



Iran and the Axis of Aggressors, Part II: Russia

October 1, 2025

Featuring Cliff May

Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

DUBOWITZ: When Cliff May and others founded FDD more than two decades ago, we set out to defend democracies. That mission meant confronting the forces that threaten them. Today, those threats are converging. A new axis of aggressors is taking shape, and it has the West squarely in its sights. As Iranian drones blacken Ukrainian skies and Russian diplomats shield Tehran at the United Nations, Vladimir Putin and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei have sealed a 20-year pact. An alliance of aggressive empires determined to rewrite the global order.

To break this down, I'm joined by my longtime friend and colleague, Cliff May, founder and president of FDD, former *New York Times* foreign correspondent, and host of the "Foreign Podicy" Podcast. Together we'll expose what the Russian-Iranian axis really is; why it matters for Israel, Ukraine, and the United States; and how the West can still crack its foundation before it sets in stone. I'm your host, Mark Dubowitz, and this is "The Iran Breakdown." So let's break it down. Cliff May, wonderful to have you.

MAY: Good to be in a room with you. We don't do this often enough.

DUBOWITZ: We don't. We don't. It occurs to me this is the first time that you're on the other side of the table.

MAY: I am. It's a little disconcerting.

DUBOWITZ: I know, I know. You host a fabulous podcast, the "Foreign Podicy." You also, besides obviously founding FDD and leading FDD, you run our Russia program and have been an observer of Russia and Iran for quite some time. I always begin these podcasts with the personal story of our guests. So let's talk about your personal story that goes back a ways.

MAY: Well, it does quite a ways, and I will tell you, even though I know you know the story and you know more of my jokes than anybody other than my wife. But okay, you're good enough to laugh again at my jokes when I retell them.

(LAUGHTER)

DUBOWITZ: Well, no, it's because at my age now, Cliff, I just forget them. So I hear them for the first time and they're as funny as they were.

MAY: So how did I end up in Russia? So 1969, I was 18 years old, I was going to go to college in the fall. I was living in New York City, in Chelsea, on the edge of Greenwich Village.

DUBOWITZ: The Summer of Love?

MAY: Summer of Love, this was very much the '60s. And the fact of the matter is my parents said to me, "So Clifford," they called me Clifford, "what are you doing this summer?" And I said, "Hanging out, I guess." And they said, "No, I don't think so." Because they knew I'd hang around with my hippie friends in Greenwich Village.

DUBOWITZ: So to keep you out of trouble, they sent you the Soviet Union?

MAY: That's exactly, what they said was, "Okay, we're going to spend some money. We're going to send you somewhere. You figure out what you want to do. It should be educational, do something." And for some reason, the college I was going to go to, which was Sarah Lawrence College, a fancy girls school just outside New York, they were taking the first crop of freshman males. And anyhow, so I was –

DUBOWITZ: Good odds for you.

MAY: It was good odds for me. I would go into the High School of Performing Arts in New York.

DUBOWITZ: The Fame School.

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MAY: The Fame School. And there were three actually art schools in New York, at the Performing Arts, Art and Design, and Music and Art. And actually, I ran an illicit newspaper among the three schools. For some reason, the administrators of all three just hated that I was running this newspaper called *Naissance* of all things. But I was a teenager, give me a break. So anyhow, it happened that Sarah Lawrence was running a program for the first time, I think the only time to the Soviet Union that summer. Run by a guy, actually, people can look him up. His name was Joel Siegelman. He was a composer, he was a harpsichordist, great guy. Like a lot of musicians, he spoke, he was great with languages and spoke very fluent Russian.

And Frank Randall, a very well-known historian as well, both at Columbia. And anyhow, and I said, "How about this? I'll go to the Soviet Union." And they said, "It just sounded exotic to me. It sounded crazy." And they said, "Absolutely. You do know, of course, what happens if you do bad things in the Soviet Union, you will end up in Siberia. Do you understand this?"

DUBOWITZ: It's your parents telling you this?

MAY: This is my parents telling me this. I said, "Yeah, I get it. I get it." Okay. So I went to the Soviet Union on this trip for the summer, an academic trip. I was fascinated by everything. It was so foreign to me. And I walked around with a little dictionary in my hand and was working so hard to learn the language, and to see things, and to read, and to watch from the bus. And we went to Armenia and we went to Ukraine. It was great. And when I got back, I was just totally obsessed. And I studied Russian language. I studied Russian history. I studied Russian literature. That became what I studied there. And then on the summertime, I went to Middlebury Language School and then to Norwich, which had a Russian school only, very different. Middlebury had French and German. Norwich, it was Czarist Russians that were there. They spoke Russian differently in there. They distrusted anybody who stayed in the Soviet Union beyond 1917.

A lot of the men who were there were seminarians becoming priests in the Russian Orthodox Church. And Russian Orthodox priests must be married, unlike the Catholic church. So a lot of the women who were there wanted to marry a priest, and that's what they were there. So myself and then girlfriend, we were odd birds there. I applied for the only undergraduate program that took you to the Soviet Union for a semester. Graduate students, there were some. But I think it was only the second year. After that, and I got in and I go and I spend a semester in the Soviet Union. Anyhow.

DUBOWITZ: And this is where at Leningrad State University?

