

INTERVIEW: DR. ANDREY KORTUNOV

Will the U.S.-Russian Strategic Dialogue Be a Step Back from War?

The following is an edited transcript of the interview with Andrey Kortunov conducted by Harley Schlanger of the Schiller Institute and EIR on January 6, 2022. Dr. Kortunov is the Director General of the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), a prestigious and important institute in shaping Russian foreign policy. Dr. Kortunov has participated in several Schiller Institute conferences.

Harley Schlanger: We're at a moment of heightened tension between the U.S. and NATO with Russia, but also on the eve of a number of dialogues which have a potential for a breakthrough, and we want to explore this with Dr. Andrey Kortunov. Andrey, thank you for joining us today.

Andrey Kortunov: You're welcome.

The Growing East-West Tension: The Russian View

Schlanger: The tension that's been growing in the most recent period can be traced back to the Dec. 3rd leak in the *Washington Post*, claiming that the Russians and President Putin are about to invade Ukraine. This has led to several discussions—two talks, in fact, videoconference talks—between Presidents Putin and Biden. And there is a demand from President Putin that there be a discussion about legally binding agreements for Russian national security.

I'd like to start by just asking you, why do you think at this time, there's been increased tensions? I don't mean to say it just started Dec. 3rd, but we've seen a constant drumbeat since then.

Dr. Kortunov: Well, it's hard to tell what exactly triggered the current escalation, but I think it was simmering for some time. If you look at the Russian side of the equation, of course, there has been a growing disappointment with the performance of the Normandy Format [the Germany-France-Russia-Ukraine discussions since 2014], and I think that right now, there are



Dr. Andrey Kortunov

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very clear frustrations about the ability of this group to lead to the full implementation of the Minsk agreements [of 2014].

There were hopes when Mr. [Vlodymyr] Zelenskyy came to power in Kiev, that he would be very different from his predecessor, Mr. [Petro] Poroshenko, but at the end of the day, it turned out that it was more of the same. He introduced new legislation on languages, which implies denaturalization of the use of the Russian language in Ukraine; he banned a couple of important and influential opposition media; and he prosecuted some of the Russia-friendly politicians in his country, so the perception was that probably we cannot expect too much from him.

Likewise, there was growing frustration with Paris and Berlin, in terms of their ability to use their leverage in Kiev to make the Ukrainian side implement the Minsk agreements. And an indicator of this was the publication of an exchange of letters between Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov and his peers in Paris and in Berlin—a very unorthodox, unusual step for Russian diplomacy—which suggests that Russia cannot really count on Berlin and Paris as honest brokers in this context.

So, I think ultimately, the decision was made that we should bring it to the attention of President Biden, because President Biden might be a tough negotiator, but he at least delivers on his commitments. And Biden has demonstrated that he is ready to continue a dialogue with Moscow. They had a meeting with President Putin in June of last year in Geneva, and I think that the decision was made that we should count on the United States more than on our European partners.

This is how I see the situation on the Russian side. And of course, there are also concerns about what Putin called a “military cultivation” of the Ukrainian territory by the North Atlantic Alliance.

Looking at the situation from Moscow, one can see that although Ukraine is not a member of the NATO alliance, there is more and more military cooperation between Ukraine and countries like the United States, and Germany, and the United Kingdom, and Turkey, and that changes the equation in the East of Ukraine; and I think that the concerns in Moscow are that at some point, President Zelenskyy, or whoever is in charge in Kiev, might decide to go for a military solution of the Donbass problem, and this is definitely not something that Moscow would like to see. So, in certain ways, the Russian policy in Ukraine is that of deterrence, to deny Kiev a military solution for the problem of the East.

Signals

Schlanger: Now, you wrote that you don’t believe that President Putin intends to invade Ukraine, that it would be an enormous cost to Russia, and that, in fact, sending troops to the border which was within Russia, may be in all this increased tension, may be designed to send a signal to the West—you just mentioned France and Germany. But do you think the West is getting the signal? Annalena Baerbock, the German Foreign Minister, was just in Washington and she and Blinken were rattling their sabers, a little bit, again. Stoltenberg of NATO continues to make very strong statements.



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Map of the Russian-speaking Donbass region in southeastern Ukraine, showing the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.

Do you think the signal is being recognized, or it’s reaching the people that need to understand what President Putin is insisting on?

