



Trump's NATO comments, Tucker-Putin Interview & Cold War with China | Prof. Kuznick

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Zain Raza (ZR): Thank you for tuning in today, and welcome back to another episode of The Source. I'm your host, Zain Raza. And today I'll be talking to professor of history and the director at the Nuclear Studies Institute at American University, Professor Peter Kuznick. Professor Kuznick is also the author of many books, one of them include *The Untold History of the United States*. He wrote this book together with film director and Hollywood producer Oliver Stone. Peter, welcome back.

Peter Kuznick (PK): Glad to be with you, Zain. I wish the world were in better shape, though.

ZR: I hope so too. So let me start the discussion with a remark that former US President Donald Trump recently made at a campaign rally in South Carolina, which caused quite a stir in Germany and much of Europe. In this remark, Trump stated that should he return to the White House, he will not defend NATO members if they fail to meet their defense goals and that he would even encourage Russia to attack them. NATO members are currently meeting in Brussels and according to Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, 18 out of 31 NATO members will meet the 2% military target this year; a record number as well as a six fold increase from 2014. He also emphasized that European members cannot defend NATO alone, as 80% of the budget comes from North America. This comes at a time when NATO is conducting its largest military exercise in Europe since the Cold War, known as Steadfast Defender 2024, that will last until May 31st with the goal of deterring Russia from a possible attack. Around 90,000 soldiers from 31 NATO countries are taking part in this exercise, which includes naval air ground maneuvers across large parts of Europe. In Germany a further debate has flared up in much of the press about whether Germany or Europe as a whole should develop its own nuclear bomb. According to the German Press Agency, the German government will spend a record €73 billion this year on its military defense. All of this is happening in the context of the German economy being in recession and implementing tough austerity measures that are leading to large-scale discontent and protests in the transport and agriculture sectors. Germany also revised its economic growth for 2024

downwards from 1.3% to 0.3%, while the Russian economy, on the other hand, recorded growth of 3.6% 2023 and is also expected to continue growing in 2024. How do you assess these developments, in particular Trump's statements, the militarization of Europe and the erosion of the social safety net here?

PK: Well, I think you're safe for the time being. Scholz and Baerbock are saying that Germany's going to reach the 2% threshold. And so that means that Trump is not going to encourage Putin to invade Germany and punish you. You know, we're in a crazy situation, the United States. We have a choice at this point between Trump, who's an outright fascist, his nickname, Dementia Don, because he doesn't remember things and is so hawkish that even Putin just said that he prefers Biden over Trump because Trump is so reckless and unpredictable. And [inaudible] we try to win Trump, on the one hand, who makes these outlandish statements about NATO, and Russia attacking NATO countries, and Biden, who is a super hawk who thinks that there's a military solution to every conflict and who wants to spend unlimited amounts on to build up the militaries in Ukraine, certainly, and in Taiwan, and in Israel. So the United States is caught between a rock and a hard place or between a fascist out of his mind hawkish president who wants to withdraw the United States in some ways, and somebody who wants to further engage in a new Cold War. The United States is really in dismal shape in that regard. What Trump said, you know, one could make an intelligent critique of NATO, and I do that all the time. And I see NATO as more of a destructive force in the world than a constructive force in the world. But to call on Putin to attack NATO members because they're not reaching the 2% threshold is madness and is simply so irresponsible, so reckless, so thoughtless, that nobody would say that.

