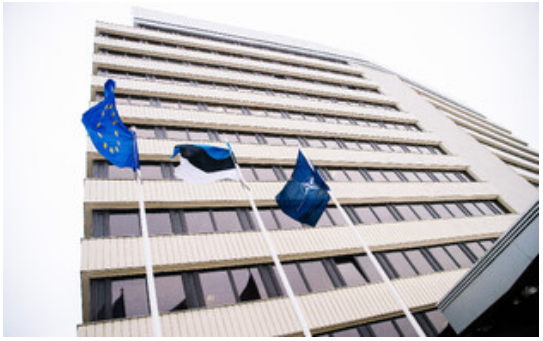
Fiona Hill, fellow at the Robert Bosch Institute and senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, writes about the Rest's rebellion against the United States in this year's Lennart Meri Lecture delivered at the Lennart Meri Conference 2023.

More than a year after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the brutal war Vladimir Putin ignited has transformed, as major regional conflicts often do, into a war with global ramifications. This has not, as Vladimir Putin and others claim, become a proxy war between the United States or the "collective West" (the U.S. and its European and

other allies) against Russia. In the current geopolitical arena, the war is now effectively the reverse—a proxy for a rebellion by Russia and the "Rest" against the United States. The war in Ukraine is perhaps the event that makes the passing of pax Americana apparent to everyone.

In its pursuit of the war, Russia has cleverly exploited deep-seated international resistance, and in some cases open challenges, to continued American leadership of global institutions. It is not just Russia that seeks to push the United States to the sidelines in Europe, and China that wants to minimize and contain U.S. military and economic presence in Asia so both can secure their respective spheres of influence. Other countries that have traditionally been considered "middle powers" or "swing states"—the so-called "Rest" of the world—seek to cut the U.S. down to a different size in their neighborhoods and exert more influence in global affairs. They want to decide, not be told what's in their interest. In short, in 2023, we hear a resounding no to U.S. domination and see a marked appetite for a world without a hegemon.

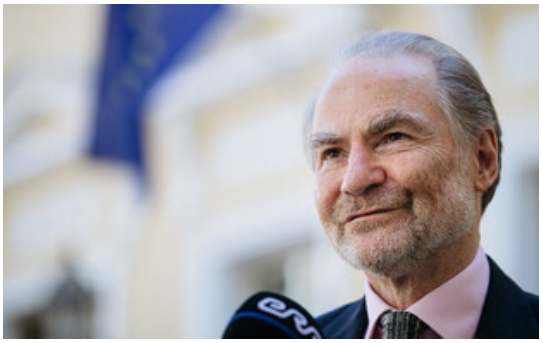


Hannes Hanso presents credentials as new Estonian ambassador to Vietnam

In this context, the next iteration of the global security, political and economic system will not be framed by the United States alone. The reality is already something else. It is not an "order," which inherently points to a hierarchy, and perhaps not even a "disorder." A range of countries are pushing and pulling in line with their own priorities to produce new arrangements. We in the transatlantic community may need to develop some new terminology as well as adapt our foreign policy approaches to deal with horizontal networks of overlapping and sometimes competing structures. We have entered what Samir Saran, president of India's Observer Research Foundation, has dubbed the age of "limited liability partnerships." The regionalization of security, trade and political alliances complicates our national security strategies and policy planning, but it may also intersect with our priorities in useful ways if we can be flexible and creative—rather than simply resisting and responding when things go in directions we don't like. As British security expert Neil Melvin has suggested, we should embrace the idea of "mini-lateralism."

Lennart Meri, whom we celebrate and commemorate with this conference, demonstrated flexibility as well as his creativity at a similarly disruptive juncture at the

end of the Cold War—just as one might expect from a talented polyglot, writer, and filmmaker, who as a politician served as both foreign minister and president. In fact, we might even suggest that Lennart Meri prefigured our present moment. In the 1990s, President Meri promoted the idea that becoming a European or being a transatlanticist didn't mean you had to shed your distinctive Estonian identity or discount your specific regional context. As a trained historian he understood that context to its deepest core. President Meri sought to develop multiple regional and global perspectives for Estonia. He prioritized relations with immediate neighbors and Europe, with the United States and with the United Nations. Relations with the U.S. were critical for Meri, because Washington never acknowledged the Soviet occupation of the Baltic States after World War II and facilitated the freedom of Estonia after 1991. But Meri also took a staunchly Baltic approach in his elaboration of Estonia's policy. He never subordinated Estonia in any way to a larger power. President Meri had a keen appreciation of what a small country could achieve and why. As he noted in a famous comment reflecting on Estonia's obvious proximity to and history with Russia: "Compared to Russia, Estonia is like an Inuit kayak. A supertanker takes 16 nautical miles to turn around, but the Inuit can do a 180 degree turn on a dime."