Dr. Kortunov: Well, I think that it really depends on how you define “recognition” of the signal: Because on the one hand, indeed, you’re absolutely right, we observe a lot of rather militant rhetoric coming from the West, and it is not limited to Washington and to Berlin only. We see some other Western countries, where they make very strong statements, denying Russian veto power over decisions that are made, or can be made within the NATO alliance.

But on the other hand, you can also observe that there is a readiness, at least, to start talking to Moscow, and this is exactly what Mr. Putin apparently wants. His point is that if we do not generate a certain tension, you will not listen to us, you will not even hear us. So, we are forced to make all these noises in order to get heard, if not listened to. So, they are ready to meet. I am not too optimistic about potential breakthroughs that can be reached within these meetings, but the idea to meet and to discuss a band of issues is already something that President Putin can claim as his foreign policy accomplishment.

Schlanger: Now, in the United States, the media are continuing to paint President Putin as an autocrat, Russia as an authoritarian nation, and they’re sort of missing one of the broader points here, which is that we’re looking at something which could be described as a reverse Cuban Missile Crisis. And I just went through President Kennedy’s national television address of Oct. 22, 1962, where he made a point very parallel to what President Putin is saying, which is that no nation can tolerate offensive weapons that close to its border, as the Soviet weapons were to the U.S. in Cuba. Do you think this is something that is part of the consideration from the standpoint of President Putin and the Russian government?

Dr. Kortunov: Well, I think that, again, you’re

right, here. I think that definitely President Putin implies that there are certain rules of the game, maybe not codified rules of the game, that should be observed. And I think that when we're talking about the U.S. position, there is a standard U.S. feeling of exclusiveness—we can do it because we are good guys, so we cannot harbor any evil intentions, so our missiles are fine. These are peacekeeping missiles; they cannot constitute any threat to Russia or to anyone else. But if you guys put your missiles in the vicinity of our borders, since you are bad guys, it means your missiles are also bad, and that they should be removed.

Of course, the United States pursues this policy of double standards for a very long time, and I understand why the United States is doing that, but I think that such double standards can no longer work in our world. So, if we agree that there should be some constraints, and that security interests of major powers should be taken into consideration, then it should be applied universally. It should not be applied to the United States only, but it should be applied to Russia, to China, to some other countries as well.

A New Security Architecture

Schlanger: Now, you've spoken of your view that there needs to be a new security architecture, to replace the existing bloc structure which seems to be left over from the Cold War. Just a few days ago, the permanent five nations of the UN Security Council [China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States] issued a statement, which I think was quite extraordinary, that “nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought,” which is an echo of the discussion between Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev back in October 1986 in Reykjavik. Is this the kind of thing that can move toward a new security architecture, or recognition of something like this? And what kind of changes would you like to see, in order to create stability and ease the tensions?

Dr. Kortunov: Well, I would say that this is an important first step, and the question is whether this step will have any continuation. Because it is relatively easy—though it is difficult in itself, but it is, in relative terms, it is easier—to make a general statement, without making any specific commitments, than to go for something more practical.

I guess that one of the problems we see in Europe, in particular, is that NATO has monopolized the security agenda in Europe, and that implies that if you are not



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“Any European system which excludes Russia is very likely to be very fragile.” —Andrey Kortunov. Shown: Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation.

within NATO, you have no stakes in the European security: You are not a stakeholder. And if you're not a stakeholder, you are tempted to become a spoiler. And that is something that I see as a major problem.

So, in my view, the key goal should be not to reverse the NATO enlargement, which is not possible, I think. But rather to deprive NATO of its monopoly position on European security matters. That might imply giving more power and more authority to more inclusive European institutions, like the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), for example, which really needs some additional flesh on its bones. It has to be empowered; it has to become a real European multilateral organization that can take a part of the security agenda. There might be some other agreements, and some other arrangements that would diversify our security portfolio in Europe. But I think that definitely, any European system which excludes Russia by definition, is likely to be very—not very stable, let me put it in this way, and fragile, and it will have high maintenance costs. So, I think it's better to have Russia in, rather than to have Russia out.

Afghanistan: An Arena for Cooperation

Schlanger: In an [article](#) you wrote recently, “A Non-Alarmist Forecast for 2022,” one of the things you talked about is finding areas of cooperation. And you say one of the most urgent of these is Afghanistan for obvious reasons: the refugee crisis, the potential

for radicalization of people if the humanitarian crisis deepens—as it is; David Beasley of the World Food Program just said yesterday, almost 9 million Afghans are at the verge of starvation.