What we need is a new global architecture that will ensure everybody's safety and security and that will obviate the need for NATO, and this kind of polarization that's occurring. But that's not what Trump is talking about. And the Trump people, you know, the United States should be engaged in the world. The United States should be a force for peace and prosperity and progress and global development. But that's not what the Trump people are calling for. The Trump supporters are calling for a new kind of isolationism. Drawing the borders tighter and tighter, militarizing the borders in the United States, cutting back on the safety net and social programs, and cutting taxes for the wealthy. They've got a whole different vision than what I would see. So the problem is that the only forces or the main forces that are opposed to the US effort to really unleash this militarism on the world are the right wingers in the United States, the Trump supporters. Whereas this has historically been the left wing position in the United States. But what we've seen is this bizarre reversal where you've got Republicans, some of whom are still traditional hawks and want the United States to be the dominant force in the world, but a growing majority of Republicans are now Trumpists who will applaud anything that that madman says. And really, the response to Trump's call for Putin attacking the Europeans who don't pay their fair share, has been applauded. And the Lindsey Graham's of the world and the others who are usually these hawks, have fallen into line in large part. And then the Democrats, who have been the party of peace and reason and diplomacy are the ones now who are pushing for all this big defense, military spending. When we think of the ramifications of that for the Europeans, for Ukraine, for the Taiwanese, for the Gazans, this is

a bizarre kind of reversal. And it's hard for me as an American to get my head around how much the political landscape has changed in the United States and how little those of us who have progressive ideas and are looking for peaceful solutions to the problems, how little place we have in any of these debates right now, sadly; as the world gets more and more dangerous by the day really, even by the hour.

ZR: You mentioned a new global architecture. In the interview that American conservative political commentator Tucker Carlson recently conducted with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Putin talked about how he went to Bill Clinton and offered to join NATO as he wanted to integrate with the capitalist system. Putin also mentioned the long history of NATO expansion, despite the promises that were made, to the contrary. In addition, he talked about a 2014 coup d'etat that took place in Ukraine and that began what we now know as the Ukraine war. How did you look at this interview? And did you think that he provided an accurate assessment of the situation?

PK: He started off with a half hour history lesson; all of his complaints about Ukraine being a sovereign country. I mean, give it up already. Ukraine, they might have historical ties to Russia, but this obsession that Putin has with Ukraine being an illegitimate country is going nowhere and is not a justifiable basis for an invasion. There's a lot of things that Putin said. He's said a lot of what I consider legitimate national security concerns and complaints about the way Russia is treated from 1990 on. I mean, I share a lot of those concerns, but to use that to justify an invasion of another country is not acceptable. As Putin himself acknowledged, France and Germany and others were opposed to Ukraine joining NATO. So even though you might have had George W Bush and other hawks talking about the importance of Ukraine joining NATO, that was not going to happen. And a lot of the Russian narrative justifying the invasion is also specious. That said, the United States, while the invasion was, I say, unjustified, I say it was not unprovoked. And it was provoked by exactly what you're talking about, NATO expansion. They did give Gorbachev those verbal assurances in 1990, but Gorbachev never got it in writing. And before 1990 was even up, NATO was planning for expansion. It doesn't actually occurred till 1998, when you've got Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland joining NATO. But the seeds were sown much earlier in complete disregard for Russia's interests. But they figured Russia was so weak at that point they could kick it in the teeth, and Russia would not be able to respond. But even Yeltsin [inaudible]. American foreign policy experts, the George Cannon's and others warned that this was going to lead to war, potentially, if the United States continued this NATO expansion. Well, the United States did, and the Europeans went along in 2003. We expanded much further. And we've had expansion after expansion after expansion. That's outrageous. And that's wrong. And that was the broader context. The specifics and the timing were not that valid.

And so I think that Putin's response was a mix of important historical concerns and legitimate national security concerns and his own delusional thinking, justifying an invasion that is not only hurt Russia, but we look at, you know, we don't know the exact numbers of the casualties, but the estimates are 50,000, 60,000 Russians dead and another quarter of a million Russians injured. And most of those injured are amputees, or maybe close to half of

them, at least. So it is terrible, the toll that has taken on Russia. And the militarization of the economy, well, yeah, the GDP looks positive compared to many of the European countries, including Germany. In terms of real growth that people need, this military spending does not translate into raising people's standards of living and improving the safety net, the kinds of things that people really need. Now we see the consequences, though, because the Western plan to destroy the Russian economy, kicking them out of the SWIFT banking system, putting all these sanctions in has backfired. And who's it hurting? Germany; cutting off from Russian energy supplies. But now they not only announced Germany being in a recession, but also the United Kingdom is in a recession. Japan is in a recession. And so this policy that was intended to destroy the Russian economy, has even had a more devastating effect on many of the United States's closest allies.

