PULLING BACK FROM THE ABYSS

The global consequences of the war in Ukraine

ANDREI SAKHAROV RESEARCH CENTER FOR DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT
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FOREWORD

The following report attempts to provide a concise reflection of the proceedings of the Fifteenth International Sakharov Conference, which took place in Vilnius on May 21-22, 2025. The conference came at a time when the full-scale war in Ukraine had entered its third year and the security situation in Europe became increasingly complex. While most of the NATO members in Europe had already significantly increased their defense budget, it was also clear that Russia had no intention to end the war and was using every possible means to test the resilience of NATO and destabilize the political situation in an ever increasing number of countries. The conference was followed by a closed session during which several dozen Western military experts met with two dozen active Ukrainian military with direct frontline experience to discuss the military, medical and psychological consequences of the changing face of warfare. Innovations and the increasing use of drones, robots and other technological innovations resulted in a rapidly and constantly changing military reality which also threatened to affect the balance of power between NATO and Russia.

The conference was also the first in a series of events that focus on the Helsinki Accords, that were signed fifty years earlier and created a security system in post-war Europe. The Accords were signed in 1975 to prevent exactly that, what is happening now right before our eyes: the violation of internationally accepted borders, the denial of the sovereignty of a European nation and a war of destruction of a magnitude not seen since the Second World War. Fifty years after the signing of the Helsinki Accords, they appear to be dead and buried.

The conference not only focused on Europe, but also on the global consequences of the war in Ukraine. Of particular interest were the developments in the Pacific. Here we witness an ever growing threat on the part of Russia's main military hardware provider, North Korea.

At the same time the People's Republic of China cleverly continues to implement a long-term policy of professed "neutrality," while at the same time making maximum use of the political and military standoff between Russia and the West. The conference highlighted the fact that while the conflict dominates policy in Europe, it has an impact on other parts of the world as well and embodies a significant risk of becoming a global one.

During the last session, the conference also looked at the policy makers themselves, with a series of presentations discussing the psychology of politicians and rulers, and the influence of (mental) health on their decision making.

A new feature of this Sakharov conference was the introduction of "young challengers" in the program, allowing representatives of the younger generation to challenge speakers with extensive careers in their field of specialty, thereby making the discussions more lively and interesting. It is a feature that we definitely will be using in future events as well, and which very much interlinks with the Young Change-Makers program of the Andrei Sakharov Center.

In this report, we try to provide you with a kaleidoscope of the many presentations and discussions that focused on the above mentioned issues. We hope it provides you with a good understanding of the complex and rather disturbing issues that we face today.

Robert van Voren

IVAN KRASTEV

Ivan Krastev is the chairman of the Centre for Liberal Strategies and a permanent fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM) in Vienna. A leading political thinker and Financial Times contributing editor, he serves on several international boards and is the author of ***The Light That Failed: A Reckoning, After Europe,*** *and* ***Is It Tomorrow, Yet? How the Pandemic Changes Europe.***

Appearing online for his keynote address, Ivan Krastev reflected on the current global situation through the perspective and legacy of Andrei Sakharov. He argued that Sakharov's vision of a peaceful international community, shaped by a belief in convergence toward liberal democracy, has been challenged. While some theorists believed that similarity among nations would bring peace, others, like René Girard, warned that wanting the same things leads to conflict.

At the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, there was hope that this aggression might reinforce liberal internationalism, and the UN General Assembly's first vote reflected this. Yet, in the global public imagination—particularly in postcolonial contexts—Ukraine's struggle was not widely seen as analogous to anti-colonial resistance. What began as a seemingly global conflict is now largely perceived as a European one, highlighting a fragmentation in historical memory among people who were not ready to see decolonization struggles on the European continent.

Krastev pointed out that we are indeed in the era of nationalism that is assuming two different forms. This reshapes global politics not as a clash between nationalism and globalism, but between two competing nationalisms. In fact, Trump embodies a "real-estate-style" nationalism, viewing peoples as tenants who can be moved from their land. While his rise certainly strengthened far-right movements in other countries, it also inspired a different form of nationalism in some countries—a sort of progressive nationalism that focuses on sovereignty and dignity.

Finally, Krastev highlighted the connection between one element that is characteristic of far-right movements but, unexpectedly, also represents the justification for the war in Ukraine: demographic anxiety—a key driver of current political instability. Aging populations, low birth rates, and anti-immigration sentiments have created a widespread crisis, visible in both democratic and authoritarian regimes, and there are no policies effectively addressing this issue. Russia's war in Ukraine is not a war over land, but over people—and understanding this "population war" is essential in shaping future domestic and international policy.

MICHEL ELTCHANINOFF

What is Putin Trumpism?

Michel Eltchaninoff is a French philosopher, essayist, and writer, known for his works that explore philosophy, political theory, and the intersection of these subjects with contemporary issues. One of his most notable works is ***Inside the Mind of Vladimir Putin*** *where he analyzes the Russian president's use of philosophical ideas to justify his political actions.*

In his keynote speech, Michel Eltchaninoff explored the ideological and strategic links between *Putinism* and *Trumpism*, presenting them as interconnected threats to liberal democracy.

Eltchaninoff described *Putinism* as a complex, sometimes contradictory ideology rooted in four pillars: Soviet nostalgia, conservative values, a distinct Russian path of development, and *Eurasianism*. Putin draws from nationalist thinkers and uses history to justify imperial ambitions, particularly towards Ukraine. His rhetoric suggests a messianic mission for Russia to resist Western decadence and liberalism through war and territorial expansion.

