



# The Perch Pod Episode 32

## Andrey Sushentsov on Russia

Jacob Shapiro:

You're listening to the Perch Pod from Perch Perspectives. Hello listeners, and welcome to another episode of the Perch Pod. As usual, I'm your host, I'm Jacob Shapiro. I'm also the founder and chief strategist of Perch Perspectives, which is a human-centric business and political consulting firm.

Jacob Shapiro:

Joining me on the podcast today is Andrey Sushentsov. If you've been a long time listener of this podcast, you know that Andrey was actually one of the first guests that we had on the Perch Pod, and we're happy to invite him back on a year later to get his perspective from Moscow on things. I've known Andrey for a couple years now. He is one of the best and most insightful analysts I know, looking at geopolitical issues out of Russia. He's the director of the Laboratory of International Trends Analysis at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations. He's a program director at the Valdi Discussion Club. He's the president of Eurasian Strategies. He wears a lot of hats and does a lot of good work.

Jacob Shapiro:

If you can understand Russian, or if you speak Russian, he also has been putting out some great videos on YouTube, in Russian of course, about his point of view on things, so you should check those out as well. Take care, I hope you're all doing well, and see you out there. Cheers.

Jacob Shapiro:

Andrey, thank you for joining us. Listeners, this is round two. We had some technical difficulties on round one, so hopefully this time works better. Andrey, thanks for joining.

Andrey Sushentsov:

Jacob, very glad to be with you.

Jacob Shapiro:

And nice to see you too. Zencast has this new video feature, where we can actually look at each other while we're podcasting, so I don't just have your voice ethereally beamed into my ears. I can actually look at your face and see if you're actually laughing at my jokes, which you probably won't.

Andrey Sushentsov:



It is very illuminating, and actually one of the signs that we have a proper conversation.

Jacob Shapiro:

Yeah. Look, there is a lot of things we can talk about, but the first thing I wanted to ask is, it's been about a year since you came on the podcast, almost exactly, I think maybe 13 months technically. And the last time we talked, COVID-19 was just breaking out, but the US was also full swing into election season. It wasn't exactly clear who was going to pull ahead in the presidential election. And I just wanted to ask you to take a step back and reflect about both the last year in American politics and the last four years in American politics, from a Russian perspective. Does it feel like everything that's happened in the past year, or the past four years from your perspective is just normal, American, Democratic chaos? Does it feel like something is fundamentally broken when you look at the American politic system? How do you think about the last year and the last four years in American politics?

Andrey Sushentsov:

From Russian standpoint, we don't consider what we observed for the last four years as a collapse and a dramatic chaos, that somehow strategically changes American position in the world. Basically, American impact globally is based on four basic premises, military preponderance, significant technological advantage, financial power, in terms of the dollar as a major reserve currency and the lifestyle of power. I think only the latter has somehow eroded. But, if you observe all other three, we see very slight changes in those previous positions. So from Russian viewpoint, it doesn't actually matter who leads the United States, until those four major pillars are in place.

Jacob Shapiro:

But when we were talking yesterday, you did allude to the fact that you felt like the Trump administration, in particular, had done tremendous damage, maybe even irreparable damage to the US Russia relationship, which maybe was not what folks were expecting. I think maybe people thought that the Trump administration was going to improve relations with Russian, although every US president going back to Clinton has promised that. So do you feel like the Trump administration fundamentally broke anything in US Russia relations in the long term, or it's just another chapter in this ever going story?

Andrey Sushentsov:

We can see that Trump and people around him as a part of the American establishment, like the hawkish one, the one that sees America first and tries to exploit weaknesses of both adversaries and allies. If you observe the long trends, we can imagine a group of people like them to come back in the White House in some foreseeable future, like in maybe five, 10 years. They did inflict significant damage to Russia-America relations. Expectations were different when Trump first came. His rhetoric was promising something.



Andrey Sushentsov:

I personally was writing at the time that we are entering an era of high unpredictability, because he is a non-systemic, political figure in American politics, and essentially, he will try to ruin positions of his political adversaries internally, and that can have a significance be lower to Russia-American relations. That is exactly what happened. Major treaties were broken. We are probably in the lowest point since the end of the Cold War. Russia grew closer to China. Significant suspicion toward any constructive initiative toward United States is in currently in Moscow. So there are very few players in Russia who would opt, and as Medvedev did in 2008, go toward United States having an expectation that something good can come out of it. So I think that was the most dramatic experience of the last four years.

