

2021: Welcome To West Asia

Scott Ritter (clip) Next week, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is getting together to meet. A couple of things are going to be on the agenda. One, bringing Iran in as a permanent member. That means now Iran is part of an economic, political and military alliance with Russia, China, Pakistan, India. Afghanistan will be there as an observer. The whole idea is if you can get Afghanistan to function as a nation state, you will finally have a Eurasian geopolitical entity that can fire on all cylinders. That's a huge threat to the United States, which is why everything I just said isn't going to be allowed to happen. A successful Afghanistan, the successful Taliban is a threat the United States of America. We spent 40 years perfecting the art of destabilising their nation, and I think we're going to continue to implement destabilisation policies going forward because the last thing we need, last thing we want, is for the Taliban to succeed.

Ross Sharmine Narwani, great to have you back on the programme, friend of the show. Welcome.

Sharmine Narwani Thank you very much, Ross. It's great to be back.

Ross Sharmine, congratulations on your new venture, The Cradle. But something surprising, often we call the Middle East the Middle East, but 'The Cradle' refers to the Middle East as West Asia. Why that shift?

Sharmine Narwani You know, the world's shifting dramatically, and I think it's time for new narratives. This region has been swept away. Its recent history's been swept away by Western narratives - media and political - and it's time to reframe ourselves moving forward. And we are in fact, in West Asia. And I think it's an important two words because it reminds a lot of Arabs who are very distressed about their futures, the calamities going on in the regions - the wars, the economic distress. It reminds them that they're in Asia, which is something a lot of people in the Middle East tend to forget. And I think everybody understands that Asia is the biggest growth story of this century. And I think it's a very friendly reminder to us that we are, and can be, part of that story. So I think it's time to take back where we are. We are in the Asian continent and we're the west of the Asian continent.

Ross There was a lot of jumping up and down in Western media when Afghanistan fell as if it wasn't always going to happen. But you know, the sort of played consternation was there. What does it mean now for Afghanistan and the region, the Pashtun people, which are fundamentally the Taliban, albeit with their differing factions? What does it mean now for Afghanistan and its people?

Sharmine Narwani I mean, several things. I mean, there are obviously the anti-Taliban elements in Afghanistan still and those who are for it. That internal battle will continue. I think the Taliban today is trying very hard - at least the Taliban leadership in Kabul - to show that they can be dealt with, that this is a new incarnation for them. And the Taliban has now had 20 years of experience in various mediation rooms around the world and have learnt what is expected of them. And they obviously have, you know, their closest neighbours, have a set of rules they expect the Taliban to live up to, to have a government that has the participation

of different elements of societies minorities, et cetera. The other thing that's important as well is a war has stopped, right? So the country's resources and tension can go to nation building. And Afghanistan has a lot to offer. I mean, it's got the largest deposits of rare earth minerals in the world - copper, iron - these things have not been mined, have not been taken advantage to build the nation's wealth. With the American occupation of the country, Afghanistan has essentially not been able to have normal relations with its neighbours. And those borders will now open for trade, commerce, diplomacy and many other things that are critical to regional states. So this is a huge game changer for the region, and it's a very exciting one because Afghanistan sits between west and central Asia and is, you know, potentially a critical part of China's Belt and Road Initiative. But importantly, it gets unhelpful U.S. presence out of the region and demilitarises a central part of Asia. So a lot of change is underway.

Ross Afghanistan's liberation, one of the first meetings that took place after it, was with the Chinese. Are you surprised that the Chinese moved in so quickly and that meeting took place?

Sharmine Narwani Not at all. I think given China's very, you know, its grand plans, its Belt and Road Initiative, which aims to cut a swathe from eastern Asia all the way to Europe. Every country coming into play is essential because you're not just looking at the main Belt and Road corridors, but you're looking at secondary and tertiary corridors. And the countries in the region themselves are participating in - and this is outside of the Belt and Road Initiative - to create their own corridors. Now these countries are, you know, they're not fighting over political differences. What people don't understand is now the challenges are who gets to control these routes. The roads and railways and shipping lines or shipping routes are going to be the most essential part of the competition as to what's coming in the area. But let's not forget that all these transportation corridors underpin economy. So at the end of this, you know, it's supposedly all rainbows.