In contrast, *Trumpism* lacks a coherent ideology but is driven by personal convictions: the supremacy of business deals, wealth as a sign of virtue, and contempt for elites. Trump embraces populism as popularity, surrounding himself with far-right ideologues, libertarians, and religious conservatives. Eltchaninoff noted that Trump's second term would likely be even more aggressive.

The two figures converge on several key points: disdain in Europe, hostility toward liberalism, and the belief in the right of great powers to reshape the world order. Eltchaninoff argued that Trump, fascinated by Putin, has internalized much of the Russian leader's worldview, contributing to a global shift towards authoritarianism. He warned that Putin has not merely influenced Trump but helped shape him as a geopolitical tool to undermine the West from within. Trump, on the other hand, is less a free actor and more a product of a long-term Russian strategy.

Eltchaninoff concluded with a stark warning: we are entering a world driven by competition for resources and power, where democracy risks being discarded. The real danger lies not only in external aggression, but in the erosion of democratic values from within. To counter this, citizens must reflect critically, defend democratic principles, and resist the allure of authoritarian "strongmen."

PANEL I:
The war in Ukraine and the changed political reality in Europe

The first panel, moderated by **Janet Gunn**, brought together experts with very different backgrounds who were called to discuss the topic “The war in Ukraine and the changed political reality in Europe.”

YAROSLAV HRYTSAK

Yaroslav Hrytsak is Ukrainian historian and public intellectual. He is professor at the Ukrainian Catholic University (Lviv, Ukraine) where he is director of Petro Jacyk Program for the Study of Modern Ukrainian History and Society.

SÁNDOR SEREMET

Sándor Seremet is senior research fellow at the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, and at the Eurasia Center of John von Neumann University.

MICHAEL ROHSCHÜRMANN

Dr. Michael Rohschürmann, M.A., is a seasoned expert in civil security and Islamic studies, with over two decades of experience in both civilian and military roles, lecturer of modern Islam at several German universities and a Senior Fellow at the Institute for Security Policy at Kiel University.

NATALIA CHABAN

Natalia Chaban is a professor in the Department of Media and Communication at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand, Director of the UC research center Public Diplomacy and Political Communication Forum, President of the Ukrainian Studies Association of Australia and New Zealand, and a founding co-editor of Australian and New Zealand Journal of European Studies.

OLENA PROTSENKO

Olena Protsenko is a human rights lawyer working for the Armed Conflict Unit at the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). Born and raised in the east of Ukraine, Olena has been specializing in the rights of war victims in Ukraine since 2015.

The panel was kicked off by Professor **Yaroslav Hrytsak**, who argued that Ukraine has long been central to European geopolitics. From a historical perspective, he compared the "Ukrainian question" to the Jewish or Polish questions of the 19th century, stressing the impossibility of implementing a "final solution." The only viable approach, he argued, is pragmatic and based on the existence of an independent state, not part of a wider empire. Historically treated as a geopolitical "borderland of the borderland," it is now evident that peace in Ukraine is crucial for security in Europe, turning this local conflict into an international issue. For the first time in history, however, Ukraine enjoys consistent support from the West, and now more than ever it has become a highly homogeneous country. Recalling the fall of the Soviet Union, Hrytsak highlighted the importance of dissent and resistance, describing Ukraine as a dissident nation—one that, sharing common objectives with the EU, may now more easily envision its European integration.

Drawing on the theme of Ukrainian foreign relations, Dr **Sándor Seremet** addressed the complexities of Ukrainian–Hungarian bilateral relations emphasizing that, despite political tensions, Hungary remains a committed partner to Ukraine. While political and media narratives have sometimes fueled misunderstandings, Hungary has provided substantial humanitarian, economic, and infrastructural support to Ukraine since the onset of the war. This includes accepting over a million refugees delivering medical and energy assistance and maintaining strong intelligence cooperation. Hungary's stance on withholding direct military aid is offset by indirect support via NATO and defense-related industry. Seremet stressed that Hungary condemns Russian aggression and supports Ukraine's sovereignty. He called for renewed dialogue, emphasizing trust-building and post-war societal healing as essential next steps. The long-term vision is of a strong, stable Ukraine as a vital neighbor for Hungary's own security and regional prosperity.

Considering the question from a very different angle, Dr **Michael Rohschürmann** explored the disconnect between modern democratic values and the psychological and cultural needs of military personnel in wartime. Drawing from personal experience and historical insight, he argued that true military readiness extends beyond hardware and budgets. It requires rituals, traditions, and shared identity to build group cohesion. In Germany, skepticism toward military symbolism, rooted in historical trauma, has undermined these vital practices. Yet such practices, like drill exercises, are not outdated relics but psychologically necessary tools that help soldiers transition between peace and war. He proposed creating a pan-European military culture rooted in shared values and traditions to strengthen unity among allied forces. Sherman also warned against treating international norms like "rules-based order" as immovable truths, arguing that they must be upheld with intention. Ultimately, military traditions should humanize – not glorify – war, and support the emotional resilience of those who fight.