Do you see a potential, then, through the Extended Troika—China, Pakistan, Russia, United States—to do something? And as you know, Mrs. Helga Zepp-LaRouche of the Schiller Institute has called for an “Operation Ibn Sina” to use the healthcare situation as the basis for beginning, not just emergency aid, but building up a modern healthcare system in Afghanistan. Is this some area, where you could see some cooperation?

Dr. Kortunov: Afghanistan strikes me as one of a very few places in the world, where I see no major contradictions between the East and the West, between Russia and China on the one hand, and the United States and the European Union on the other. I think that everybody around Afghanistan, and also if we consider overseas powers, everybody is interested in seeing Afghanistan as a stable place, as a place which will not harbor international terrorism, as a place which will stop being a major drug producer and drug exporter to neighboring countries: So, these interests are essentially the same.

I would definitely call for as broad an international coalition to deal with Afghanistan as possible; and this coalition should involve not only neighboring countries—which are clearly very important—but also countries which have the stakes in Afghanistan. We can talk about the European Union which remains the largest assistance provider to Afghanistan, even today; we can talk about the United States with its residential influence in Afghanistan; we can talk about Pakistan, Turkey, Iran, and the Central Asian states.

So, I think the broader the coalition we have in dealing with Afghanistan the better it is, because it would mean that we have more leverage in dealing with the regime in Kabul and that also implies that we can agree on the red lines that this regime should not cross if it wants to maintain its international legitimacy.

So, I think Afghanistan can be regarded not only as a challenge, but also as an opportunity for a multilateral, international cooperation. We can talk about the Extended Troika. We can talk about the SCO [Shanghai Cooperation Organization] as a platform to discuss Afghanistan. We can talk about other formats, but formats are just tools in our hands. The key issue is to agree on what we expect from the Taliban, and what we can give the Taliban in exchange.

The Russia-China Alliance

Schlanger: Now, another area I want to take up with you is the Russia-China alliance. This is causing sleepless nights for a lot of the geopoliticians who see this as primarily a military alliance and it seems as though they’re ignoring the economic benefits of Eurasian integration, including potential benefits for the West. What are your thoughts on this? Is this going to continue the alliance, and is it more than just a reaction to the targeting of Moscow and Beijing by the Western war-hawks?

Dr. Kortunov: I think that these days, everybody is pivoted to Asia, Asia is becoming an important driver of the global economic development, and you cannot ignore China, no matter where you sit—whether you sit in Moscow, or Brussels, or in Washington—you have to keep in mind what’s going on in Beijing. So, the Russian-Chinese cooperation has its own logic. We have arguably the longest land border in the world, and definitely, there is a natural complementarity of the Russian and the Chinese economies. Trade is growing pretty fast: I think if you take last year, it was about \$140 billion and there is a lot of potential there.

There are also common interests: there are interests that the two countries share in terms of Eurasia, and we discussed Afghanistan; definitely this is where Russian and Chinese interests mostly coincide. We can talk about the situation in Northeast Asia, and again, here, there is a noble effort for Russian and Chinese interests.

As far as the United States is concerned, I think definitely both countries are exposed to political and military and economic pressures from Washington. The Biden administration continues the policy of dual containment targeted at both Beijing and Moscow; and that is an additional factor that brings Russia and China closer to each other.

But let me emphasize once again that the Russian-Chinese cooperation has its own dynamics, its own logic and this logic does not depend fully on the position of the United States though this position is important for politicians both in Russia and in China.

Schlanger: I want to come back to the P5 statement on not fighting nuclear wars, because we’ve raised this before in discussion with you. President Putin in January of 2020 proposed a P5 summit—, so that it’s broader than just the United States and Russia. Do you still see this as a venue that would be an ap-

propriate one for taking up some of these broader issues?

Dr. Kortunov: I think it would be important, at least, in order to reactivate the United Nations Security Council. Because unfortunately, we see on many important issues, the council cannot really deliver, because there are very clear disagreements between its permanent members and that prevents the council from taking a consolidated action. So, I think if they discuss some of the regional issues at such a meeting; if they discuss issues like nonproliferation, or the fight against international terrorism, or let's say, energy or food security, that would be helpful.