Jacob Shapiro:

Well, if Trump is an unsystemic politician as you described him, Biden is the polar opposite, has been in the system for certainly all of my life, probably all of your life as well. He's been doing this stuff before both of us were around. Do you see a return to stability? I was fairly pessimistic about Biden and US-Russia relations in general, because he was using that neoconservative ideological language. But I saw Blinken and Lavrov seem to have a polite, cordial meeting yesterday. It feels like the first time there has been some cordiality there in months in the relationship, so are things more predictable going forward, or is it just we're in a weird state and for the next couple of years, the hangover from the Trump administration is going to hang over US-Russia relations?

Andrey Sushentsov:

I was thinking about this, and I think it's really important. We actually have one of the YouTube videos at my channel, it's in Russian, but to the regions of Russian I think it can be of interest. The thing is that, those people in the Biden administration, they were the same people who propelled the first result in 2009 to 2010. So they had this experience of having both positive and then very negative relations with Russia during the Ukraine Crisis. And they indeed systemic people, they are part of the deep rooted establishment. And this is in some way coming to normal in terms of the mainstream American foreign policy. So the major outcome of this is that nobody currently in Washington believes that Russians did place Biden in the office.

Andrey Sushentsov:

So no, this fear that we have a Manchurian candidate. And this means that we have an American president leading American foreign policy, and that's good enough for us. So nobody will sabotage what we can achieve with them. And they basically have a much greater maneuver internally, while Trump White House was basically paralyzed, first of all internally, and then in international arena. And I think that we see some signs of coming to common sense in what our American interests are with Russia. Before the elections, there was this letter signed by 103 Russian experts, I think, who reasoned that we need to come to our senses and figured out what are



exactly American interests are with Russia. Because we can not supplement a strategy with impulsive steps like sanctions, we need to figure out why.

Andrey Sushentsov:

And this is exactly what is happening now with the Biden administration, they appointed a person in the department of commerce, I think, whose task is basically to make an inventorization of all the sanctions. Like, "What did we do for all those four years? How many of them? What are they destined for? Are they working? Can we actually supplement or change something inside of it?" And that's pretty okay with us. I'm not that optimistic that we can go toward the positive type or relations we had at sometimes during last decades, but what we need now is predictability and stability indeed. We need to be able to trust each other that the other side can deliver, when we have common interests, for example, like in Arctic or in Afghanistan or North Korea, or like in Syria, probably. And that was not the case during the Trump. So in this respect, his foreign policy was a complete ruin, particularly on the Russian direction.

Jacob Shapiro:

So we're talking a little bit about what the US wants out of Russia in the bilateral relationship, but if I could turn the question around on you, what do you think Russia wants out of the relationship? And let's even make it a hypothetical. I mean, let's say you had a direct line to the White House right now, and let's say you had a very pliant US president, who was willing to do whatever you said to fix US-Russia relations or make things better. What would you say to him or to her, that would communicate what Russia wants and what Russia needs to see out of the relationship in order to move forward? Obviously it won't happen because politics is going to prevent it, but just that analytically, pure articulation of Russia's strategic interest. What is it right now, do you think with the US?

Andrey Sushentsov:

Yeah, you're putting me to the wall, basically what this question. It's really significant. But to make it short and smart, I think we need to do a peace dividend 2 strategy. After the end of the Cold War, a lot of free resources from the diminishing military budgets were available. And these led to a very significant period of growth. And I think this was, of course very unique internationally period of time, but we can put forward an idea similar to the idea that we're currently exploring in the field of ecology. Like we need to come back to the emission of gas of level of 1992. Let's do the same with the military budgets. Let's diminish them to the level of 1992, because what last 40 years have showed, is that basically war and this military and nervousness doesn't lead anywhere, it doesn't help solve problems. And we have problems piling up, global problems.

Andrey Sushentsov:

If we'll take all the military budgets combined globally for last 40 years, we could have solved all of the major problems without spoiling trillions really, on politically unsuccessful and pointless military enterprises. And I think with the nuclear



weapons and cyber capabilities, we're basically doomed for peace. We cannot permit ourselves a global war, because everybody wants to leave, proliferates, everybody wants to feel good, to consume, all these things that basically makes this globalization working. I cannot imagine a person in China, France, Great Britain, United States, or Russia, who would be able to press the button, if we will be on the brink of the nuclear war. We had this experience in the 20th century, several significant stress tests.

Andrey Sushentsov:

And I think several stress tests, even in this century like Ukraine Crisis, Russia-Turkey Crisis, American-Chinese Crisis, and American-North Korean Crisis. And we see that in all of those instances, we pass those stress tests. So this can help me to say very forcefully that, war would not work in this century. So let's find out how to better use the resources that we can use.