Professor **Natalia Chaban** examined the evolution of EU's cultural diplomacy toward Ukraine since 2021 and how it shifted from promoting cultural understanding to protecting culture as a strategic, security-related asset. The Russian invasion revealed how heritage can be weaponized, destroyed, distorted, or exploited as part of hybrid warfare. Her international research network studied how Ukraine is portrayed in the cultural narratives of global South media. Findings show that while sympathy toward Ukraine is widespread, Russia is often not seen as the aggressor. Each country frames Ukraine's heritage destruction in ways that reflect its own identity and geopolitical goals. For example, while India highlights empathy, China emphasizes its cultural superiority; and in Brazil the Ukrainian diaspora was rediscovered and valued. These narratives offer new opportunities for Ukraine and the EU to engage global audiences through culturally sensitive, tailored diplomacy. Chaban urged the EU to deepen strategic communication around heritage protection and to view culture not as a soft concern, but as essential to conflict resolution and global influence.

To conclude the panel, **Olena Protsenko** reacted to the panelists' insights offering a powerful perspective from the younger generation of Ukrainians. She highlighted unprecedented transformations the country is undergoing in terms of identity and sense of unity. She raised a point on diversity as well, seeking a way to include and value those "voices out of the chorus," such as in Donbas or Crimea, which may be seen by some as territories to give up on, in order to preserve the newly strong national identity. Taking a broader and international perspective, Protsenko expressed her hesitation over Hungary's ambiguous stance that, while offering support to Ukraine, is maintaining cooperative ties with Russia, raising questions about the coherence and sincerity of certain international alliances. Furthermore, she reflected on the power of group belonging and identity within the European armies, noting that similar dynamics may exist within Russian forces, representing a potential justification for the aggression. Finally, she stressed the importance of communicating Ukraine's cultural and national identity to international audiences without reducing it to simplistic narratives. The challenge lies in balancing clarity with complexity, unity with diversity, especially when the world is watching.

OLENA HERASYMIUK

Olena Herasymiuk is a Ukrainian poet, veteran, and paramedic with the Hospitallers Volunteer Medical Battalion.

Olena Herasymiuk delivered a powerful appeal on behalf of the Hospitallers Medical Battalion, a volunteer medical unit that has been saving lives on the front lines since 2014. Herasymiuk's remarks came in the wake of a devastating attack: on April 25, 2025, the battalion's base was destroyed by Russian forces.

In her address, Herasymiuk emphasized that the Hospitallers are far more than a logistical or tactical asset — they are a vital lifeline. Composed entirely of volunteers, the battalion operates under some of the most dangerous conditions imaginable, entering active combat zones not to fight, but to rescue and treat the wounded. Despite the loss of their operational base, the battalion remains committed to its mission and has already begun efforts to rebuild.

Her call for support was both urgent and multifaceted. Financial aid is crucial, but Herasymiuk also called for moral, political, and organizational support from the international community. The goal, she stressed, is not merely to recover what was lost, but to fully restore the battalion's capacity to continue its lifesaving work.

She concluded with a practical message, encouraging attendees to learn more and contribute through the official Hospitallers mobile app, now available in multiple languages. Her final appeal resonated with the overarching theme of the event: to ensure that those who protect and heal in the name of freedom are themselves not forgotten or left without protection.

PETER DICKINSON

Peter Dickinson is editor of the Atlantic Council UkraineAlert service and publisher of Business Ukraine magazine.

Peter Dickinson participated online and delivered a keynote speech titled "Europe After America: Security in the New Geopolitical Era." With a candid and strategically grounded tone, Dickinson addressed the rapidly shifting dynamics of European defense, arguing that the war in Ukraine is not just a regional conflict but a catalyst for rethinking the entire security architecture of Europe.

Dickinson began by underscoring the unprecedented nature of the current moment. For the first time since the Cold War, Europe faces the prospect of a diminished American presence. While much attention has focused on Donald Trump's return to political prominence and his calls to scale back U.S. commitments to NATO, Dickinson emphasized that even under the Biden administration, transatlantic solidarity has shown signs of strain, as illustrated by the temporary freeze of American aid to Ukraine.

The traditional assumption that the United States would always anchor European security can no longer be taken for granted. Dickinson characterized this as a revolutionary change. In response, Europe is beginning to reorientate: defense budgets are increasing, and leaders like the German Chancellor have committed to greater military responsibility, declaring Germany the future "backbone of European defense." However, Dickinson warned that rebuilding Europe's strategic capabilities will take time: from military production and logistics to training and doctrine.

Given these delays, he asserted that the smartest and most immediate investment Europe can make is in Ukraine. The country inherited

significant defense industrial infrastructure from the Soviet period and, since the full-scale invasion in 2022, has not only revived it but modernized it at a remarkable speed. Today, Ukraine is a global leader in drone technology, home to hundreds of companies producing millions of units. International defense firms, including British manufacturers, are now establishing facilities inside Ukraine, recognizing its growing importance in the defense sector.

Dickinson emphasized that Ukraine no longer needs symbolic support: it needs substantial, long-term investment. This is not just to ensure Ukraine's survival, but to protect Europe as a whole. The worst-case scenario would be a victorious, militarized Russia pressing against NATO borders.

The alternative, however, is equally clear: a secure, resilient, and integrated Ukraine that becomes a cornerstone of Europe's future security system.

In closing, Dickinson argued that building a new European defense order with Ukraine, in Ukraine, and because of Ukraine is not only desirable: it is necessary. In an era where American guarantees may no longer be assured, this new model offers a pragmatic and powerful path forward.