Ross One of the underreported, or very little reported, facts when Afghanistan fell was Iran's membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Turns out, the Western press didn't pick up on it at all. Can't think why? What do you think that that membership for Iran and the region will deliver?

Sharmine Narwani For Iran, it's pretty significant to start off with because since the revolution in 1979, Iran has maintained a very strict position of neutrality and non-alignment. So this will be the first time ever that Iran joins a regional collective security pact. This means a great deal. It doesn't mean that Iran is an absolute solid alliance. It means it has entered the gateway to something else. There are other parts of this that are critical. I mean, Iran's been under sanctions for much of these 43 years of the revolution. And in the past, Iran twice applied to become a full fledged member of the SCO and was turned down, the first time in earlier days, I think around 2006, because it would be impossible for these countries to deal in the way they're meant to as a collective with Iran under sanctions. And the world had not turned yet then. So U.S. sanctions meant something. Joining the SCO means that these other eight countries - so Iran is the ninth member only - will move to trade with Iran. But I think Russia and China view Iran as the wisest nation in West Asia, the most secure nation in West Asia, the one whose priorities are most aligned with Russia and China. And that would be development, economy, getting rid of terrorism, creating infrastructure,

bringing Eurasia together and keeping the Americans at bay. So Iran was an important first member, and they've given this country the right to veto others in West Asia.

Ross Scott Ritter, when he was on this programme, he said the Western powers aren't going to like that collaboration whatsoever, so they're going to do whatever they possibly can to destabilise all of those processes and also destabilise any of the economic orders. Have you now got efficiency in order? Is that starting to come through? Is it starting to emanate?

Sharmine Narwani Efficiency and order have been here for a good few decades. They've been slow to gather steam. But wars launched by the western region have forced the current members of this collective together, and that very much happened in the Syrian war. And, for me, the Syrian war was a turning point, globally, as well because it was the first major war between the major powers. So it was a major power battle. I have likened it as, you know, to World War Three because for me, world wars are when the major powers go at it. But it also means a battle after which new institutions are created globally, because that's what happened in the aftermath of the First and Second World War. And now we're absolutely seeing this here. And the almost 10 years of war in Syria really opened the sort of conversation and cooperation, collaboration, if you like, between Russia, China and Iran - three countries that have not collaborated closely in the past. They collaborated in the U.N. Security Council on the world stage. They collaborate in international institutions. They collaborate on the ground, in the air and in private rooms and in command centres. So this is why everything's suddenly flipped. The U.S. will, of course, try to disturb these collaborations in whatever way they can. But let's look at what options are at their disposal. The U.S. was able to invade and occupy Iraq and Afghanistan. Since then, they have not been able to. What they did in Libya, what they did in Yemen, what they did in Syria were proxy wars, basically - not really troops on the ground. And when those failed, they have moved to what they have left, which is what they're exercising in Lebanon now. There's an American war on Lebanon, an undeclared one, of course, and they are using the sort of the last tool in their kit which is economic sanctions, as they have, by the way, with Turkey. So the U.S. is a punisher and that's what it tries to do. Now, in Afghanistan, this is key. But here's the thing that all the countries now happy about the US exiting Afghanistan you know, they've been coming together in anticipation of this and they know exactly who's operating on the ground. You know, when when the U.S. left Afghanistan, just in a short period before, they started suddenly talking about ISIS K which are basically airlifted by coalition partners during the conflict in Syria from Deir ez-Zor, the eastern province of Syria. We have seen these airlifts. They have been reported on by impartial sources, mostly foreign fighters airlifted out of Syria and taken to Afghanistan. I know, personally, from having spoken to Afghans that they have told the US, they have said, you know, to American forces in Afghanistan, ISIS is coming at five o'clock and the Americans say, well, 'can you give us their identities'? You know, they basically are not fighting ISIS. ISIS is a very useful tool for them. As it remains in Iraq - we're seeing a resurgence of them again, and they will remain in Afghanistan. But Afghanistan's neighbours know this all too well. They have anticipated this. And Taliban, on the first day after they had taken Kabul, the day after, they went into a prison and assassinated the head of ISIS, the most senior ISIS commander they had in custody. And this just goes to show how collaborative Afghanistan and the Taliban appear to be with China, Russia, Iran and Pakistan, all super aware, concerned about terrorism and trying to make sure that Afghanistan does not become a breeding ground for it that can be utilised by the Americans. So everyone's on watch here.