Jacob Shapiro:

Yeah Andrey, you're dangerously close to sounding like an idealist. I feel like I'm usually the one who's making these sorts of arguments, but it's nice to know that you and I are on the same page there. And it also calls to mind, I just finished a book that was published in the US. I can't remember if it was this year or the year before, but the title of the book is just 2034. And it imagines a World War III scenario. And there was a lot of crazy stuff in the book, and I don't want to spoil it for listeners or for you if you haven't read it already. But basically it imagines that there is a nuclear exchange between China and the United States in the context of a war, 10 to 12 years from now.

Jacob Shapiro:

And to your point, I couldn't imagine it getting that far. And maybe that's a failure of imagination, maybe we're overestimating human nature and the limited decisions that happen when you do get into a conflict, and when both sides feel like their backs are against the wall. But I'm actually relieved to hear you say that that sort of scenario, is as unimaginable to you as it is to me, even though I just read this US book that was basically predicting it.

Andrey Sushentsov:

Well, we cannot blame people for good imagination. And I think we need to very vividly imagine the consequences of possible nuclear exchange. And they are the same basically, they have been the same since the early sixties.

Jacob Shapiro:

Yeah. Well, let's maybe dive in on the pressure points. I would think that, to me, the key pressure point in the US-Russia relationship, and it's not really close, and I'm curious to get your thoughts on this, is Ukraine. And it feels like if we could untie the Ukraine knot, if both sides could get on the same page about Ukraine, maybe all these other conflicts that you rightfully point out are accumulating on the



periphery, that the US and Russia just have not been able to work together on, because there is no trust and no goodwill on either side. I feel like if you could get to some kind of common understanding on the Ukraine issue, that maybe things would push forward. And it seems to me that, I mean, the United... Well, I'm not even going to say anything right there. Do you feel like the Ukraine issue is the center of gravity that needs to be solved for the US and Russia to move forward, or would you point somewhere else in the relationship to start with repairing ties?

Andrey Sushentsov:

I think Ukraine is one of the biggest issues on the Russian-American plate, but not the only one. It's an egg or chicken question. Do we need to solve first Russia-Ukraine relations first, or do we need to first fix the Russian-American relations to fix the Ukrainian Crisis? Because Ukraine is pretty independent, in terms of the ability to get attention and to exploit its position in European security, to draw this attention, both from Russia and United States, to manipulate it on some occasions. From our perspective, it's clear that they have several times staged provocations on the eve of significant summits, that involved American on Russian presidents. And they play this victim thing all the time. But Ukraine is not in a vacuum, the development of this crisis is a direct consequence of unsolved European security architecture problem, the enlargement of NATO, the spread of the Western influence. And then very fragile Ukrainian statehood, where both parties, the pro Russian, pro Western parties, they're basically competing with one another.

Andrey Sushentsov:

And they're actively involving foreign interference into internal affairs of Ukraine, both Western and Russian. And that eventually led to 2014, this implosion, which is a devastating blow to Ukrainian sovereignty in my respect, because they're currently much less sovereign than they have been 10 years ago. And this is one of the questions that would not be easily solved without Russian-American consensus. Whether Russia and United States are eager to get to the point of consensus, I'm not sure currently.

Jacob Shapiro:

Politicians are never eager for change, or at least not normally. I was wondering, I've been trying to think about how to describe the Ukraine-Russia issue to clients and to Perch readers. And I was wondering what you think of the analogy of Ukraine is to Russia, as China is to Taiwan. And to put my cards on the table, what I'm really asking there is, even though I think there's a pretty stable status quo in the South China sea with Taiwan, I don't see any US-China conflict over Taiwan happening soon. I think all parties involved want to maintain the status quo. Still though, China eventually wants to take back Taiwan. Maybe it's willing to wait four decades, maybe it's willing to wait a century, but any clear-eyed analyst has to understand that China views Taiwan as part of China, and everything that it's doing is to eventually try and reincorporate Taiwan back into the people's Republic of China.

Jacob Shapiro:

Even if the status quo will obtain for a while. Is that true of Russia and Ukraine? Does Russia have that historical memory or phantom pain of missing Ukraine, as something that used to be part of Russia, and is no longer and needs to be returned? Or is Russia different from China in the relationship with Ukraine? That as you say, is willing to respect Ukrainian sovereignty, might even prefer an independent Ukraine buffer state, as long as there's some agreement with the European security architecture and the US security architecture about, "Really, no interference. Don't put NATO forces in Kiev." All these other things. Where do you fall on that analogy?