PANEL II:
50 years after the Helsinki Accords: the collapse of Europe's security system and the return of the nuclear threat

LAWRENCE FREEDMAN

Sir Lawrence Freedman is Emeritus Professor of War Studies at King's College London. Professor Freedman has written extensively on nuclear strategy and the cold war, as well as commentating regularly on contemporary security issues.

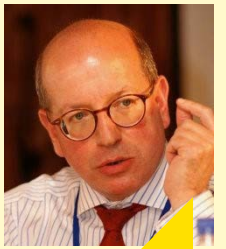
To open the panel, **Sir Lawrence Freedman** appeared online to deliver a keynote address reflecting on the historical significance and long-term consequences of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act. He reminded the audience that the world of the 1970s was fundamentally different – not only geopolitically but diplomatically. It was the Soviet Union, not the Russian Federation, and while the Cold War cast a long shadow, European security was relatively stable. The primary goal at the time, especially for the Soviets, was to formalize territorial boundaries and reduce the threat of direct military confrontation.

Sir Freedman highlighted how seemingly open-ended negotiations – such as those on mutual force reductions – served a political purpose even when they produced no concrete outcomes. Simply keeping contentious issues on the diplomatic agenda could neutralize immediate conflict. The Soviets, he noted, deliberately accepted talks on troop reductions in Europe to maintain U.S. presence on the continent, fearing an independent European security bloc.

One of the great legacies of the Helsinki Accords, Freedman argued, was the institutionalization of human rights language in an international context. Though initially dismissed as symbolic, these commitments later empowered opposition movements across the Eastern Bloc. The West underestimated how fragile the Soviet system really was, particularly in terms of political legitimacy and internal dissent. As the Cold War came to an end, human rights – once a marginal issue – became central to international order.

Yet today, that diplomatic infrastructure no longer exists. Sir Freedman warned that the mechanisms of the 1970s – confidence-building measures, observer missions, long-form diplomacy – were designed for peacetime rivalry, not active war. With Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Europe faces a security environment that is both more volatile and more dangerous than during much of the Cold War. The values embedded in the Helsinki process – individual rights, minority protections, non-interference – were monumental achievements, but they were never irreversible. In many ways, they were left unattended. And now, they are under siege.

Following Sir Lawrence Freedman's keynote, the topic gained further momentum with a panel discussion.



JAMES SHERR

James Sherr OBE is a Senior Fellow of the International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS) in Tallinn and an Associate Fellow (and former Head) of the Chatham House Russia and Eurasia Programme.

KARIN VON HIPPEL

Dr. Karin von Hippel was Director-General of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) for nine years (2015 – 2024). She has also worked for the United Nations and the European Union in Somalia and Kosovo, and has direct experience in over two dozen conflict zones.

LETIZIA SANTHIÀ

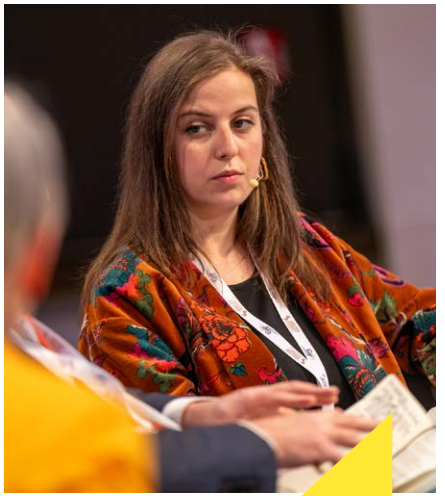
Letizia Santhià is a graduate student focusing on border studies, migration and human rights, while she continues to cultivate her interest in social and political developments in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus.

The panel was opened by moderator **Janet H. Anderson** framing the historical context. She reminded the audience that 1975 marked a high point in diplomatic optimism, the end of the Vietnam War, the rise of new global players, the early stages of the digital revolution, and the Helsinki Accords. It was a moment when East and West made mutual commitments to stability and human rights. Today, those commitments feel not only fragile, but distant.

James Sherr addressed the panel with a stark view of how Russia perceives the security order established in Helsinki. As early as 2014, it was evident that Moscow had rejected the core premises of the post-Cold War system. President Putin and other senior Russian officials made it clear; the world had entered a new era defined not by treaties or law, but by power and respect.

Russia's foreign policy doctrine increasingly refers not to Soviet ideology but to a reinvented imperial vision. In that worldview, sovereignty is reserved only for great powers. States like Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia are seen as historically and culturally bound to Russia, and thus not entitled to independent strategic choices.

Sherr emphasized that Russian doctrine no longer treats international law as binding in Eastern Europe. Instead, legitimacy is derived from power, specifically nuclear and military capability. And in this paradigm, nuclear weapons are not a last resort – they are an integrated part of statecraft, a signal of strength in a world Russia views as governed by confrontation, not cooperation. In the absence of a credible Western response, such threats are effective.



Dr. Karin von Hippel offered a sobering view from the U.S. and multilateral perspective. While much of the anxiety today centers around Trump's presidency, she noted that the gradual American disengagement from global security did not start with him. The Obama administration, too, was hesitant, particularly in Syria and Ukraine. Today's U.S. foreign policy operates in a transitional space: reactive, overstretched, and increasingly transactional. Yet she pointed out an emerging trend, coalitions of like-minded nations beginning to coordinate responses outside of traditional frameworks. These new alignments may eventually lay the foundation for a reimagined security order, even if the U.S. is not always in the lead.