So and then in terms of the other effect, to undermine the Russian war machine, it's not working. It's Ukraine that's not getting the armaments that it needs and the weapons systems to replace what it is losing, while Russia has geared up its military production and is actually in strong shape. So the United States, Biden is calling for this \$95 billion, more than \$60 billion to Ukraine, another 14 billion to Israel, 5 billion to Taiwan, more to spread in other parts of Asia. But in that same speech where he decried Republicans stalling on this, he said that the Republicans have got to step up to the plate and do what's responsible. He said, and look at it further, all of that money gets spent in the United States. And it gets spent in Arizona. It gets spent in New Hampshire. What is he saying? He's saying that this is a boondoggle for the US merchants of death. The war manufacturers, the military manufacturers; that's who really benefits from these wars. Every person who's killed, every weapon that's fired, every bomb that's dropped, makes one of these sons of bitches richer. And they're profiting off this. And that's a big part of the motivation. And it's not really discussed. And when Biden says that, it doesn't have the effect that it should. It doesn't get highlighted. It doesn't get talked about. Back in the 30s in the United States, the congressional hearings to cut off all profiteering in the event of war, to tax 99% of the profits that go to the war industries. And they were called merchants of death. And people talked about World War One and how these bastards made a killing out of the killing in World War One. We don't hear that now, but that's really a big part of the subtext of what's going on.

It's not the only thing. We still have hegemony. We still have the Western desire to destroy and weaken Russia. We still have Russia's own imperialistic tendencies. There is a lot going on. But that's not the discourse that we hear, certainly not in the United States now. And so you talk about the Tucker Carlson interview, it was a mixed bag. It immediately got rejected by the center and the left in the United States as an outlet for Russian propaganda. And what did Tucker Carlson get called? Hillary Clinton calls him a useful idiot. But Hillary Clinton is a useless warmonger. I'd rather be a useful idiot than a useless warmonger. And then Kinzinger, Adam Kinzinger calls him a traitor. And Tucker Carlson is not my favorite person. And I think that he often has very dangerous ideas, like his great replacement theory, really awful ideas, sometimes verging on fascism. But sometimes he's right on a lot of these issues, and he was trying to do something that needs to be done because, whenever Putin is heard, it's through a filter and a prism that demonises him. And the people who think that some of

what he says makes sense are not given a voice in American media. And so you turn on CNN and MSNBC, one admiral, one general, one foreign policy hawk, one establishment person after another. But anybody who's a critic does not get a voice anywhere on American mainstream media. So what do I think of him? I don't like Carlson, and I wish that Putin had been smart enough and brave enough to do that interview with Christiane Amanpour. Oliver and I went on her show, she's not so tough. And you push back against her, you can make your points. And if he did it with her, then it would be heard throughout the United States and would be taken so much more seriously. So even his call for negotiations, which is the right thing and which we're all, those of us who are progressive minded, say we need a cease fire. We need to sit down and negotiate because the situation is a disaster for not only the Russians, but the Ukrainians and for the entire world population.