MAY: Leningrad State University, as I always say, "Ra, ra, ra, go Reds." At the same time I was there, there was another up-and-coming young student, I didn't know this at the time, but found out later, his name was Vladimir Putin. I think he was in the law department, something like that. He wasn't in studying Pushkin like I was.

DUBOWITZ: And entirely possible that you were drinking vodka with a guy named Vladimir?

MAY: I got drunk on bad vodka with a lot of guys named Vladimir. Some of the worse. We lived in a dormitory there. It was dormitory number six. [*Russian Language.*] But six to a room, I don't know how I slept six to a room, but I did. But it had a view of the Hermitage over the Neva River. It was very beautiful. It was hot water once a week, whether you needed it or not. You could take a shower. You had a line up. Women lined up for much longer than the men. The men were more better about sharing, washing clothes in buckets, and that sort of thing, when soaping. There were toilets, you just had to bring your own seat. And if they liked you in the dining room, they'd put a lot of butter on your potatoes. Anyhow, so I won't go – later, after that, I went to graduate school at Columbia. I was at the Russian Institute in the School of International Affairs.

DUBOWITZ: Another hard bed of Marxism? Or not in those days?

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MAY: Not so much in those days, actually. It was very Soviet. It was Sovietology. My professors were pretty good. They were not far left, I would say. Brzezinski was there, though I didn't study with him, but I studied with others. Marshall Shulman's people who know this stuff will remember. Actually, I'll tell you another story. I met Marshall Shulman at some party when I was a student in Russia. And I was speaking pretty good Russian at that point. And most of the old Russianists, like him, Sovietologists, didn't speak good Russian because it was so hard to spend time there. And it was hard. And we didn't have the kind of classes you have nowadays with electronic, you just had to stick with the teacher. Anyway, he heard me speak and he said, "What are you doing after for graduate school?" And I said, "I don't know."

He said, "You have two choices. You come and study with me at the Russian Institute, or you go to Harvard with..." I forget whoever the guy's name was, also Marshall. He said, "Those are the only two places you want to study. But if you want to come to the Russian Institute, maybe the School of International Affairs, do a PhD program, you let me know and you'll get in." Basically, that's what he said to me. And so that's what I ended up doing. And then I took some journalism courses there and ended up deciding I probably don't have the temperament or the patience for a doctorate. So I got a master's in international affairs and a master's in journalism. And then I did spend some time, a little time as a journalist in the Soviet Union after that. Anyhow, I won't go through all of it, but the fact of the matter is Russia and the Soviet Union have been an abiding interest of mine for well over a half a century.

DUBOWITZ: It's fair to say that unlike Bernie Sanders, who decided to go on his honeymoon to the Soviet Union because he was impressed by the Soviet system and by Marxism. You were not impressed by what you saw?

MAY: I was initially. When I initially went there, I was by no means anti-Soviet. I thought maybe there were loads of good reasons to think that this was not a bad place. It took time. I had to learn the language and speak and meet people, and I did. And I got to know people who, I would say, some I knew a few well-known dissidents. I knew others who were kind of quasi-dissidents, were not well-known. But there were people who, if you were supposed to come out for May Day and March for Soviet Power, they'd now would take a sick day, that kind of thing. They would go into a profession where they couldn't get involved plugging old Turkic languages, that sort of thing. Mathematics, they were those kinds of people. And I'll tell you very quickly. I mean, yes, it was a slow understanding of how evil this place was, but there was one encounter that really brought it home to me.

We met this old woman smoking, we're smoking cigarettes, drinking very strong coffee. She told me that she had spent 10 years in a camp in Siberia. I said, oh, and I tried being as tactful as I could. I said, "Why did they send you to a concentration camp, a labor camp in Siberia?" And she said, "Darling, they sent me for 10 years." I said, "Okay, yeah, yeah, 10 years." I said, "But what I'm really asking is not how long you spent. I understood. But why they sent you to that camp. I'm not saying they had good reason, I'm just saying why." She said, "I went for 10 years."

I said, my Russian is obviously not because she says, "Honey, your Russian's okay. Your understanding of Russia is very poor. They send me for 10 years. When they want to send you under Stalin to a camp for 10 years, they don't come up with a reason. They don't bother. They just send you. You're an intellectual, you're a Jew, you're somebody they don't like for whatever reason, they send you for 10 years. They don't come up with a reason. Now, my daughter, there they came up with a reason because they executed my daughter." I said, "Okay, well, what did they say your daughter did?" "Well, she organized a Marxist-Leninist study club." I said, "I'm still not quite getting it. What do you mean they executed her for organizing a Marxist-Leninist study club in the Soviet Union?" She said, "Think about it, sweetheart. It wasn't a Marxist-Leninist, Stalinist study club. They killed her."

DUBOWITZ: Wow.

MAY: So that brought home to me where I was.



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DUBOWITZ: Just how brutal this regime was.

MAY: How brutal this regime was, how arbitrary, how brutal, how totalitarian in every way. And that began to change me a lot even while I was there. I remember my – because we had Russian roommates in the *obshchezhitie*, the dormitory. And they could tell that I was, anyhow, I could tell you a million stories about them. And how it was.

DUBOWITZ: Well, I want to ask you, Cliff. Because this is obviously “The Iran Breakdown.”

MAY: Yes, right.