Letizia Santhià, the group's youngest panelist, brought a generational perspective that challenged the group to broaden the scope of what security means in the 21st century. For her and many of her colleagues, the Helsinki system felt more like a relic of history than a living structure. In its place, she argued, must come a vision that places climate change, sustainability, and the existential risks of nuclear weapons at the center—not as peripheral concerns but as core components of peace and stability. This, she insisted, was not a matter of idealism but a necessity if any future security architecture hoped to resonate with those who inherited it.

Dr. von Hippel responded by reflecting on the limits of existing institutions. She noted growing fatigue in multilateral organizations, many of which, she argued, had become complacent. The shock of

Trump-era policies and the broader erosion of liberal norms had forced democratic states to recognize the urgent need for institutional reform. In place of rigid alliances, she envisioned more flexible, crisis-specific coalitions—forms of cooperation that might lack the elegance of the Helsinki model but could prove more adaptable in a fragmented, multipolar world.

James Sherr continued with a dose of realism. The core problem, he argued, was not structural design but political will. The Helsinki system succeeded because the contending sides saw a common interest in stability, even in the face of ideological division. That condition no longer holds. In his view, Russia now finds strategic value in disruption, while the West remains hesitant, its resolve uncertain. Without the resolve to uphold norms, no institutional model, no matter how innovative, can endure.

Returning to the topic of nuclear risk, Santhià highlighted the growing anxiety among younger generations who see nuclear threats not as relics of the Cold War but as unresolved dangers with new urgency. Sherr offered a somber reflection, noting that Moscow's only recent offer of disarmament was the complete disarmament of Ukraine. He described Russia's nuclear posture as psychological warfare, drawing on a doctrine steeped in the military thinking of Clausewitz and Lenin, where war is simply policy by other means, and nuclear and conventional threats are tools in the same strategic toolbox.

Von Hippel concluded with a call for broader leadership in the nuclear debate. The conversation, she argued, should no longer be limited to Washington and Moscow. A revived disarmament agenda requires voices from Europe, the Global South, and emerging coalitions that can rethink discourse. The challenge is not just military, but strategic, normative, and deeply existential.

Ultimately, the group was united by the recognition that the "spirit of Helsinki" dialogue, restraint, and respect for human rights, are not dead. But they need to be rethought. In a world that is far more chaotic, competitive, and interconnected than it was in 1975, the challenge is to transform that spirit into a structure capable of addressing the realities of today and tomorrow.

PANEL III:
Is the Pacific the next battleground?

Janet Gunn opened the third panel of the conference with a sharp observation of how international relations are portrayed in Western media, particularly in the context of a potential second Trump presidency. She pointed out the curious narrative that Trump might attempt to court Russia as a strategic partner against China. The assumption, widely criticized as naïve or unrealistic, reflects deeper anxieties: with Trump's transactional worldview, focused on cost-cutting and deal-making, would the United States go to war over Taiwan?

DENIS SUARSANA

Dr. Denis Suarsana has been the Director of the Indonesia office of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) in Jakarta since 2022 and currently acts as the Interim Director of the organization's Regional Office Australia and the Pacific.

IAN BURUMA

Ian Buruma is currently the Paul W. Williams Professor at Bard College, NY. He was Cultural Editor of the Far Eastern Economic Review (Hongkong), Foreign Editor of The Spectator (London), and Editor of the New York Review of Books (New York).

JUNHYUP KWON

Junhyup Kwon is a journalist based in Seoul, South Korea, specializing in East Asia. He has reported on Korean and international news since 2016.

BRIGITA DYBURYTĖ

Brigita Dyburytė is a master's student in Political Science at Vytautas Magnus University, specializing in diplomacy and foreign relations.

Denis Suarsana immediately challenged the premise of the panel's title. He noted that the question already begins with a problem, that the Asia-Pacific already is a battleground, just without the "hot" war. He described the region as experiencing ongoing low-level conflict with global ramifications, from maritime sabotage and cyberattacks to grey-zone activities. China, he argued, is a destabilizing actor in this context, not just through military build-up, but through information warfare, infrastructure manipulation, and strategic economic dependence.

Suarsana outlined three approaches China is using simultaneously. Hard Power Projection involves regular military exercises near Australian waters, sabotage of maritime infrastructure, and cyber campaigns targeting regional states, indicating a constant state of pressure. Strategic Infrastructure includes Chinese investments in remote Pacific Island states that appear commercial but serve dual-use military purposes. Though these locations may seem distant from Beijing, Suarsana argued these nodes could be used to deny the U.S. access in a future conflict. Economic Dependence is evident across Southeast Asia, where China is the largest economic partner, even for politically wary nations like Vietnam. While these countries value sovereignty, their dependence creates hesitation.

Suarsana concluded that China's goal is to make sure that when escalation comes, no one is entirely free to choose sides. He warned that this web of economic and strategic entanglement, combined with uncertainty over America's long-term commitment to the region, places

U.S. allies like Japan, South Korea, and even Australia in a vulnerable position. No one takes the U.S. presence for granted anymore.