Timothy Garton Ash: Germany has attraction mixed with fear for Russia

If he were here today, I suspect President Meri would recognize that the war in Ukraine is a world or system changing war. It has stripped away the surface detail and exposed the flaws and fault lines in the international order. It is not a 21st century conflict. It is a retrograde war—what we hope will be the terminal spasm of the European convulsions that shook the rest of the world in the 20th century because of Europe's previous mercantilist dominance and imperial conquests. Putin and Moscow are fighting in Ukraine to regain control over former colonial territory relinquished at the end of the 20th century.

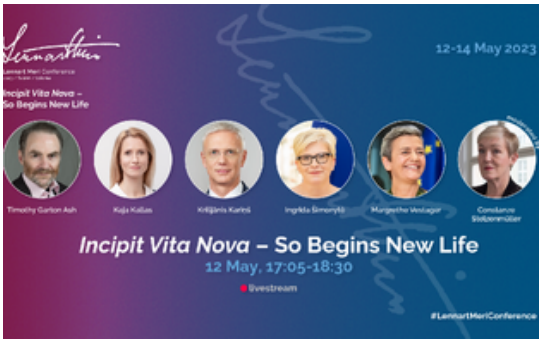
Putin believes that Russia is not just the successor state to, but the "State in Continuum" of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. And indeed, this is how we all recognized Russia after the dissolution of the USSR in December 1991. This fact explains a great deal about the present. Russia is the last continental empire in Europe. Over the course of the 20th century, First World War brought down the

Donald Trump in 2016 dimmed the power of America's democratic example. Trump's contempt for international agreements and his flagrant mishandling of the global pandemic, as well as, more recently, the Biden Administration's botched withdrawal from Afghanistan, cast further doubt on the U.S. capacity for global leadership.

Alar Karis: Putin not insane but might resort to WMDs

None of this means that Russia's invasion of Ukraine is viewed positively. The central tenets of international law are still a universal order or ordering principle, especially for smaller states. Countries across the globe have broadly acknowledged and condemned the facts of Russia's aggression, including in multiple votes in the United Nations General Assembly. The International Court of Justice, the International Criminal Court, and other international rulings have emphasized that Ukraine has the legal not just the moral high ground in the war. Moscow's brutal conduct and atrocities alongside its military blunders and failures have diminished Russia's standing. But how most states and commentators feel about the United States is their prism for assessing Russia's actions.

Ukraine is essentially being punished by guilt through association for having direct U.S. support in its effort to defend itself and liberate its territory. Indeed, in some international and American domestic forums, discussions about Ukraine quickly degenerate into arguments about U.S. past behavior. Russia's actions are addressed in a perfunctory fashion. "Russia is only doing what the U.S. does," is the retort . . . Yes, Russia overturned the fundamental post-1945 principle of the prohibition against war and the use of force enshrined in Article 2 of the UN Charter . . . But, the U.S. already damaged this principle when it invaded Iraq 20 years ago.



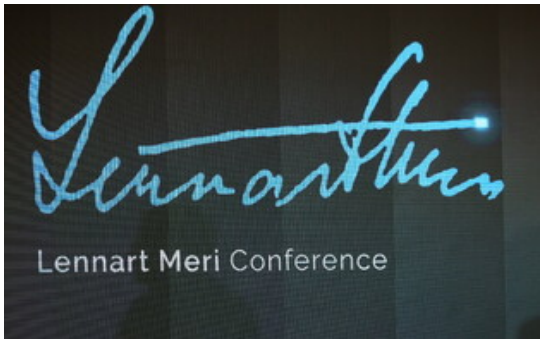
LMC 2023 watch again: Incipit Vita

"Whataboutism" is not just a feature of Russian rhetoric. The U.S. invasion of Iraq universally undercut U.S. credibility and continues to do so. For many critics of the United States, Iraq was the most recent in a series of American sins stretching back to Vietnam and the precursor of current events. Even though a tiny handful of states have sided with Russia in successive UN resolutions in the