DUBOWITZ: And now I want to connect it to the other part of your life, which is, so you go into journalism and you are working at *Newsweek International*, *Hearst Newspapers*. You do a stint to the Soviet Union. And then it's 1979, and you're correspondent for CBS Radio and a writer for Bill Moore's, if I remember. And he's the Bill Moore's journal on PBS, right?

MAY: PBS. Yeah, Channel 13.

DUBOWITZ: And you were sent to Iran to cover the Islamic Revolution?

MAY: Yeah, actually, I was living in Mexico City at the time, and my editor at *Hearst Newspapers* was friendly with the producer at Channel 13 PBS. His name is Jerry Toobin, father of Jeffrey Toobin, the legal analyst you've seen on CNN over 50 years. And I had been doing some, it's what's called a stringer for CBS radio. In other words, they give you a tape recorder. You only get paid when you – anyhow, they were all talking, we need to send somebody over to cover this revolution. We have limited funds. So they work it out. Hearst will pay my salary, PBS \$10,000 in cash in my pocket to pay expenses. CBS will pay my cigarette money. And they send me over to meet with an Iranian producer and to cover the revolution over the next few months in Iran. And that was my introduction to what was going on in Iran.

I have to say, I landed knowing very little about it, and lucky you could just get on AI and say, give me a brief history. You took some books, you took some newspaper articles. You did the best you can. It was interesting because I had a producer who was Iranian, we had very good access. And we could go around the country. We went to Qom, and we saw Ayatollah Khomeini standing there on top of his little cottage, I would say, which was really interesting. I tell you more about that. We went up to Russia, went on the Caspian Sea. We went to, of course, we spent a lot of time in Tehran. The difficulty became that the producer I was working with was very gung-ho pro-revolution. I think he hoped to be minister of propaganda or something like that. I was starting to see, “Hmm. I'm not sure. This is so terrific.” I'll tell you, there are two stories I want to tell you.

DUBOWITZ: But I mean, the fact that you were actually identifying this was unusual because I think at the time, certainly the Western Intelligentsia, the Western media, those who were covering Iran, those who were just observing Iran were quite taken by Khomeini and this revolution against the “hated Shah,” this authoritarian leader who they considered to be a brutal authoritarian leader, even though he was obviously pro-American. Again, why were you the exception? Why were you able to see what was really going on?

MAY: Yeah, why did I see that this is not an Iranian revolution, this is an Islamic revolution? It's not true that a lot, as a lot of people thought, including Iranians I met, and I met Iranians who had gone to University of Texas at Austin and spoke good English. They were not Islamists, but they said, “No, no Khomeini, he values us. This is a revolution of all the people, the students, the Bazaari, the Communists. We're all... He's going to be our...” This was the line in the *New York Times*, and there was this one guy from Princeton, I can't remember his name. He was writing a lot about he's going to be a spiritual leader that... That's what Khomeini was saying, that's all he wants to be. That's why he went back Qom.



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DUBOWITZ: "I'm actually, in politics, I'm a quietest. I'm going back to Qom where I will immerse myself in spiritual reflections and let others run the country."

MAY: Well, except that he had been writing since the –

DUBOWITZ: Which of course, he didn't do. He was lying about it.

MAY: He was lying. He had written plenty about the idea of the Islamic jurist running the country. People like our friend, the late Bernard Lewis. He had read this stuff and he knew about this stuff and it even became clear he had Peter Jennings that corresponded, I think for ABC on the plane coming from France, the French, once again, the French were trying to appease the Islamists. They have quite a history of going back a long ways before this, I'm afraid.

You remember that Peter Jennings said to him, "How do you feel?" Because Khomeini had been for years in exile, he had been in exile in Iraq and then in exile in France. He said, "How do you feel coming back?" He expected he'd say, "Oh my home, I can't wait to see my home." He said, "Nothing. I feel nothing." That should have been a sign of what was going on.

If you read him on other things, he had written, I think not just said, but written that, "Patriotism is a form of paganism because it means you love your country rather than Allah." He's also said that for Islam to dominate in the world again, that is the main thing. That is what the Jihad is all about. So if Iran must burn, let it burn. Right? That doesn't matter either. This is very important, you know better than I. You've had on this program, people who understand that Khamenei, and his ilk, and the IRGC, those of true faith, they are Khomeinists. They believe in him and his revolution.

They're being so, so stubborn about everything because they can't give up the revolution and just say, "Let's see if we can't have a chicken in every pot. Let's see if we can't have the best damn healthcare system in the Middle East. We tried to have nuclear weapons. We tried to wipe the Israelis off the map. Why don't we just move on for that?" They kind of can't do that because it's ideological, and more importantly, perhaps theological. The extent to which that was true, Bijan made clear to me the day just after we filmed.

DUBOWITZ: This is Bijan, your main producer. Yeah.

MAY: Where we saw him come out on the roof of his cottage, and very figure right out of the Bible, with the turban, and the white beard, and the cloak, stern visage, all that. A little gesture to the crowd and everybody just cheering. Women ululating, holding babies up, all that.

Anyhow, the point is that when that was over, Bijan turns to me and says, "You are sure lucky." I said, "Yeah, I think you're right, Bijan. I am because I'm a young foreign correspondent and a lot of my friends are covering cops in Detroit and a lot of them are sitting behind desks copy editing. Here I am with the front row in history. You're right, I'm lucky." He laughed at me dismissively. He said, "You don't understand at all, do you? Let me explain. There've only been a few great men in history. There was Moses, there was Jesus, there was Mohammed, and now there is Khomeini, and you are in his divine presence." Now I understood. That's how I understood this is an Islamic revolution and this is going to be a problem.