Ian Buruma followed with a broader historical and cultural lens. He noted that even liberal, traditionally pacifist media outlets in Japan are now taking a more hawkish stance, not just on China but on the war in Ukraine. He said the fear is real, that if Russia succeeds in Ukraine, China will be emboldened in Taiwan, and that this resonates strongly in East Asia.

Buruma reflected on post-WWII dynamics, where U.S. military presence effectively undermined regional stability. Japan, like Germany, was content to outsource security to Washington. But Trump's unpredictability, and the larger erosion of trust in U.S. consistency, have forced a reckoning. He argued Japan must become what Germany became in Europe, and that the time for hiding behind pacifism is running out.

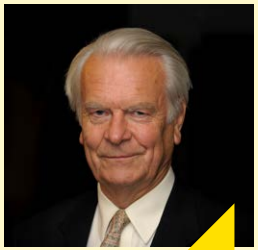
Yet Buruma emphasized that history complicates this shift. He pointed out that in South Korea, conservative elites are still seen by some as collaborators with the Japanese colonial regime. These memories still shape domestic attitudes toward Japan's remilitarization, despite shared strategic interests. Within Japan, there is resistance as well, not only from pacifists but from segments of the government and even the U.S., which historically discouraged Tokyo from becoming too independent militarily. Ironically, he noted, a liberal Japanese government may have an easier time rewriting the constitution than conservatives, especially if the U.S. becomes an unreliable partner under Trump's second term as the president.

Junhyup Kwon delivered a compelling and personal reflection on how the war in Ukraine is reshaping perceptions in South Korea. He said that ten years ago, they treated North Korean provocations as theatre, but now they treat them as preparation.

He emphasized that North Korea has gained practical battlefield experience, learning from conflicts abroad and applying those lessons at home, including the deployment and countering of drones. South Korea is increasingly alarmed by North Korea's deepening alignment with Russia, a relationship that now includes mutual military support in case of conflict. This rekindles painful historical traumas in the South, where many citizens now question the reliability of U.S. security guarantees.

Kwon noted that more than ever before, there is open debate within South Korea about developing nuclear weapons. He observed that while the Korean Peninsula is not always framed this way internationally, this too is a war between North and South Korea, made visible through the war in Ukraine. He reminded the audience that South Korea has indirectly provided more 155mm artillery shells to Ukraine than all European countries combined. He closed by pointing to a major theme across the Pacific: no one wants to be the battleground. Many states in the region view the escalating U.S.–China rivalry as something external being imposed on them. He stated that they are not bystanders, but also not the ones escalating this. Both China and the U.S. are turning the Pacific into their arena.

Brigita Dyburytė, the panel's young challenger from Lithuania, offered a final reflection. She questioned how Europe views the Indo-Pacific through its strategic lens. Just as the Baltic states feel the tremors of Russian imperialism, Pacific nations are experiencing a parallel unease, one shaped by historical trauma, geographic exposure, and economic entrapment. Her core question was whether the world is heading into a globalized Cold War, or if these regional conflicts are still containable through diplomatic reinvention.



DAVID OWEN

Leaders Who Can Take Us to the Abyss

Lord David Owen is a doctor by training and was neurology and psychiatric registrar at St Thomas's Hospital, London. He then entered politics and in Labour Governments served as Navy Minister, Health Minister and Foreign Secretary.

In his keynote address, *Leaders Who Can Take Us to the Abyss*, **Lord David Owen** reflected on the dangers posed by hubristic leadership and its profound impact on global stability. Drawing from his medical background and political experience, Lord Owen explored how power can distort judgment and character, leading to catastrophic decisions that threaten international peace.

While framing the discussion within the broad topic of the conference – the human factor in conflict – he also brought out the recurring failure to step back from the brink. He focused specifically on the psychological phenomenon of hubris (defined in classical terms as excessive pride, arrogance, and contempt) and its modern expression as Hubris Syndrome, a condition he co-identified in a 2009 article in the journal *Brain*. This syndrome, he explained, affects individuals whose personalities change due to prolonged exposure to power, resulting in reckless and self-aggrandizing behavior.

He cited Presidents Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump as contemporary examples of leaders displaying traits of hubris. Though different in temperament and ideology, both exhibit contempt for checks and balances, a disregard for institutional norms, and a readiness to act unilaterally. Putin's calculated aggression and Trump's erratic nationalism, Lord Owen warned, challenge the post-war rules-based order and risk destabilizing key alliances such as NATO.

Lord Owen highlighted the dangers of conflating leadership with infallibility. Traits such as overconfidence, messianic self-image, impulsiveness, and a loss of contact with reality are red flags. He argued that both Putin and Trump weaponize fear, distort truth, and seek expansion (whether geographically or ideologically) therefore undermining democratic institutions. Trump's financial and rhetorical ties to Russia, his authoritarian tendencies, and his disdain for critics were all cited as signs of hubristic drift.

To counteract this hazard, Lord Owen called for greater awareness of the causal link between power and personality distortion. He stressed that humility, self-awareness, and institutional oversight are essential to preserving democratic governance. Concluding with a historical reminder, he urged political leaders and citizens never to forget that unchecked power, left unchallenged, can lead nations to disaster, not through madness, but through the slow and dangerous intoxication of hubris.

EUGENE SADLER-SMITH

The Hubris Hazard and Stepping Back from the Abyss

Eugene Sadler-Smith is Professor of Organizational Behaviour at Surrey Business School, University of Surrey, UK. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (FRSA), Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (FCIPD) and a Fellow of the Academy of Social Science (FAcSS).