Nova – So Begins New Life

General Assembly, significant abstentions, including by China and India, signal displeasure with the United States. As a result, the vital twin tasks of restoring the prohibition against war and the use of force as the critical cornerstone of the United Nations and international system, and of defending Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, get lost in a morass of skepticism and suspicions about the United States.

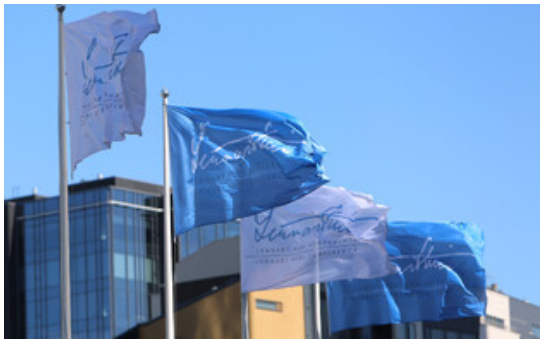
In the so-called "Global South," and what I am loosely referring to as the "Rest" (of the world), there is no sense of the U.S. as a virtuous state. Perceptions of American hubris and hypocrisy are widespread. Trust in the international system(s) that the U.S. helped invent and has presided over since World War II is long gone. Elites and populations in many of these countries believe that the system was imposed on them at a time of weakness when they were only just securing their independence. Even if elites and populations have generally benefitted from pax Americana, they believe the United States and its bloc of countries in the collective West have benefitted far more. For them, this war is about protecting the West's benefits and hegemony, not defending Ukraine.



LMC 2023: All Men Dream, But Not Equally: Prospects for the Middle East

Russian false narratives about its invasion of Ukraine and about the U.S. resonate and take root globally because they fall on this fertile soil. Russia's disinformation seems more like information—it comports with "the facts" as others seem them. Non-Western elites share the same belief as some Western analysts that Russia was provoked or pushed into war by the United States and NATO expansion. They resent the power of the U.S. dollar and Washington's frequent punitive use of financial sanctions. They were not consulted by the U.S. on this round of sanctions against Russia. They see Western sanctions constraining their energy and food supplies and pushing up prices. They blame Russia's Black Sea blockade and deliberate disruption of global grain exports on the United States—not on the actual perpetrator, Vladimir Putin. They point out that no-one pushed to sanction the United States when it invaded Afghanistan and then Iraq, even though they were opposed to U.S. intervention, so why should they step up now?

Countries in the Global South's resistance to U.S. and European appeals for solidarity on Ukraine are an open rebellion. This is a mutiny against what they see as the collective West dominating the international discourse and foisting its problems on everyone else, while brushing aside their priorities on climate change compensation, economic development, and debt relief. The Rest feel constantly marginalized in world affairs. Why in fact are they labeled (as I am reflecting here in this speech) the "Global South," having previously been called the Third World or the Developing World? Why are they even the "Rest" of the world? They are the world, representing 6.5 billion people. Our terminology reeks of colonialism.



Watch again: Lennart Meri Conference 2023

The Cold War era non-aligned movement has reemerged if it ever went away. At present, this is less a cohesive movement than a desire for distance, to be left out of the European mess around Ukraine. But it is also a very clear negative reaction to the American propensity for defining the global order and forcing countries to take sides. As one Indian interlocutor recently exclaimed about Ukraine: "this is your conflict! . . . We have other pressing matters, our own issues . . . We are in our own lands on our own sides . . . Where are you when things go wrong for us?"