DUBOWITZ: Right. It sure was. Then he proceeded to, Khomeini proceeded to kill everybody and anybody who stood with him.

MAY: The students we talked about from, if they didn't escape, thousands of people, the Communist party. No, he went after everybody to solidify his power and the power of his revolution.

DUBOWITZ: So you've seen the Soviet Union up close. You've seen the Islamic Republic up close. So let's talk about this relationship between the USSR and Iran, and Russia and Iran. It's very much a partnership in practice. Can you frame this

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partnership? It has historical dimensions to it, obviously contemporary dimensions, economic, military, political. Help us understand this relationship between Russia and Iran because it's a complicated relationship. It's not a simple and warm partnership. It's complicated.

MAY: It's complicated. I would start with this. It's very important to understand that Russia is and has always been an empire, not a nation-state. It's an empire that expanded on foot as it went east to Central Asia and all the way to the Sea of Japan. *Vladivostok*, which means *vada* ruler *vostok* east, ruler of the East.

That's part of what people need to understand about Putin. He's trying to restore this empire. He thinks that's his mission. He thinks he's the latter-day czar. He understands that the Russian Empire was at its greatest, at its grandest, at its largest when it was rebranded for a time as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, which of course it wasn't. Think of the colonies that it had Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and then let's mention the current colonies, Chechnya, Dagestan. Anyhow, we can go on. Armenia was part of that. We'd go to Christian, right, Georgia, but mostly Christian. Anyhow.

Listen, Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers, they're trying to establish an empire. I wouldn't call it a Persian empire because it's an Islamic empire. But they do remember the fact that Persia was a great empire of antiquity. Were there clashes between the Russian Empire and the Persian empires in antiquity? Oh yes, there were. Absolutely there were.

But again, here's what they have in common. Just before we go walk out on a little bit on history, and that is they both, both Vladimir Putin and Ayatollah Khomeini, want, one, to expand their empires. Two, they want to diminish the power of the US. Three, they want to replace the post-World War II, post-Cold War world order with one in which they ascend while America retreats. By the way, that's also the aim of Xi Jinping in China and Kim Jong-un in Pyongyang, North Korea. That ties together what we at FDD have been calling for some years now, because we perceived it, as this axis, Axis of Aggressors. Others are using that phrase, they maybe say axis of authoritarians, axis of revisionists, whatever. But it's an axis. There's no question about it.

I wanted to get, and we can talk about the specific ways and we should, and that they help each other. We've done research on this here at FDD, Brad Bowman's working on a monograph on exactly this. It's almost complete. We can talk about how economically, diplomatically, militarily they are all working together. Not least, I would say, Tehran and Moscow at this particular point. But there's one point I want to make, and you may disagree. I think I know some of our friends disagree on this.

That is people say, "Okay, but this relationship is purely transactional." It's true. But what does that imply? Transactional? It means it's based on interests. Okay. The implication of that is that a relationship based on interest is less solid than one based on values. What's the evidence for that? We had a good relationship with the Soviet Union during World War II. It wasn't based on values. It was based on interests. It was an attempt to make it based on values with the establishment of the United Nations and all that. But it didn't never work out.

We have very similar values to say Britain, and France, and Spain. But how good is our relationship with them? Are they coming to President Trump in the last few months and saying, "We know you want to stop the war in Gaza, so how can we help? How can we be on the same page?" No.

DUBOWITZ: Quite the opposite.

MAY: It's quite the opposite.

DUBOWITZ: They're emboldening Hamas.

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MAY: They're emboldening Hamas while President Trump is trying to say to Hamas, "You have to stop, give up the hostages, and then we can talk about whether you live..." No, based on values. Why? Because their interests are trumping their values. What are their interests? If you're Starmer? You've got all these Islamists who are now living in your country. A lot of them have come as illegal immigrants and you're afraid of them.

DUBOWITZ: Same with Macron in France, afraid.

MAY: Macron of France, I think. Same with Sanchez in Spain. So no question if it's a transactional relationship, if it's based on interests, when the interests change, the relationship will change. But that could be 20 years from now. That could be – I have no doubt that at certain point, whoever is leading the Communist party in China, say, may look north and say, "There's so much land and so much resources up there, and so few people comparatively, and I've got so many people, why should that be Russian?" It could change, but I don't see it happening now because they have other fish they want to fry.

DUBOWITZ: Common interest and common enemies.

MAY: Common interest and common enemies. That's exactly the case. So I think that's important now. So to get a little more specific, and I'm drawing from FDD's research. On the Russian side, they're helping Iran with nuclear energy projects. They're signing massive contracts worth billions of dollars to build even new nuclear reactors. They provided jet fighters, they held joint drills. They've offered some high-tech transfers like aircraft and helicopters. In the UN Moscow routinely backs Tehran against Western pressure. On the Iranian side the support has been even more direct. Iran has shipped thousands of drones and ballistic missiles to Russia for use to slaughter Ukrainians. It's supplied artillery shells. It's helped Russia build drone factories in its own territory based on Iranian models. The Shahed, for example.