And this militarization that you're talking about in Europe is not in the interests of the Europeans, but we see this coming out everywhere. So the Estonian intelligence services issued a report a couple of days ago warning that Russia has got its eyes not only on Ukraine, but after Ukraine, on Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland, Poland, but this is the war mongering that's going on. And that's the line in the United States that, if we let Putin have a victory in Ukraine, he's never going to stop. He's got this ambition to recreate the Russian Empire and to take over much of the world. So better to stop him there than to fight him here on America's shores. And of course, it's idiocy. And they've got no evidence and there's no reason to think that if Russia can barely defeat Ukraine, the fighting, we're almost two years into this now. Next week is going to be two years, and we've got pretty much a stalemate on the battlefield. And the Ukrainian army that's not able to resupply, that doesn't have enough manpower, I mean look at this. Russian manpower is three and a half times as great as Ukraine's. Russian armaments are far more than Ukraine's. The Russian economy is ten times the size of Ukraine's and Russia is still struggling on the battlefield to make any serious gains. On the other hand, Ukraine's much vaunted, counter-offensive went nowhere, and Russia is making slow, incremental gains at this point. And so what we've been you and I have been talking about for two years now, where we're likely to be a year from now is another half million kids and older people being killed and wounded and no decisive victory. The fantasy again in the US is that if Ukraine can hold on in 2024 and 2025, they can defeat the Russians. Bullshit. That's idiocy. It's nonsense. These people are bloodthirsty, and they are willing to let the Ukrainians bleed and die in unimaginable numbers, in order to continue their plan, to weaken Russia, to isolate Russia, and to build up the Western military spending. And that's a big part of what's going on now in Europe.

So the response to Trump's idiocy is to use that as an excuse to continue increasing Europe's military spending. And we see this not only in Europe. We see this in Japan, doubling its military spending. Britain is talking about increasing its nuclear arsenal by 40%. This whole discussion of the need for Europe to have its own nuclear weapons now, because the US can't be trusted, is to take the madness and go further with it. Do we really need to expand nuclear weapons? It's happening. We know that. The recent report in October of last year, the bipartisan Congressional Strategic Posture Commission issued a report saying that the United States has got to be in a position to defeat both China and Russia simultaneously in a two

front war. And how can we do it? By getting rid of all the limits in our nuclear arsenal and by outspending the Russians on nuclear weapons, increasing America's nuclear weapons. Three decades we've gone the other direction, decreasing the size of the nuclear arsenals. Now, what are we doing? Every nuclear power is modernizing, making their nuclear arsenals more efficient, more lethal. And now most of them are talking about increasing. And the excuse, in part, is not only Russia got the biggest nuclear arsenal and is so dangerous, but now China is increasing its nuclear arsenal. Why is China doing that? China is doing it because in 2018, the US strategic posture said that the United States main threat is no longer the global war on terror, it's Russia and China. And that the United States now is focusing much more seriously on China as a nuclear threat. And China wants to have a second strike capability. And they're afraid with the US missile defense and US targeting, that the US can challenge China's second strike capability. And so China has now increased its nuclear arsenal from 200 to, some say already to 500, with a thousand is the goal by 2030, 1500 by 2035. So what does that mean? – that China now wants to join the United States and Russia as the countries that could end life on the planet, effectively. Xi Jinping looks with envy. Helen Caldicott years ago, coined the phrase missile envy; a play on Freud's penis envy. And it looks like now Xi Jinping, they have missile envy when he looks at Biden and Putin and the fact that they could kill everybody on the planet, and he wants to have that capability also. I mean, we're going the wrong direction. We're dealing with madmen all over. The Europeans now want to join that game; some of them, at least.

ZR: You mentioned China, longtime US official and extreme China hawk, Kurt Campbell was appointed number two in the State Department. In addition, the US is going to deploy five of its eleven aircraft carriers in the Pacific. In light of what you mentioned and these developments, how do you think China will view these developments?