The American's are going to have very few avenues in which to destabilise. I often say that the West controls the narrative, but we in West Asia now control the outcome.

Ross Gareth Porter, really wonderful to have you back on Renegade Inc. Welcome to the programme.

Gareth Porter Thanks so much for having me.

Ross Gareth, last time we spoke, you were emphatic about the fact that any kind of war game scenario, any kind of strategy, role play, if you like, there was no way that the US could really, win any war with Iran, but nor could they sustain their presence in the Middle East in an effective way. Turns out you were right. Withdrawal from Afghanistan, was it the beginning of the exodus from the Middle East for you?

Gareth Porter Well, I don't know if it's the beginning. I think it was more closer to the end, but I would say that it was a big step towards the U.S. exit from the Middle East, militarily. And, you know, I don't think that there is going to be any major increase in U.S. military presence in the Middle East in the coming years and that we'll see at least some moves toward a decrease towards zero U.S. military presence on the ground in the Middle East. Of course, the U.S. will hold on to its air bases for dear life, that is, the Pentagon will hold on to those air bases for dear life. So there is not a high probability that we're going to see an exodus from those bases. But the end of the effective ground presence, I think, is definitely something that we can look forward to in the coming years

Ross When we start to look around the region, whether it be Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, obviously Iran, there seems to be a real difficulty now with feeding the beast that is the military-industrial complex because those locations that I mentioned were all necessary to be able to swell profits and sell arms and start these proxy wars, also, you know, fund a lot of these terrorist groups and all the stuff that we now know. How do you start to swell the coffers of the military-industrial complex again, if you haven't got those places to go and do it?

Gareth Porter Well, I think the answer to that is very simple and it has five letters I believe - China. It's all about China. And it has been ever since 2017, essentially, when the Pentagon clearly pivoted in a major way, in a public way, toward preparation for potential war with China. Because that was indeed the answer to the question that you've just posed, which is, OK, how do we justify a continued high or even higher, hopefully higher, levels of military spending over the next several years? And that is indeed exactly what they have been about in terms of explaining to the American public why there have to be continued high military budgets, despite the fact that we have cleared out of the wars of the past in the Middle East and that there is no significant threat on the horizon anywhere in the Middle East. So they have essentially manufactured a new threat, which is the threat of China. But you know, if you spend any time at all looking at the issue, you quickly discover that what they're really talking about is that the United States must commit itself to war with China over Taiwan. And that, of course, is a very iffy proposition for most people in this country, at least it has been in the past. Now they've obviously worked very hard, already, to change public opinion about that. But in the past, the level of public support for going to war with China over Taiwan has been extremely low.

Ross You say that there are five letters - China. They're are another five letters aren't their? And it's an acronym this time, and it's SLICC, which is a self licking ice cream cone. Now the self licking ice cream cone, I want you to explain it to us. But basically for a definition for our viewers, it is something that appears to exist in order to justify its existence and produces irrelevant indicators of success. And this really is the mechanism, isn't it, at the heart of the military- industrial complex? And it's what, when he was on this programme, Scott Ritter talked about, which is that all these generals have been at war for 20 years in Afghanistan so it became a self-reinforcing loop of medals and awards and bravery awards and all the rest of it, when actually when all is said and done, the emperor didn't have any clothes?