Andrey Sushentsov:

I think it is a good analogy. And I submit that Taiwan is more important to China than Ukraine to Russia, because Taiwan is basically at the core of all China foreign relations and foreign connection, trade, economy, transport routes, whole vector of Chinese attention is to the Pacific ocean. And if you put yourself in Beijing and turn yourself to the Pacific Ocean, the first thing you would see is Taiwan, it's basically just in front of you. And this is a major headache for any Beijing government. And I think they are very serious about Taiwan. That's indeed would be one of the questions, like the Caribbean Crisis of the 21st century would possibly be around Taiwan. So I would not underestimate this thing. Russia is more relaxed over Ukraine.

Andrey Sushentsov:

It's strategy, pre Ukraine Crisis, was to actually award Ukrainian interference, award Ukrainian influence into Russia-European affairs. Russia was building alternative infrastructure pipelines, railroads. Russia was diminishing the relation in the military industrial complex with Ukraine. Russia cannot break the ties with Ukraine completely, because it is still a family matter. Almost every Russian family has a relative in Ukraine, like myself for example. And it's like, imagine Texas has broken from the United States 30 years ago, but you still share borders and you still have relatives, and you're not foreign to them in respect that you shared several centuries of history. And you still have ideas, some positive, some negative toward them.

Andrey Sushentsov:

And you still have issues about some things like, for example, I don't know, space facilities of United States are still located in Texas. Or oil fields or military infrastructure, something like this. So it's a really complicated question. And I would actually opt for Russia to be an island like United States, with no neighbors to share a fate with. And that's not the case with Russia, it has the longest land border on the planet.

Jacob Shapiro:



I mean, I don't think the United States would tolerate Texas breaking off at any point in its history. So is it similar with Russia, where maybe it doesn't have the power to prevent Ukraine from doing what it wants right now, but it's not an acceptable state of affairs from Moscow's perspective? Or is it the sort of thing where it's, "Okay. Yes, we're in the same family, but there's room for different political structures. We just need to come to some kind of common agreement." Is it more on that front end? Like the way the United States would try to treat a renegade Texas, or is it more more pragmatic?

Andrey Sushentsov:

I think it's more pragmatic. And I think that it was basically Russia and Russian elites, who broke Soviet Union, who wanted independence for Russia. And they perceived those relations with other Soviet republics as Buddhism for Russia. But that was that state of mind in the nineties, that, "We need to break out." And I think that the pragmatism still dominates relations. Russia has its clear red lines in Ukraine. I think you mentioned some of them like no membership in NATO, no American military infrastructure, but generally Russia would like to focus on itself. Russia would like to maintain security for Russian citizens on its own territory, that is the biggest territory on the planet or 11 hour bells.

Andrey Sushentsov:

Several European unions can be located inside Russian territory. This is not an issue of territory, this is more of an issue over Ukrainian crisis becoming Russian internal political issue. Every time when there is a media cycle citing some law in Ukraine that is harming interest of Russian speaking minority in that country, it become huge news. Imagine Texas has broke out, and a locals are prohibiting using, I don't know, English.

Jacob Shapiro:

English. Yeah. Let's say they were speaking Spanish or something.

Andrey Sushentsov:

Yeah. Yeah. And that would be big. And you can earn a lot of points in domestic politics if you're defending Russians abroad.

Jacob Shapiro:

Yeah. I think that's a great point, not an issue of territory, but has become a domestic, Russian internal issue. And I want to turn to some domestic Russia internal issues, but before we do, before we leave this topic in general, I take your point about not underestimating the situation in the South of China Sea, and not being too comfortable with the Taiwan situation itself. Certainly there has been a lot of fear-mongering here, especially in the United States about the potential for a Chinese-Taiwan military conflict. You've got major US military officials saying it's possible this decade, which I look at it and I just don't see that it's possible. But I mean, they're out there saying it.





Jacob Shapiro:

I'll put you on the spot there. Do you feel like a China-Taiwan military conflict is possible this decade? I certainly think past 2030 we might get in range of that. But for the next eight, nine years, do you see that as possible on the horizon? Maybe it's a very, very small chance, but how do you react?

Andrey Sushentsov:

As an analyst, I think we both should agree that everything can happen under some circumstances.

Jacob Shapiro:

Sure.