PK: Well, China already, as I was saying, is viewing them quite ominously. To the many American planners, Ukraine is a distraction. And Israel is even a greater distraction now. Because the real goal was to combat China, as even Putin said recently. The Americans are not so concerned about Russia. It's China they're concerned about, because by certain measures, the Chinese economy has already overtaken the American economy. And almost all the experts say by the end of this decade, China will be out producing the US. In terms of GDP, they don't compare yet. But in terms of overall productive capability, they do. And we saw when the United States became the world's leading industrial manufacturer in the 1890s, how did the US respond? The Spanish-American War, overthrowing the outgoing Aguinaldo rebellion in the Philippines. The United States went from being a democratic force on the world stage to being the leading counter revolutionary force on the world stage. And now China is going to be in a position, it's flexing its muscles in certain ways and saying that after the century of humiliation China wants its do on the world stage. But the Americans, so we've talked about the fact that Biden came to power with 18 now 17 top officials from the Center for New American Security. Well, the Center for American Security was founded a few years back by Kurt Campbell and Michele Flournoy. And Kurt Campbell is the leading China hawk. And the people around Biden are even more China hawks than they are Russia hawks. And because they know China poses the real threat, even though Russia poses the

nuclear threat. And so appointing Kurt Campbell to be number two in the State Department is sending a clear signal that the leading China hawk is now the number two behind Anthony Blinken.

It used to be Wendy Sherman, and Wendy Sherman was part of that world, but she was not nearly the vocal hawk militarist that her replacement, Victoria Nuland, was. Victoria Nuland was serving there on a temporary basis, and she's really, in many ways, the brains behind the coup in 2014 that you mentioned earlier in Ukraine. And that's her obsession, it is Ukraine and defeating Russia. But now she's been knocked back down to number three and the number two is Kurt Campbell. Which is sending the signal that the United States has not lost its laser focus on Taiwan. Taiwan, as part of this first island chain. Oliver and I did a 90 minute interview this week, a couple of days ago, with the Asahi Shimbun reporter from Okinawa. The Asahi Shimbun is the Japanese equivalent of the New York Times, and we wanted to talk about Okinawa, the base relocation from Futenma to Henoko and the US plans for maintaining its military forces in Okinawa. You know that Okinawa represents 6/10 of 1% of Japan's landmass and houses about 60% of America's military bases. And so it's crucial, but it's crucial as part of that first island chain to stop China. So you've got Okinawa, you've got Korea, you've got Taiwan, you've got Guam. And this is a key for America's strategic thinking and planning. So Taiwan and that really, the real threat, as especially the fear is that if the US allows Ukraine to be defeated or if the US follows through on what Biden wants and becomes a neo isolationist country, and the US does not provide global leadership, then China is going to march into Taiwan and take Taiwan. Putin is going to march into Estonia and Finland. Israel has already marched into Gaza. The world is on hair trigger right now, and it's just very, very dangerous, as we've been discussing. We haven't even mentioned the nightmare in Gaza.

ZR: Let me get to that. Let us switch gears to the Middle East, in particular, the situation around Israel and Gaza. Let me recap the latest developments for our viewers. Since October 7th attack of Hamas that killed at least 1200 Israelis, that includes around 370 military personnel, Israel launched an air and ground assault in Gaza, first in the north and then towards Khan Younis in the south, which thus far has killed at least 28,000 Palestinians, the majority of them being women and children. It is now being anticipated that Israel is going to expand its assault towards Rafah, where 1.4 million Palestinians are stuck who fled from the north and have nowhere to go. Despite international warnings and condemnation from international institutions such as the World Health Organization, United Nations, as well as European countries such as France, Spain and Ireland, it seems Israel will go ahead. During the German foreign minister visit Annalena Baerbock, she stated let me quote her here: "The safety of the people in Israel from the terror of Hamas is just as important as the survival of the Palestinians. Both belong together. We therefore believe that a further ceasefire is needed", unquote. This conflict has also taken an international dimension with countries such as Iran, Yemen, Lebanon, US, Britain and Israel involved in airstrikes or missile exchanges. Then we have the genocide case of South Africa against Israel at the International Court of Justice, as well as Nicaragua threatening to sue Western countries that are supporting Israel. Recently, a Dutch court also ordered the ban of export of F-35 fighter jets parts to Israel, a

case that the three human rights groups brought forward. The court explicitly stated that, quote, "Israel does not take sufficient account of the consequences for the civilian population when conducting its attacks", unquote. Can you talk about the overall situation in Israel and Gaza, as well as in the region? Secondly, in your view, do you think conditions are ripe for a third World war?