DUBOWITZ: Right? What's interesting to me, because we talk a lot about Ukraine, but those drones, which are Iranian-engineered drones have also penetrated the airspace of our NATO allies, of Poland, of Romania. Putin is testing NATO's lines using Iranian drones.

MAY: NATO's lines and NATO's resolve. By the way, that brings us back a little bit to what we were just talking about a moment ago. When people say, "Oh, it's only transactional." Moscow and China didn't bail Tehran out during the 12-Day War when Israel went up and began to destroy nuclear facilities and intercontinental ballistic missiles. President Trump came in with the B-2. They didn't. They didn't. They don't have what we call Article V, a treaty was Article V, it's part of the NATO treaty that essentially says that an attack on one NATO member is an attack on all NATO members. Ukraine's not a NATO member. Poland isn't a NATO member. Is Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania? They are.

But Article V has never been tested. Do we really know that, for example, a Russian attack on, say, Lithuania would mean America would be involved? Do we really think Turkey would be involved? Do we think Hungary would be involved? Now would it be in Russia's interest to show that NATO is a house of cards and that it falls apart? Of course. Would it be in Xi Jinping's interest? Of course. Then he can say to the Japan, and, "You're going to rely on the Americans? They had an Article V guarantee, and it fell. It didn't mean anything. Maybe you want to make a deal with me. What do you think?" So it's in the interest of each member of the Axis of Aggressor to see NATO collapse

And to see America turn out not to be, not such a good ally based on values. And this is tricky too because I would argue that we should be supporting Ukraine. I do argue we should be supporting Ukraine based on both values and interests. But there were a lot of people in this town, friends of ours who say the only reason – "We have no interest in Ukraine. It doesn't matter to us. It's far away. We don't care. It's part of Russia's sphere of influence. We don't care And I don't care about values, I'm only interested in interest. That's all I care about are American interests. If I don't see American interests,



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we wish them well, but our values don't take us any further than that." And that's a big argument, I would say on the right, as you know, in this town currently.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah, I mean it's worth noting. I mean, China and Russia didn't ride to the rescue of Iran during the 12-Day War. But after the 12-Day War, both countries are hard at work helping Khamenei reconstitute.

MAY: Build back better.

DUBOWITZ: The capabilities and build back better. I mean, I think for Putin and for Xi Jinping, they take pride in the fact that they will defend their allies, they will work with their partners. And even though they may not decide militarily to intervene at that time, they're not going to abandon their partners. And so even though Khamenei today has been deeply embarrassed, deeply wounded and deeply weakened, and I think Putin and Xi Jinping appreciate that, understand that, and are disappointed in that.

MAY: Yes.

DUBOWITZ: They're not abandoning Tehran and they're going to help him build back better, as you said. I think that's an important message that we need to learn is that we, the United States, can't abandon our allies. I mean, the Ukrainians have fought and died in their own defense. There've been no American soldiers on the ground. They've done severe damage to one of our most dangerous enemies for a fraction of the Pentagon's budget.

MAY: Tiny fraction, less than 3% of the Pentagon's budget for the past three years.

DUBOWITZ: Right and so they're wounding Putin's Russia. The Israelis are wounding Khamenei's Islamic Republic. If we were to abandon these beleaguered democracies, that's a clear indication around the world to other allies that you can't depend on America. And if you're in the Indo-Pacific or you're in Europe or you're in the Middle East or anywhere in the world, you're going to get the message that this is not The American Century. The American Century is over, and you'd better cozy up to this Axis of Aggressors or you're going to find yourself in the firing zone.

MAY: And if we want this to be The American Century among other things, we need to learn from what the Ukrainians are doing because they've been very creative, very innovative in things like drone warfare, which we need to know about and see. But they're also testing American military equipment. That's great. Trump also, so as not to spend more money, but actually to make some more money, his answers the restrainers and isolationists says, here's what we're going to do. We're going to build weapons, sell them to our NATO allies. Not our NATO allies. Pay for them and transfer them. That's great.

If that also increases the American industrial base, that's usually important because Ukraine, among other things, is a wake-up call that we had allowed our defense industrial base to wither way beyond where it should. As if we just had – the way the Europeans did even more because they just thought, "Oh, wars, maybe that happens in Africa. Maybe that happens in the Middle East. It doesn't happen here in Europe. We don't need to worry about it. We can sell – we can buy gas and oil just from Russia and they'll like the fact that they're getting euros. It's all fine. We have diplomacy. We don't need to have a serious military. And besides, America has a serious military. It's their responsibility."

Now to be fair, again, thinking of friends of ours who argue with me and with you, say, "After World War II, we didn't want Germany to redevelop as a military power." Okay. That was then. Throughout the 20th century. We're now a quarter of the way into the 21st century. Things, facts change. You have to change along with them.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. Well certainly we've talked about on this podcast a kind of recurring theme, this kind of idea that you can seduce the hard men of Moscow, and Tehran, and Beijing, and Pyongyang to become responsible global



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stakeholders if you just flood them with cash. You give them lots of money. You let China into the WTO. You do deals with Putin and you sink billions into the Russian economy. You lift sanctions and flow billions into the Islamic Republic. You'll turn these hard men into moderates. And clearly that has been the exact opposite. We made them richer, but we've also made them much more dangerous.