Andrey Sushentsov:

So what should be the circumstances for China to take that very bold step? And we can list those circumstances. It can be a miscalculation, it can be a provocation, it can be very forceful American presence. It can be a proclamation of Taiwan independence. It can be some things which we expect reasonable people would not do, but eventually this happens. Like in Ukraine in February 2014, reasonable people should have not done a lot of things, and that could have spared us off of this crisis. And I think that we need to be attentive to Chinese intentions and Taiwanese insecurity. And I think that we also need to consider that China doesn't have significant strategic experience of using force on a large scale, and that it doesn't have this experience.

Andrey Sushentsov:

So its strategic culture, in some ways, is imperfect still. And the calculus behind the decision can be very different from what we expect it to be. This was a very good lesson for us in the Russian-Turkish Crisis of 2015. I think we had this conversation in the previous podcast, when we thought of Turkey as a ordinary NATO country, which shares with us the same experience of restraint, mutual understanding what are the stakes in this confrontation. And this was basically the major benefit of the Cold War, this strategic experience that we should refrain from provoking each other, because we understand what the consequences can be. And Turkey just very different country, independent, strategically very agile, uses force against every neighbor, including NATO ally, Greece, Cyprus, Syria. Very active in the Caucasus, Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan-Armenian, so shooting all sides. And these strategic autonomy was very unpleasant surprise for us. And we miscalculated Turkey in this respect, and I think that something like this can happen to China also.

Jacob Shapiro:

Well, that's a sobering thought, I'll have to keep that in mind. Let's move on for a second, and let's touch on some Russia domestic issues before we leave things. I don't know how often you get a chance to speak to an English listening audience. Obviously, I look at your videos in Russian all the time and wish that I could



understand Russian. You guys need to get maybe some English captions or something, maybe we can help you with that. But from that aside, just to say, you have an English listening audience here primarily, and I hope an ideological one. I mean, folks are coming to this podcast because they don't want their political views confirmed, they want an understanding of what's going on. So I preface this next question with that in mind.

Jacob Shapiro:

And I have to say that, even some of the listeners of this podcast, even myself, I don't want to say easy, but it's possible to understand Russia's point of view, to empathize with Russia's position, to see what Russia strategic interests are. But I wanted to ask about the whole business with Alexei Navalny, because I think that's one case where it breaks down, especially for an American observer trying to understand what's going on. Because it just doesn't seem like it's that big of a deal. It doesn't seem like he's that big of a threat to the Russian state, it almost seems like by focusing on him so much, Russia's basically shooting itself in the foot. It's got Germany that wants to move forward with Nord Stream 2, it's got France that wants Poland and all these Eastern European countries to stop worrying so much about Russia and focus on the European union, find a more pragmatic way to deal with Russia.

Jacob Shapiro:

But when you pick on an issue like Navalny, you're hitting the one thing that the Europeans are going to have to react towards, and the one thing that the Americans are going to have to react towards. You almost make a martyr out of him in a sense. So explain the logic behind the treatment of Navalny, and why he's been elevated in such a way. Are we underestimating what the Russian government views him as a threat towards? Is it just a reflexive, instinctual reaction to somebody who's challenging central power in Moscow? Help us understand how the Russian government is treating Navalny, and why it's taking such a hard line against him.

Andrey Sushentsov:

I would put this issue in the international context. He is bigger than Russian politics. And I think the personality and able person like him, he found some attraction in being a global player in the competition between Russia and the West. And at some point I think he started to cooperate with the... I could generally call it a Western intelligence community. If you check the report by the, I think it was in Office of the National Intelligence, and this annual threat assessments that have been published recently. It has very good language and interesting language, like there are top four national threats, China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea. And they analyze each country, implying that they have a leverage in what they call influence operations.

Andrey Sushentsov:

Influence operations are those aimed at putting obstacles into internal affairs of other stage, to manipulate the international behavior, "Let us put some leverage into the..." They assess that. Russia is thinking, why won't we put some leverage and



spoil some things inside American politics, and maybe support some people in the Republican party, Trump himself. And that would divert attention of the American power from getting to questions that we don't want them to get. I think this issue is reciprocally used in, what those people call the shadow parts of the international relations. In one of the recent articles of Mr. Burns, who's currently heading CIA. I think at that time he was still with the Carnegie, right?

Jacob Shapiro:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Andrey Sushentsov:

He was head of Carnegie. Yes. And I think he really properly observed that the competition between major powers is getting from the situation of the hot conflict, which they cannot permit to have between them, to this shadow arena, where they use information, manipulation, there's fake things, digital activities, and interference in internal affairs as some tool to outfox, out maneuver the competitor. And Navalny, even though he indeed points out to some of the very pressing issues in Russian politics, like corruption and things of political stability and inequality, et cetera, et cetera, he probably at some point has found himself amused by playing this ground geopolitics. And his standing outside of Russia is much, much bigger than in inside Russia. If you'll see what exactly the consequence of his very bright departure from Berlin to Moscow, they have been relatively negligible, if you assess it through the Russian internal politics issue. He is like Gorbachev, much more recognized and respected in the West than in Russia. But the truth is that there is a significant pressure toward the government in Russia, and a constructive opposition wisely uses it.