In his keynote address titled *The Hubris Hazard and Stepping Back from the Abyss*, **Eugene Sadler-Smith**, building on Lord Owen's insights, explored the destructive potential of hubris in leadership and its implications for politics, business, and society. Citing historical examples, philosophical insights, and contemporary cases, he argued that unchecked hubris has repeatedly led individuals and entire nations toward crisis, conflict, and collapse.

Sadler-Smith opened by referencing Andrei Sakharov's warning about the need to step back from disaster, posing a critical question: why do leaders so often fail to do so? His analysis traced hubris from antiquity to the modern era, highlighting how its consequences span from corporate failures to military disasters and political overreach, notably the 2003 Iraq invasion. Hubristic leaders, he noted, ignore warnings, silence dissent, and act with a sense of invincibility. In doing so, they not only endanger their institutions but also society at large.

Hubris, he emphasized, is not just a personal flaw but a systemic risk. Through the concept of the "toxic triangle," Sadler-Smith described how hubristic leadership thrives in a context enabled by complicit followers (ranging from conformers to opportunists) and political environments marked by populism, polarization, and post-truth narratives. These factors create fertile ground for authoritarian leaders who claim to speak for the people while undermining institutions and spreading disinformation.

To address the dangers of hubris, Sadler-Smith proposed several strategies. He advocated for prevention through cautious leadership selection and a "hubris health check" for executives and public officials, namely early warning assessments that could help identify signs of dangerous overreach. Most importantly, he called for a renewed emphasis on humility as a core leadership virtue. Humble leaders are receptive to feedback, aware of their limitations, and committed to the public good, in contrast to the self-serving nature of hubristic figures.
In conclusion, Sadler-Smith warned that hubris, if left unchallenged, leads to irreversible harm. Stepping back from the brink requires awareness, accountability, and a conscious choice to elevate humility in those we choose to lead us.

SIMON BARON-COHEN

Empathy and Conflict Resolution

Simon Baron-Cohen is a Professor in the Departments of Psychology and Psychiatry at University of Cambridge and Fellow at Trinity College, Cambridge. He is Director of the Autism Research Centre in Cambridge, which he set up in 1997.

In his online keynote address, psychiatrist Simon Baron-Cohen explored the central role of empathy in both - the origins of human cruelty, and the possibilities for conflict resolution. Drawing on his 2011 book *Zero Degrees of Empathy*, Baron-Cohen explained that empathy comprises two key components: cognitive empathy (the ability to understand others' thoughts and feelings) and affective empathy (the capacity to respond emotionally and appropriately). He argued that the erosion of affective empathy is what enables acts of extreme cruelty.

Through historical and contemporary examples (including Nazi medical experiments during the Holocaust, the October 7th Hamas attack on Israeli civilians, and the humanitarian crisis in Gaza) Baron-Cohen demonstrated how empathy breakdowns dehumanize victims and legitimize violence. He noted that military approaches alone have failed to resolve the Israeli Palestinian conflict and proposed empathy as an underexplored but powerful tool for peacebuilding.

Baron-Cohen discussed several factors that erode empathy, including obedience to authority, ideological extremism, and "in-group vs. out-group" thinking, citing examples from the Holocaust, 9/11, and the Rwandan genocide. He also presented insights from neuroscience and psychology, showing how empathy is governed by interconnected brain circuits and influenced by both genetics and early life experiences. He explained that childhood neglect and insecure attachment can reduce empathic capacity and increase antisocial behavior, especially when combined with certain genetic predispositions.

Yet, Baron-Cohen also emphasized empathy's potential as a transformative force. He highlighted real-world examples such as the humanitarian work rescuing refugees, and the Parent Circle, a joint Israeli-Palestinian initiative of bereaved families promoting reconciliation. He also referenced historical figures like Raoul Wallenberg and political transitions such as South Africa's end of apartheid, in which empathy played a key role.

Baron-Cohen concluded by describing empathy as a universal and renewable human resource. It requires no financial investment, yet it may offer a more sustainable and humane path to conflict resolution than military, legal, or economic measures. As such, nurturing empathy, particularly across opposing groups, should be central to peacebuilding efforts worldwide.

PANEL IV:
The human factor: are we our worst enemy?

The last panel, moderated by Janet H. Anderson, addressed the issue of the human factor, posing the question “are we our worst enemy?”

ROMÉO DALLAIRE

Lieutenant-General (ret’d) Roméo Dallaire is an advocate for global human rights, author, public speaker, leadership consultant, international advisor, former Canadian Senator, and founder of the Dallaire Institute for Children, Peace, and Security. General Dallaire served most notably as Force Commander of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda during the 1994 genocide.

ABRAM DE SWAAN

Abram de Swaan is emeritus distinguished research professor of social science of the University of Amsterdam, founded and chaired the Amsterdam School for Social Science Research (1987-2007).

SIMON WESSELY

Sir Simon Wessely is the Interim Dean of the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience at King’s College London, where he is also the UK’s only Regius Chair of Psychiatry. Since 1991 he has been a Consultant Psychiatrist at the South London and Maudsley and also King’s College Hospital NHS Foundation Trusts.

MAKA BERULAVA

Maka Berulava is a Research Analyst at the Andrei Sakharov Research Center for Democratic Development Research, where she works primarily with archives.