MAY: Yes. If they get richer, they use their riches to strengthen themselves and weaken us. It turns out they're not all material girls. They don't all want – and this is a failure of imagination that we Americans and even Europeans have too, that we just think they're going to respond as we would if we were in their place.

DUBOWITZ: Well, that's right. And we also, I think we had Miad Maleki on a previous episode.

MAY: I listened to it yesterday.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah, I think he did a very good job of explaining that the Islamic Republic's economy is essentially a criminal mafia.

MAY: Right.

DUBOWITZ: So when you flood billions of dollars into the economy, you're not helping the people. The money doesn't trickle down to help the average Iranian. You're flowing it into a criminal mafia regime.

MAY: The IRGC.

DUBOWITZ: Khamenei.

MAY: The Basij.

DUBOWITZ: The Basij, they own these huge bonyads, have these massive economic interests. They're getting the money. And it's the same thing with Putin's Russia. I mean, right? Putin's Russia is also – Putin's running a criminal mafia regime. He's at the top of it. He's probably the world's wealthiest man because he – so much of the money that's flowed into Russia or so much of the money that is part of Russia's wealth and resources he's expropriated. So you're not going to moderate Putin and Khamenei by giving them more money. You're just going to make them richer and much more dangerous. Because I want to talk a little bit, we've jumped to the contemporary reality, which is exactly right. Let's go back a little bit to the history because it has been a long, complicated history. You've talked about these two imperial empires and that there's rivalry between Russia and Persia. Can you talk a little bit about the Imperial rivalry, the Soviet period, the post-Soviet ties? There's a lot of history there.

MAY: There's a huge amount, but I'll try to hit some of the high points. I mean, one thing that I think is important to recognize, very different about Russia, and Russia is kind of schizophrenic in this regard, for about 250 years, the Russians were under what they call the Mongol Yoke. They were dominated by these nomadic warriors from the Far East, from The Steppes. And you have several hundred years of domination. That changes you and the way you see. It also – I mean, it has to be somewhat uncomfortable for Putin to be kowtowing to Xi Jinping.

On the other hand, there's also within Russia a kind of ideology. Alexander Dugin is the guy who personifies this, who says essentially, "Embrace that. We're not Europeans. We're not like the French. We're not like the Germans. We're Eurasians. We do come from the Mongols. That's okay. We're warriors. We love war." You know what I mean? It's a different kind of ideology. It's a different ideology. It kind of embraces what they used to say. I mean, it used to be, even when I was there, they didn't want to be seen as Asians. They wanted to be seen as Europeans.

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DUBOWITZ: Well especially where you studied. I mean, you studied in Leningrad which became St. Petersburg. St. Petersburg was always, I think, the most Western-facing Russian or Soviet city.

MAY: More than that. You're absolutely right. Don't forget the land that where St. Petersburg was built was taken from the Swedes and their empire. And prior to Peter the Great who established it, Russia was a Tsardom but not an empire really. It started in the 1700s under Ivan the Fourth, Ivan the Terrible as people know him as. But it was still just a Tsardom. The word czar comes from Caesar, but it was kind of modeled on the Mongol Khanates, the Khans. It was sort of that... Because they had nothing else to draw on. I mean, it wasn't like they could say, "Oh, give me a book on how they do it over in America." That's what they drew on. And that's part of very much why Putin sees himself as a new Peter the Great, taking these lands. And establishing a city like Petersburg, which was carved out of essentially subarctic swamp. And thousands died to build it. All that. So there was that.

Also for centuries, Russia and Persia and its various empires fought in particular. If you just think of the map a little bit, there's like a bridge between Russia and Persia, and that's the Caucasus. And so they fought. In the early 1800s, Persia lost huge swaths of territory, Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan to the Russian Empire. Right. Later in the 19th century, Persia became part of what was known as the Great Game, which was really a rivalry between Russia and Britain. But Persia wasn't that strong, so it would... Like Afghanistan, they could try to grab it. You fast-forward to the 20th century. During World War II, the Soviets occupied northern Iran. And in 1946, I believe it was, Moscow even backed a separatist government in Iranian Azerbaijan, which is like the northwest –

DUBOWITZ: North of the country.

MAY: Right. And U.S. pressure forced them to back down. It was one of the first confrontations of the Cold War. Okay, let's go fast-forward to the 2000s. Russia begins building Iran's first nuclear power plant. In the 2010s, now we were in Putin time, they're fighting side by side in Syria to prop up Bashar al-Assad. Iran wants Syria because it's frontline against Israel, and it's also a way to get support to Hezbollah and Lebanon. This is again, part of this new empire. Putin's trying to reestablish what he had in the Soviet days, in particular, an important Mediterranean port in Tartus. And he wants this because he's going to also project power into the Middle East and into Africa and all that. Again, there are some contradictions.

DUBOWITZ: Oh wait, I think, postscript to that, when Assad went down, he currently now, I believe, is in Moscow.

MAY: Oh, yes. Well, of course. Where does he go? With his well-dressed wife. He goes to Moscow.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah, he goes to Moscow. So he's now under the protection, quote unquote, of Vladimir Putin until he finds himself probably falling from a 15-floor balcony as many former protectors of Putin –

MAY: Want to watch your footing when you're in a hotel in Russia for sure.