Andrey Sushentsov:

And I think Navalny also tried to use it and exploit it in some issues. And strategically speaking, he is more of the assets currently, for spoiling things inside Russia. And it's very interesting why after he was jailed, there is no major leader of the opposition emerged. Is it a movement or was it just a spike of the emotions of provocation? Many things are still unclear for me, but I expect those people who have budgets and do things on those influence operations, I would, in their position, if I would be managing those operations somewhere in the West, I would see Navalny as an assets really. Like, "This things can really trouble things in Russia, why don't we use him?" I think this similar tactic is used against China, like in Hong Kong, in Tibet, this genocide narrative. It's really significant currently, and I'm pretty sure that some of it, at least some of it, is poorly substantiated.

Jacob Shapiro:

Yeah. You put your finger on one of the hardest things to think about. And it has become particularly hard in the United States because, it's obvious to me, we're talking about Xinjiang and the Uyghurs now in China that you alluded to. And I think it's a good thing to bring up in the context of this conversation. It seems obvious to me that something is going on in Xinjiang. I don't know how bad it is, I haven't been



to Xinjiang. Nobody's really been to Xinjiang, because China limits access on the ground pretty fiercely. I have said that if China wants to nip this problem in the bud, just open up Xinjiang to a couple of Western reporters and let them do whatever they want and walk around. And if there's really nothing going on, great, you'll be done with the issue.

Jacob Shapiro:

But for a lot of reasons, China can't do that. But to your point, the Xinjiang issue was doubly depressing, because I think you're right that even if something terrible is going on there, and I happen to think something probably is going on there, the way that it is being used by politicians or even by celebrities or other folks for their own purposes, and manipulating that suffering to give themselves a platform or to push their own political agenda, it's almost doubly depressing. And then you never actually get to the root cause, which is probably there are Uyghurs suffering, because of policies that are there right now. And there's going to be no discussion, because it's all getting refracted through people using these issues.

Jacob Shapiro:

So yeah, unfortunately I think oftentimes in these situations, all of the noise that comes around these conflicts actually prevents politicians on both sides who would like to find some way to improve the situation from actually dealing with it, because that noise affects them in such ways. And it sounds like you're saying there's a similar dynamic here with Navalny, because so many people are using him or he is using his position or his platform, it's hard to actually deal maybe with some of the issues, that in a normal context might be open for conversation. Is that fair?

Andrey Sushentsov:

Well, I think that those several decades that's just passed since Cold War, we had several instances of those political martyrs, like Yulia Tymoshenko who was jailed by Yanukovich, but then eventually miraculously is perfectly fine and doing well, and one of the leading political figure. It's really a joke. This Ukrainian journalist who staged his assassination to get media coverage. And he did get news for one day, and then he resurrected the second day after all the articles have appeared with the condolences and the proclamation that Putin did it and everything. I don't know, maybe I'm too cynical being in this profession for too long. But it's clear that we are in the middle of the very, very tense information warfare. And it's really hard for people to navigate this thing, to distinguish what is truth and what is not.

Andrey Sushentsov:

And I really apologize, and I really feel sorry that you need to get a proper training in international relations analysis, or proper training in political analysis, including in dirty parts, shadow parts in the things that are instrumental, manipulative in nature, to develop some sense of cynicism toward what you hear. And it's really devaluating a lot of positive things that are going on on the planet. And you are skeptical, you're absorbing things with lack of enthusiasm. You're trying to see who benefits. And unfortunately that is what news did to us.

Jacob Shapiro:

Yeah. Before we leave this topic in general and maybe start closing out, since we last talked, Putin has extended his term. I forget what he did with the constitution to make sure that he can stick around for a while. So my age old question every time we talk is, is there going to be a successor for Putin sometime soon? Do you see a scenario in which the Russian government evolves beyond its need for Putin, or Putin's need for power? Do you feel like Putin is beginning to set a table for contingencies? I mean, he's getting up there in age. I'm sure he'd love to project the issue that he's going to live forever, but unfortunately none of us are going to live forever. Do you worry about what's going to happen after Putin? I want to throw all those questions at you and see how you respond.