General Roméo Dallaire opened the discussion with a powerful reflection on the failure to achieve lasting peace despite decades of conflict resolution efforts. Drawing from his military experience in places like Rwanda, Yugoslavia, and Darfur, he argued that what we call “peace” has too often been temporary truces that fail to address the root causes of conflict.

In his view, we now live, not in a post-war or reformist period, but rather in a revolutionary era shaped by shifting geopolitics, mass displacement, environmental collapse, and the cluttering presence of digital media. This new reality demands a radical reevaluation of leadership, strategy, and values. Dallaire criticized the global failure to prioritize human life, noting how strategic decisions repeatedly ignored the humanity of vulnerable populations. Military doctrines, peacekeeping tools, and liberal democracies have proven insufficient for long-term solutions. On the contrary, he fervently called for an inclusive and ethical rethinking of global governance, especially the integration of women and youth, arguing that without broad-based, humane leadership, true peace will remain out of reach.

Abram de Swaan explored the growing appeal of extreme right-wing parties across the world. He argued that this political shift is not merely driven by ideology or economics, but by deeper emotional and cultural factors, especially a widespread sense of humiliation and lack of respect felt by many citizens. These individuals often feel looked down upon by highly educated, urban elites and excluded from the dominant liberal discourse.

Prof. de Swaan suggested that this perceived condescension fuels anger and a desire for recognition, leading voters to support political movements that promise strength, identity, and clarity. Right-wing parties skillfully tap into traditional values such as family, order, and national pride, often using symbolic language and simplified narratives to mobilize support. The result is a political climate in which resentment becomes a powerful force, and respect (or the lack of it) plays a crucial role in shaping democratic outcomes.

Building on previous insights, Sir **Simon Wessely** also offered a nuanced reflection on leadership, intersecting historical hindsight and public perception. He cautioned against judging past leaders solely by outcomes, a tendency he described as “reading history backwards.” Using Winston Churchill and Tony Blair as examples, Wessely showed how traits often labeled as hubris (confidence, risk-taking, and conviction) can lead to either failure or greatness, depending on the outcome. Blair’s decision to support the Iraq War is now widely condemned, but Wessely contextualized it within Blair’s lifelong exposure to past genocides (e.g. the Holocaust, Cambodia, Rwanda), suggesting Blair was motivated by a sincere desire to prevent further atrocities.

Wessely also addressed frequent media attempts to pathologize Donald Trump, urging fellow psychiatrists not to conflate offensive behavior with mental illness. Misogyny, narcissism, and extremism, he argued, are not clinical disorders but social and moral problems. His

key message: understanding leadership requires historical context, restraint in moral judgment, and clarity between pathology and personality.

To conclude the panel, **Maka Berulava** offered a reflection from the perspective of the young generation, witnessing the collapse of old certainties and enduring the pressure to shape something new. She expressed concern over how values and beliefs are increasingly molded by an overwhelming flow of information, often in a way that feels disempowering or detached from personal conviction.

Amidst the mediatic and ideological confusion, holding on to moral clarity and a strong sense of identity is more urgent than ever. Berulava also stressed that this moment marks not only “the end of an era”, but rather the beginning of a critical transition: therefore, youth is called to survive these tough days for democracy, and work for renewal at the same time. She argued that the reconstruction of trust in institutions is also fundamental: while international bodies appear increasingly ineffective or compromised, restoring confidence in their purpose and integrity among youth must be central to any vision of progress. Without trust in our institutions, the foundations of a shared and stable future begin to erode.

Final remarks and expression of gratitude from the Sakharov Center team

The Sakharov conferences were initiated in the 1980s by the Amsterdam-based Second World Center and organized by Robert van Voren, who in February 1987 obtained personal permission from Andrei Sakharov to continue the series to discuss important socio-political and human rights issues. The Andrei Sakharov Research Center took over the conferences in 2019 and has been organizing them every year since. The Fifteenth International Sakharov Conference is thus the 7th organized by the Andrei Sakharov Research Center.

Over the years, the scale of the conferences grew largely, requiring more and more effort, more and more funding. This year’s conference would not have been possible without the volunteers who ensured it would run smoothly and meet the needs of the audience. They were the first ones at the venue and the last ones out. Therefore, we want to express sincere gratitude to Svitlana Opalko, Ilona Mineikytė, Agnė Židelevičiūtė, Luka Tukanaitė, Paula Devečková and Gabrielė Kolbutė, as well as one more volunteer who wanted to remain anonymous.

In addition, we want to thank the discussion moderators who not only take on the challenge of supervising the (sometimes heated) debates on stage, but also pitch their ideas on the format of the discussions, recommend possible speakers as well as do tremendous preparations and create a bond of trust with their panelists to ensure the highest possible quality of the conference. It has become an inside joke that to be a moderator at our conferences, you must be named Janet, and you must be from the United Kingdom. Thus we sincerely thank our favorite British moderators Janet H. Anderson and Janet Gunn who elevate our conferences to the next level each year.

Lastly, we express our gratitude to our partners and sponsors, without which we would not be able to bring the Sakharov Conferences to life. We thank our trusted friends from Human Rights in Mental Health – FGIP, who have been reliable partners over the years in co-organizing the conferences. We also express gratitude to the Partners and Sponsors of the Fifteenth International Sakharov Conference.

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