DUBOWITZ: Without a doubt. So you get into the 2020s, and obviously Russia invades Ukraine. The maximum pressure campaign on Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guards is kicking in the high gear with Donald Trump. And sanctions are being imposed on both Russia and on the Islamic Republic. Right, so again –

MAY: And they work together. And how do we get around these sanctions? And they work together on this diplomatically. And in terms of understanding ways that you can beat sanctions, you understand all the mechanisms a lot better than I do. You've studied this for years. But that's absolutely true. Iran began transferring drones to Russia directly as early as 2022, I believe. A \$1.75 billion deal in 2023 to enable Russia to produce those drones domestically. And what else? In January of this year, you had Russia and Iran sign the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and the Eurasian Economic Union. Interesting name if you think about what we just said.

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Well, I can go through all it does, but it expands cooperation, defense, energy, nuclear technology, cybersecurity, finance, counterterrorism. They say it includes a free trade agreement, notable growth in Russian-Iranian economic ties, trade, investment. Again, Russia helping the nuclear sector in Iran could provide more nuclear technology expertise. Cautious about military commitments. Russia engages in joint military drills and offers technology transfers, aircraft, helicopters. Anyhow, all that is – this is a serious relationship. Again, based on interests, not values. Putin I'm sure doesn't like Islamism or Jihadism or any of that, but it's not a problem for him either. The regime in Tehran bites its tongue when it comes, for example, to what Putin did to crush Chechen separatists. I mean, his war was just – what he did there, he just leveled Grozny, the capital of Chechnya. And what you have now –

DUBOWITZ: Who are Muslims. I mean that would –

MAY: Who are – the Chechens are Muslims.

DUBOWITZ: You'd think that'd be a concern in Tehran.

MAY: You would think it would be, or some other capital of one of the more than 50 countries that have the Muslim majority.

DUBOWITZ: Right. Or what Xi Jinping has done to the Uyghurs in Western China.

MAY: But no, everybody, they all get a pass on that. They all get a pass.

DUBOWITZ: They get a pass from the Islamic Republic and other –

MAY: That's exactly right.

DUBOWITZ: – Islamic regimes.

MAY: That's exactly right. And really, as I said, Chechnya is really a colony and it is headed by a guy who's essentially a quisling, he's pro-Putin, but he's a quisling. You have Chechens fighting in Ukraine, happy to kill Christians. They're not as good an army as they might appear to be, you might think them to be.

You also recently had a meeting that Putin held that the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres came to in Kazan. Now, why would I mention that, Kazan? What's the matter with the Kazan? Well, what is Kazan? Yeah, Kazan, it's the capital of the "Republic" of Tatarstan. Tatarstan land of the Tatars, part of Russia. Are the Tatars Russians? No, they're not Russians. Now, where else did you have a large Tatar – and they're Turkish, Muslim, essentially Turkish or [inaudible]. Crimea, it's a Crimean – and a lot of the Tatars, after 2014 when Putin annexed Crimea, they left because they didn't want to live under the Russians there. They had been treated very badly under Stalin. They had been exiled to Central Asia, and where did they go? Ukraine. And you have Tatars in the Ukrainian army. Ukraine is actually a very successfully diverse place. People don't quite understand that, much more than you would imagine. It's very different than it once was in that. Anyway.

DUBOWITZ: Because what's interesting is all of these conflicts that are kind of converging, this Axis of Aggressors that's working closely together has finally started to wake up, even the Europeans who haven't had much backbone on either facing down Putin or facing down Khamenei. So most recently, the UN snapback occurred where the UN's Security Council resolutions that had been foolishly lifted under the 2015 Obama deal, the arms embargo and the missile embargo and weapon shipments, nuclear infrastructure, legitimacy, all of that has now come back. And who, lo and behold, was at the UN Security Council trying to protect Khamenei and the Islamic Republic from the snapback, Vladimir Putin and his Russian diplomats trying to figure out a way to protect –



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MAY: Along with China, again there.

DUBOWITZ: Along with China for sure, but very much Russia taking the lead in making the public and political case that these sanctions should not snap back. Now that was unsuccessful, the Europeans, the French, the Germans, and the Brits surprisingly actually held their ground.

MAY: Credit where credit is due.

DUBOWITZ: And with strong support from the Trump administration, those sanctions have come back. But it is sort of interesting because I think the Europeans have now finally woken up to the reality that, yeah, there are Iranian missiles and Iranian drones killing Ukrainians, threatening Poland, threatening Romania, threatening NATO, and ultimately threatening Europe. And that it's not just Khamenei's nuclear program that is a threat because of its proliferation consequences, but it's the fact that these missiles and these drones and other heavy weaponry could be used, is being used against Ukrainians and Europeans.

MAY: I think our colleague Rich Goldberg tweeted out that with the snapback in place, it now becomes illegal, illegal for Tehran to continue to give weaponry to Moscow and vice versa. Is that correct?

DUBOWITZ: It is. It's absolutely correct. Yeah, it's in violation of multiple UN security council resolutions. It's in violation of international law, not that the Chinese and the Russians are going to respect the international law, but it certainly makes it a lot more complicated for Iran to be able to provide weapons to Russia and for Russia and China to provide weapons and weapons systems to Iran.

MAY: To Tehran, yeah.

DUBOWITZ: So it was very important that this snapback occurred. But for me, it was interesting because to finally see the Western Europeans actually wake up to this threat from the Islamic Republic of Iran, and to understand that the threat is not just a threat to Israel or to the United States or a threat of nuclear proliferation in general, but that there actually is a direct military threat from Putin to Europe that is being enabled by Khamenei and the Islamic Republic.