Of course, the P5 cannot decide on every single international issue. They cannot resolve all the global problems without participation of other states, but you have to start somewhere, and maybe a P5 meeting, face to face hopefully, will be this important starting point. If it is successful, then we can complement it with other formats, for example, when we talk about the economic dimension, we can do a lot within the G20 framework, and that should complement the efforts of the Security Council. Some issues can be discussed in the framework of bilateral U.S.-Russian negotiations, some of them will require multilateral discussions, in multilateral formats.

So, formats might be different. The question is whether they have the political will to pursue this agenda, whether they are ready to go beyond their conventional wisdom and think strategically.

Schlanger: And on this question then of bilateral discussion, do you think there's a prospect for progress on nuclear arms discussions in the year ahead?

Dr. Kortunov: I think that if there is a will, there is a way, of course. But it will be an uphill battle for both sides because it's not clear what we could have after the New START agreement expires in about four years from now.

The arms race is changing. It's no longer about numbers, it's no longer about warheads and delivery means. It's about quantity, it's about precision, it's about prompt strike, it's about autonomous lethal weapons, it's about cyborgs, it's about space, and we



WFP/Jon Dumont

Drought and war, and the West's cut-off of aid and freezing of funds, have pushed Afghanistan to the brink of widespread famine. Here, an Afghan man tries to sell household items so he can buy food.

still have to find ways to counter these very dangerous, destabilizing trends in the nuclear arms race. On top of that, we have a very serious problem of how to multilateralize strategic arms control, because the lower we go—I mean “we,” the United States and Russian Federation—the lower we go, the more important nuclear capacities of a third country become, and we have to engage them in this way or another in the arms control of the future.

So, there are many issues here. I will say I'm probably pessimistic about the future of arms control, but it will require a lot of commitment, a lot of patience and a lot of stamina.

Schlanger: Somewhat pressing right now, which is the situation in Kazakhstan: We were talking last night, given the upcoming meetings and the potential for a breakthrough, that maybe we should be watching for

something coming out of the blue that could be a destabilizing influence. And there are elements of what's happening in Kazakhstan which are coherent with what we've seen with color revolutions in the past, including Western intervention into the affairs of other countries. Do you have any reading on this? Any thoughts on that?

Dr. Kortunov: Well, it's hard to tell. It's probably too early to jump to conclusions, because of course, there will be people in the West who would applaud the kind of developments in Kazakhstan. At the same time, for instance, if you look at large American oil and mining companies, they had a pretty good business in Kazakhstan, and they cannot be interested in a political destabilization there. So, I'm not sure that the United States has been directly involved in staging a color revolution in Kazakhstan. But definitely, there are some external players, that might be interested in turmoil and mutiny in Kazakhstan.

Having said that, I should underscore that there are some fundamental domestic roots of the problem: Definitely the leadership of the country was too slow to react to the social and economics demands of the population. They promised political reforms, but again,

they dragged their feet on this issue, which triggered the events that we now observe.

I can only hope that everybody will learn appropriate lessons. The state authorities should learn how important it is to keep an eye on the changing moods of society, and protesters should also learn that the borderline between peaceful protests and violent extremism might be murky. We now see that already hundreds of people, unfortunately, were killed in Kazakhstan. There were many cases of looting and vandalism, and definitely this is something that has to be stopped.

Schlanger: Well, Andrey, thank you very much for your time and for joining us today.

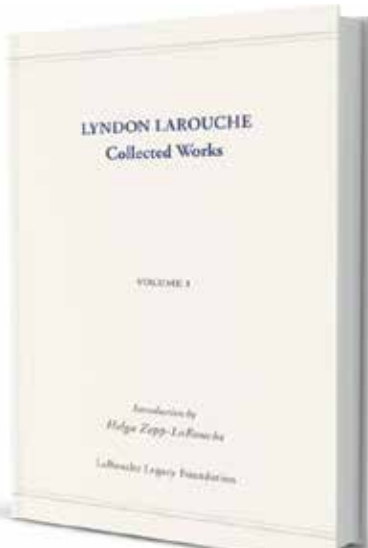
Dr. Kortunov: *Thank you.*

Schlanger: As these meetings take place and we see new developments, I'd like to be able to have an opportunity to speak with you again and see how these things are moving.

Dr. Kortunov: My pleasure, thank you.

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