Most countries—including many in Europe—reject the current U.S. framing of a new "Great Power Competition"—a geopolitical tug-of-war between the United States and China. States and elites bristle at the U.S. idea that "you are either with us or against us," or you are "on the right or wrong side of history" in an epic struggle of democracies versus autocracies. Few outside Europe accept this definition of the war in Ukraine or the geopolitical stakes. They don't want to be assigned to new blocs that are artificially imposed, and no-one wants to be caught in a titanic clash between the United States and China. In contrast to the U.S., as well as others like Japan, South Korea and India, most countries do not see China as a direct military or security threat. They may have serious qualms about China's rough economic and political behavior and its blatant abuse of human rights, but they still see China's value as a trading and investment partner for their future development. The United States and the European Union don't offer sufficient alternatives for countries to turn away from China, including in the security realm—and even within Europe the sense

of how much is at stake for individual countries in the larger international system and in relations with China varies.

Outside Europe, the interest in new regional orders is more pronounced. In this context, the BRICS—which, for its members offers an alternative to the G7 and the G20—is now attractive to others. Nineteen countries, including Saudi Arabia and Iran, purportedly showed interested in joining the organization ahead of its recent April 2023 summit. Countries see the BRICS (and other similar entities like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or SCO) as offering flexible diplomatic arrangements and possible new strategic alliances as well as different trade opportunities beyond the United States and Europe. BRICS members and aspirants, however, have very disparate interests. We need to consider these as we look ahead to finding a resolution to the war in Ukraine and as we consider the kinds of structures and networks we will have to deal with in the future.

I am going to run through some of the factors that are most relevant to thinking about Ukraine in the BRICS context.

Putin and Russia certainly hope the war has undermined the previous post-1945 global equation. Moscow intends to emerge from the war focusing on expanding its role and influence in multilateral organizations like the BRICS from which the United States and the collective West are excluded. But it is worth noting that inside the BRICS grouping, precisely because of the war, Russia is seen as increasingly reliant on China and less of an independent global player.

China clearly dominates the BRICS and wants to use the organization to consolidate its regional and global positions. Beijing sees the U.S. as the enemy of its ambitions and Moscow as an important counterweight to Washington. China does not support Russia's aggression against Ukraine, but U.S. security framing—including the frequent invocations of Taiwan and "China is watching Ukraine" in the U.S. Congress—raises concerns in Beijing that Washington sees the Ukraine war as a test run for a clash with China.

Brazil values China as a counterweight to the United States. As one Brazilian interlocutor told a group of us recently during a think tank exchange: "Brazil is condemned to exist on a continent dominated by the United States." As in China, heated American rhetoric about the war in Ukraine has shaped perceptions of the conflict in Brazil. Some Brazilian elites and officials view the war in Ukraine as "the

first proxy war of the 21st century between the United States and China!" For them Russia is already subordinate to China and weakened as an actor beyond its neighborhood.

India wants to play a larger role in the Indian Ocean but, unlike Brazil, it sees China as a genuine security threat—especially in the Himalayas where the two countries have clashed over territory. For New Delhi, Washington is a fickle source of support, while Moscow is a major supplier of arms and ammunition. India fears Russia's dependency on China. Of all the BRICS member states, India is in the most difficult policy predicament. It wants to keep tabs on China and Russia inside the BRICS and still maintain relations with the U.S.

South Africa, on the other hand, wants to develop its relations with both China and Russia in the BRICS. For South Africa, China is a source of investment and development assistance, while Russia is the continuation of the USSR, which was decisive in helping the African National Congress fight Apartheid during the Cold War. In this context, the ANC views the United States as the new imperial power and rejects what it sees as America's demonization of Russia in the Ukraine war.

Saudi Arabia, among the BRICS aspirants, sees U.S. power fading in the Middle East after its military withdrawals from Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan. In seeking to join the BRICS, Saudi Arabia wants to take advantage of global power and trade shifts. China is the major importer of Middle East oil, a significant regional investor, and the recent mediator in Saudi Arabia's relations with Iran and Yemen. For the Saudis, Russia is a factor in Middle East energy calculations as well as Syria and offers new economic opportunities as Russian businesses move money and activities to the Gulf region to avoid Western sanctions.

Iran, on the other hand, is desperately seeking economic relief. It sees an opportunity through the BRICS to change its regional pariah status and build on its recent Chinese-brokered rapprochement with Saudi Arabia. Tehran believes the war in Ukraine has undermined Europe as an independent source of power and re-subordinated it to Washington. Iran senses U.S. weakness ahead of the 2024 American presidential elections and a chance to play a different international game. Iran is already providing Moscow with weapons to use against Ukraine.