MAY: This requires that you be able to play chess, not just checkers, to see several moves that are out.

DUBOWITZ: Well, that's right. I think first of all, it requires you to connect dots.

MAY: Connect dots.

DUBOWITZ: I think that unfortunately too many people over the years try to disconnect the dots in this relationship between these nefarious actors. And finally, Europeans just had no ability to turn away when they realized, I mean, those are Iranian drones, those are Iranian missiles that are killing Ukrainians, thousands of Ukrainians in Kyiv and around the country. And those are drones –

MAY: As well as artillery, let me just remind people, artillery, a huge supply from North Korea.

DUBOWITZ: Right, and North Korean soldiers.

MAY: And North Korean soldiers

DUBOWITZ: Fighting with the Russians, killing Ukrainians, so –

MAY: And getting something in return, this is another thing that is important to understand, and what Kim Jong Un is getting in return is going to make him a more dangerous enemy to South Korea, to Japan, to Americans on Guam and to Americans in general. I mean, this is, and again, President Trump offered all sorts of things in his first administration to

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Kim Jong Un, "Wouldn't you like a country that's prosperous?" And Kim Jong Un said, "No, I'm not interested in that. I'm really not."

DUBOWITZ: Yeah, once again, it just proves the point that these are hard men with hard ideas. We talk about it on this podcast a lot. I think we as Westerners don't actually respect the fact that these are deeply ideological leaders, dictators, that Vladimir Putin has all the money that he needs, cares little about his people. Ali Khamenei has all the money he needs, similarly, doesn't care about the Iranians. And Kim Jong Un and Xi Jinping again, are not men who are going to be moderated by affluence, they are men with hard ideas who have a mission. And as Westerners, I think it's a great line, they're not material boys and material girls who are looking for a better life on this earth, they're looking to dominate, they're looking for power, and they're looking to replace the U.S.-led order that has brought so much prosperity since World War II.

MAY: Well that is true, but one this is we're the ones who are anomalous, not them. Go back hundreds of years, millennia, and what you had were either empires that conquered other empires, those that were nation-states that didn't want to be empires were swallowed up by those empires. You were either the predator or the prey. This is a very –

We're the ones who were different because after World War II, we didn't say, "You know what? We are now in charge of the world. We're the strongest. We can do what we want to. So Qatar, it's nice that you have gas fields off your coasts, they're ours." No, we'll pay for them. We'll pay for them at market prices. And what does Qatar do? Qatar says, "Now we can use this money for power and influence for our 350,000 or so citizens who are all of an ideology, which is a Muslim Brotherhood, ideology. That's what we will do. And the Americans, they're not going to stop us, but in fact, we can influence them." I mean, because we tried and experiment after World War II, people can say America's an empire, but it's really not in the way compared to any past empires, the Roman Empire, or –

DUBOWITZ: We gave people their independence and we defended that independence. We certainly didn't take their land.

MAY: That's right.

DUBOWITZ: And we didn't take their resources.

MAY: That's right.

DUBOWITZ: We did business with them. We paid for their resources. We traded for those resources, but we didn't actually expropriate their resources. We didn't conquer their lands. The only land we ever asked for was little pieces of land where we could bury our dead in cemeteries around the world of soldiers who actually defended this order.

MAY: Right, and we set up international law, and it became perverted by the ICC, the International Criminal Court, the and other courts that are – we set up the United Nations which is dominated by unfree nations in the General Assembly, and pretty much dominated by the Russians and the Chinese and the Security Council because they vote together pretty much all the time. Britain, France, and the US do not necessarily vote all together. In the Security Council –

DUBOWITZ: So, Cliff, maybe we've been a little naive.

MAY: I think we –

DUBOWITZ: Maybe we've been a little naive if we think back on the post-World War II order.

MAY: Here's a nice way to say it, a noble experiment we have tried after World War II, but if that experiment has failed, we need to look at what else we might want to do and might do differently. In terms of the UN, in terms international law, in terms of these international courts, in terms of our enemies who, as you put it, cannot be seduced.



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DUBOWITZ: Yeah. And I think we need to defend beleaguered democracies. So Cliff, thank you for creating the Foundation for Defense of Democracies to defend these beleaguered democracies. I think certainly the long-standing theme of “The Iran Breakdown,” we need to support the Iranian people to bring a different government in Tehran that's going to bring peace and stability and prosperity to the long-suffering people of Iran. And Cliff, thank you. It's been a great conversation. It's been an amazing 22 years working with you as a colleague and as a friend. And thank you for all you've done for the United States and for free nations, and looking forward to having you back on.

MAY: I'd love it. I always have a good time talking to you.

DUBOWITZ: This isn't an alliance built on trust. It's a pact of survival. Iran fuels Putin's war with drones and missiles. Russia shields Tehran's nuclear ambitions and buys it diplomatic cover. Together, they're trying to weaken America, divide the West, and resurrect their empires. But partnerships, born of desperation are fragile. That's where U.S. strategy must press hardest. My thanks to Cliff May for joining me to unpack this dangerous axis and what it means for the future of American power. I'm Mark Dubowitz. This has been “The Iran Breakdown.” Until next time, when we break it down all over again.