Andrey Sushentsov:

I think that we need to focus more on the people around Putin and who would succeed him. It's clear that the next Putin... It this way, next Putin is currently a living person, probably male, probably Russian. And he is at the top of Russian leadership. And he is under sanctions, no doubt. And that the point, inevitably, we will have a political transition. This person who at that point will be already 10, 15, maybe 20... Well not 20, 15 years under sanctions. What kind of person he would be. He would be a very different person from the young Putin who came in with the very positive perception over the West. Putin at that time, he was amusing whether Russia should join NATO. He spoke in German Bundestag, saying that Russia is a part of Europe, why don't we exploit this option?

Andrey Sushentsov:

And this new generation of Russian elites that is currently coming to stage, is very negative toward the West, because they personally have suffered. They didn't have an ability to pay medical bills somewhere in Europe, for example, because they are under sanctions. Imagine their mother had a stroke and they need to have some medical attention, and they couldn't provide it. Or their assets, financial. Or their kids have been in the foreign universities and had to evacuate, because they were under intelligence surveillance or something like that. It's really a dramatic change from what we had 15 years ago, for example, 10 years ago even. And I would focus more, not on the Putin and that he is bad for United States or for the West, but what kind of attention, what kind of attitude the West wants from Russian elites.

Andrey Sushentsov:

And generally, because Russia is not ruled by Putin, he doesn't have a PlayStation joystick with all the buttons, do this, do this, poison Navalny, or invade Ukraine. He operates in a very thick environment with a lot of top officials involved several hundreds, maybe thousands of top level bureaucrats, state officials, parliamentarians, ministers, top businessman, all of them. It's significant bulk of Russian elites that is currently under pressure. And I don't think that... If sanctions were destined to change the attitude of those people toward Putin, I don't think that they deliver.



Jacob Shapiro:

Yeah. I love the metaphor of the PlayStation joystick, although maybe Putin himself is the PlayStation joystick, I'm not so sure. Rather than him being able to use it. Before we close, is there anything I didn't ask you that you think we should be talking about? Anything you want to throw back at me, anything else on your mind?

Andrey Sushentsov:

I'm actually curious about the more long-term perspective from the American analysts. And I consider you to be one of the very in depth, able to observe things from the in-depth and the long-term perspective. I would probably submit that the United States is still in some extent lacking strategic experience of significant mistake, of maybe significant failure. United States, unlike Russia, didn't have a vital military blow that that puts an existence of a country to question. And that was very educative, very formative experience for Russia. What it would mean to maintain sovereignty. How much can you sacrifice to maintain sovereignty? And that is an important formative experience, again, for Russia. United States never had this experience, and that's very good in terms of saving lives and saving property, GDP, and all the things, but it makes a country feel that the world is very secure, abundance place, and you can experiment. And you can do basically whatever you want without a threat of being punished for it, or somehow affected by the consequences of your doing.

Andrey Sushentsov:

Do you think it's one of the driving navigating forces in American foreign policy, and can you actually import an experience like this? Because I think the brilliant American intellectuals in international relations in the mid 20th century, like Morgan Tao, like Kissinger, like Brzezinski, some of them were basically imported European experience. What do you think?

Jacob Shapiro:

Well, first of all, certainly, thank you for saying those nice things about me. I feel the same way about you, it's why I keep talking to you and consider you a friend as well as a colleague. So my first cheeky answer to your question is, I mean, the experience can certainly be imported. It might need to be imported with 10 aircraft carriers and a large amphibious landing force from some American enemy. Of course it can be imported. I'm not sure that the US would ask for it. But this goes back to your point about you wishing Russia was an island. I mean, US foreign policy is littered with mistakes and lost wars over the past half century, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, whatever the heck we're doing with Venezuela and with North Korea and with Iran, it's all a bucket of failures. And the United States just keeps doing what it's doing.

Jacob Shapiro:

And I think part of that, especially now, is reflective of just deep internal disagreements at the domestic level about what the United States is supposed to be



doing. The United States goes through these periods where it can't really decide what kind of country it wants to be itself. And you get these really fractious, internal political debates. I don't think it's a coincidence that probably the biggest failure of American foreign policy in Vietnam in the sixties, happened in a similar climate to the one that's happening in the United States today with these culture wars, and both sides not thinking that the other side is acting in good faith, not being able to have those conversations. So I think that gets reflected outward. But I think also to your point, there's just a lack of strategic imagination in US foreign policy.