With so many agendas and aspirations centered on just one of the alternative global orders, managing the war in Ukraine—as well as other high stakes issues like climate

change, future pandemics, and nuclear non-proliferation—becomes extremely difficult. Ukraine's long-term prospects depend on broader global dynamics and the goodwill of other countries, including BRICS members, not just on the military, political and economic support of the United States and Europe.

Because of its size and location, Ukraine is a multi-regional state. Its security will be defined by Neil Melvin's idea of "mini-lateralism." Ukraine will have to consolidate its existing relationships with the United States, the European Union, and NATO, as well as with its neighbors in Central and Eastern Europe, close partners here in the Baltic States, in Scandinavia, in the UK, and in the Black Sea region. The G7 and G20 country groupings will also be critical. This is where the persistently negative global views of the United States complicate Ukraine's foreign policy. What will happen, for example, if China, along with Iran (and we suspect North Korea), provides weapons to Russia based on enmity with the United States? Then, there is NATO. As a direct consequence of the war, and Finland and Sweden joining, the Alliance has become the major driver of Ukrainian and European security. At least for the duration of the conflict, ongoing debates about European strategic autonomy have taken a backseat. Europe has jolted back to the kind of reliance it had on U.S. military power from 1945-1989. This is another challenge. Outside Europe and the Transatlantic arena, NATO has an image problem that Putin exploits.

Perceptions are often more important in international affairs than reality; and since the end of the Cold War, Putin has persisted in portraying NATO as an extension of the United States militarily and an inherently anti-Russian institution. Unlike Gorbachev and Yeltsin, Putin has never seriously sought an accommodation with NATO. For Putin, the U.S. is still the Cold War adversary and NATO is a provocation for still being around. Putin has actively fueled China's concerns that the U.S. is expanding NATO-like structures to Asia; and he has fed the idea that NATO expansion is the proximate cause of war in Ukraine. Both outside and inside Europe, Putin wants the U.S. and NATO gone for good.

All this means that we need a diplomatic surge—a skillful and patient effort alongside the vital military track—to end Russia's brutal and senseless war. Ukraine needs broad-based global support. We must push back against Putin's disinformation and anti-U.S. and NATO narratives. The United States and Europe will have to engage the rest of the world in an honest conversation about the stakes of this war and actively listen to their feedback and concerns on specific issues. Given the disparate views

and agendas, we will have to take a piecemeal and more transactional approach to identify areas where we can make common cause with other states as well as international and private sector actors.

The so-called Global South still sees the United Nations as a credible and important actor; but most countries want to downgrade the exclusive power of the Security Council and boost the activities of General Assembly to develop new mechanisms for genuinely tackling climate change and economic development. As the UN still has relevance and universal acceptance as an actor, then we should also consider how we can address these issues. Where can we work with the UN to provide technical assistance, mediation, and coordination for Ukraine? For example, can the UNGA balance the UNSC and constrain the Russian and Chinese vetoes in some way? What larger role could the ICJ and ICC play—especially given South Africa's recent decision to stay in the ICC and suggest Putin not attend the Johannesburg BRICS summit so they don't have to detain him in accordance with the ICC's March arrest warrant? How could we build on UN-led crisis interventions like the International Atomic Energy Agency's efforts to secure Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant, and the Black Sea grain initiative to turn them into durable long-term solutions in partnership with other countries.

Finally, if the United States is everyone's prism for Ukraine and this has become a proxy rebellion against the U.S., as I have argued, what alternative actors could gain traction to restore peace through collective action? All eyes are currently on China, but India has historical goodwill in multiple regional contexts that might help break common ground with others. So do countries like Kenya in Africa and Singapore in Asia. In Europe, we have the Scandinavian countries that never established colonies in Africa or Asia. And, of course, we have Estonia and the Baltic States, which have individually and collectively played important roles in both the EU and NATO in spurring action by larger countries and then keeping them honest. This is a Lennart Meri moment. We need the maneuverability of an Inuit kayak, not the laborious turns of a supertanker . . . or an encumbered superpower.

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