PK: Well, Zain, you outlined it very well; sadly, unfortunately. Even when I look at the nightmare of what occurred on October 7th, the brutality, the viciousness, the ugliness of that Hamas attack, you pick up the New York Times, there's no context at all. There's no justification for what Hamas did. Killing civilians is never justifiable – unbelievable atrocities. So I despise Hamas in many ways. However, talk about provocation. We've got decades of the humiliation of the Palestinian population. And the reason why Hamas was able to do that is because Netanyahu was, number one, dividing Israeli society so that he can have this judicial reform so that his extreme right wingers, Israeli fascists, in many cases, could maintain their power there and that he could support Hamas enough so that there would never be a two state solution. I mean, this was a nightmare that was brought upon the Israelis by Netanyahu's own dismissing the threat from Hamas. We knew that the Israelis had the game plan, the war plans for what Hamas actually carried out on October 7th. They had those plans a year before. They also saw the Gazans that Hamas was training to carry it out, and they ignored it. Not only they ignored it, but Netanyahu pulled Israeli troops away from that border and moved them to the West Bank to support the atrocities that Israeli settlers were perpetrating against the population in the West Bank. This was a nightmare of Israel's own creation. Israel elected Netanyahu, kept him in power and then he was responsible, in part, for what happened. That doesn't exonerate Hamas in any way. But the Israeli response is so egregious, so unconscionable, so horrific. You turn on even the television in the United States now, I mean, there's some other things, Trump's idiocy has knocked some of this off the TV screens, but the atrocities in Gaza really knocked Taiwan and Ukraine off the front page in the United States. And people are seeing the horrors of the people in Gaza uncovering in the rubble their children and their parents and their siblings and their friends; the heartbreak of it.

And I was recently in Doha and I was recently in Hanoi, and the images in those places are even more extreme and more explicit and graphic and heartbreaking than what we've seen in the United States. As a result, the American population has regurgitated over the US support for Israel. Biden's blanket support. And you think of it from Biden's perspective, he's been in the tank for Israel for decades, not only getting lots of money from the Israel lobby, but defending Israel's interests. And he's such an old fool at this point. He says that Trump represents a threat to American democracy. He's going to overthrow the Constitution. Well, Biden, by supporting Israel so blindly rather than cutting off military aid as he should be doing, is giving an opening to Trump to get reelected, because young Americans, like my students, hate what the US is doing in defending Israel. People of Color in the United States hate what the US is doing, and maybe they're not going to come out and vote for Trump, but a lot of them are not going to vote for Biden. They're saying a plague on both your houses. And we hate Trump's fascism and xenophobia, but we also hate Biden's militarism. But Biden is willing to say that Trump can get back into office so that he can keep giving money to

Israel, even though much of the world views this as genocide, and everybody views it as an unthinkable atrocity. Even Joseph Burrell, the EU Foreign Policy Chief, has said that maybe it's time for the US to cut off military aid to Israel. And we know how hawkish he's been on Ukraine. And so Biden now has lost all credibility and moral authority when it comes to even supporting Ukraine and saying condemning Russia's attack on infrastructure and killing of civilians in Ukraine when Israel is doing it on a far worse scale in Gaza. You know, you look at that, they are destroying the living capabilities of people in Gaza. We talk about Rafah and those more than 1 million refugees there who've been driven out of other parts of Gaza to go to Rafah now, they're living in tents. They don't have food, they don't have water. They don't have health care. And so this nightmare that's been created that the US is supporting has done more to undermine the US moral authority in the world than Trump's rantings and ravings, which are not official policy. While what the US is doing in Gaza, is official policy is being carried out on a day to day basis. But what Trump's talking about is only what might happen in the future.

ZR: Peter Kuznick, author and professor of history. Thank you so much for your time today.

PK: Thank you Zain. It's always great to talk to you.

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