Gareth Porter Indeed, and this is a very interesting question that you've raised, which is what is the significance of the quote/unquote, self licking ice cream cone because it is not a term, obviously, that's used by the Pentagon itself. It's not an official term. It was a term that bubbled up from the lower levels of the U.S. military - non-commissioned officers of GI's who had no stake, themselves, in the wars in Vietnam and, again, in Afghanistan. It was a term that was first used in Vietnam during the Vietnam War many, many years ago and then sort of dropped out of use for a while and then reappeared when the United States became involved in Afghanistan. So it is indeed an understanding of these wars from below of, you know, by GI's who have seen with their own eyes that what's going on here does not make any real sense in terms of the way it's being explained to the American public. But it does make sense if you look at it in terms of the vested interest, the institutional interests, of the military services and the Pentagon. And so it is indeed a way of explaining this that now we understand, I think more clearly, makes perfect sense because it gives a reasonable explanation for why the Pentagon will sort of continue a war in Afghanistan, for which there was clearly no possibility of victory and which could only suck up resources. Well, that's exactly why it was done, because it sucked up resources and justified the continued presence of U.S. military forces in Afghanistan and, of course, even more importantly, or equally importantly, it justified the levels of military spending, which during those years of war in Afghanistan really depended very heavily on that war to justify the kind of military budgets that they were getting.

Ross What is the next play by the military-industrial complex if they cannot manufacture the consent necessary to be able to kick that war off in the South China Sea over Taiwan?

Gareth Porter Well, first of all, I think that it's too early to say that they have failed to mobilise opinion behind intervention for Taiwan. They have a lot of resources which are being devoted day by day to convincing the American public that Taiwan is a vital interest to the United States, or if Taiwan is not a vital interest, that it is vital that the United States show that it is a reliable ally of Japan, specifically. That is the new argument that is being tried out and we will hear far more of that in the future, I'm quite sure. But, I think that this is a very steep climb, much steeper than anything that they have encountered thus far in any of the efforts to promote wars that they have tried and more or less been successful at over the past 30 years. And I think in the end, they will fail because it's so clear that the United States cannot win a war with China. More and more in the American media, you see articles that are devoted to that theme. This is an extremely unusual development. And I think that this is a telling indication of just how sharp, how deep, the incline is for the U.S. Pentagon and the services who want to prepare the public for war, or potential war, with China. I don't think

they want war with China, but I think that they feel they have to commit themselves fully to the possibility of war because the alternative is unacceptable to them. It means giving up, you know, what we just talked about a few minutes ago, which is their meal ticket for high levels of military spending in the future.

Ross Before you go, leave us with an insight with how you think this multipolar world is going to play out? Where from here?

Gareth Porter Well, I think one of the developments that we are already seeing underway is that both of our former foes, Iran and Afghanistan. And I shouldn't say former foe in the case of Iran, because the conflict obviously continues in a non-military way, it continues diplomatically with Iran. But the former foe in the sense of a near war or threatened war with Iran and Afghanistan have both obviously moved toward close relations with China, a relationship with China that shows that that is going to be the primary development or the primary direction that international politics goes with regard to those two countries. And, of course, I think the case of Iran is more important in terms of geopolitical developments in the entire region of the Middle East because of Iran's importance, obviously. And I think that this is a very interesting development because in the past, for many years, the Iranian government was definitely not in favour of any strategy that involved trying to move into dependence on China or Russia for security. Despite their problems with the United States, they were trying to use the European connection in order to influence U.S. policy. And they had very high hopes in that. But in the end, of course, that didn't work out very well. And I think that's a major reason why Iran, in the most recent election, has come up with a conservative government, which represents the alternative idea, strategically, of coming up with a new relationship with China and/or Russia. In this case, it's clearly China that they're going to rely on, primarily. And that's because they never really got along very well with Russia. They're much more comfortable with reliance on China. And China has the economic goods that they can rely on here to rescue the Iranian economy, particularly, they are the number one buyer of Iranian oil, and that's all important in the future economic and political relationship with China.

Ross Multipolar world here to stay?

Gareth Porter Absolutely, no question in my mind that it's a permanently multipolar world, with the United States fading over time as a challenger to China, to a Chinese-Russian alliance. And I think that alliance will then tend to part because it's no longer needed because the United States no longer challenges it in a meaningful way.