Jacob Shapiro:

I'm an independent analyst obviously, I'm not inside the government, but I think one of the things that Trump was right about, and unfortunately he didn't follow through on it, but he talked about how it's a swamp, it's just a big bureaucracy. Nobody's thinking about different ideas. There is no meritocracy, it's who you know and how long you spend in the system. And if you do X, Y, and Z, then you're going to have a corner office in this bureaucracy, and it doesn't actually matter what your thoughts are, and it's not rewarding that long-term strategic perspective. I guess the other thing to say there though, is that most democracies, especially larger democracies that have large populations, have trouble with long-term strategy. Because if you're going to change governments every four years or every eight years, or even every two years, if you have a big swing in legislative issues, it's hard to think longterm.

Jacob Shapiro:

You have certain things that you want to be able to push through immediately, and you leave the foreign policy stuff until the end. And then when you can't do anything else domestically, "Oh, we'll start some Israeli-Palestinian negotiations." Or, "Oh, let's put some sanctions on North Korea, because I need to feel like I'm doing something." So yeah, I think that the United States is predisposed to short term thinking, and I don't see that changing in any fundamental way. But I also do think that there's a history of United States strategic thinking long-term. I mean, if you look at... I mean, even before World War II, when you think about both Roosevelts, and how they were thinking about it and the world that they saw ahead of them, there's a long tradition of the United States being able to think that way, even into the seventies.

Jacob Shapiro:

I mean, Richard Nixon was an asshole, is the technical term, but was also a very brilliant man. You look at the way he talks about how he saw the world evolving. He's the first one to talk about a multipolar world. Everything he did in terms of repairing relations with China, trying to get out of Vietnam, all this other stuff, was because he saw exactly what was happening, and he actually positioned the US pretty well. If he hadn't been such a jerk, maybe he would be remembered to history differently. So I don't think it's all hopeless, but it's actually somewhat frustrating for me with the Biden administration, because you really do have an old hand, who's just going back to the same old playbook and the same old people and the same old ideas, and you can see it all playing out.



Jacob Shapiro:

There is no recognition that the world has actually changed, and the United States has to change along with it. Probably, as has happened before, we'll have to reach the crisis point and then we'll change really, really fast all of a sudden, and everything will feel really rushed and hurried. It doesn't have to be that way. I mean, we can think long-term if we want to, and there are plenty of analysts besides me who are trying to move the conversation in that direction. But it's hard, as you know yourself in Russia, it's hard to change that conversation from the outside, especially when... I mean, bureaucracies have lives of their own. They move at their own pace, it's very slowly. They don't like change, new ideas are not great. So you're fighting upstream there, but that's probably not a comforting answer for you.

Andrey Sushentsov:

Thank you for sharing. Well, I think that we need to ask those questions. And it's really a challenging all the time, even though I believe that human nature is the same since the ancient Greeks. And basically, I always have this temptation, "Let's stress test this idea." And it never fails. Yeah.

Jacob Shapiro:

Before we close, I guess the one silver lining, or the thing that I think could be different, and you alluded to it before with the beautiful idea of peace dividend 2, climate change is coming. Maybe it's coming in 10 years, maybe it's coming in 30 years, I'm not sure, but it's coming and it's coming for all of us, and it's coming for all of us no matter what our nationalities are. It might be better for some countries than others. I think Russia actually is probably going to do fairly well with climate change, if you look at the maps, at least in the short term. But climate is changing and that is the one global issue, that I feel like maybe it could outweigh all of the fears and all of the suspicion, because the only way we're actually going to tackle what's going on with climate, is if we work together.

Jacob Shapiro:

And if nations put aside some of their differences and are able to create longterm strategies, articulate clear goals, realistic goals that can be achieved without completely sacrificing economic growth. Maybe climate change is the thing that we can hang our hat on, and maybe it becomes the crisis that allows nations to deal with each other in dealing with an issue. But there's more than a little naivete and optimism, I think in that hope. I do think it's on the board, but probably the more likely scenario, is we're going to all continue doing the same things we were doing before, and then there'll be a crisis, and there'll be winners and losers, and it'll be unfortunate. But maybe in climate change, we have some basis for getting out of the human nature that you described.

Andrey Sushentsov:

I'm in.





Jacob Shapiro:

Okay, Andrey, thank you so much for coming on the show. We'll look forward to having you back soon. And I hope at some point soon when COVID is a thing of history, we'll see each other again in person.

Andrey Sushentsov:

Jake, thank you very much. Always intellectual pleasure.

Jacob Shapiro:

Cheers. Thanks for listening to the latest episode of the Perch Pod. I think that's about all you need to hear from me. A reminder to check us out at [perchperspectives.com](http://perchperspectives.com). You can check out our free newsletter, or you can schedule a free call with us to talk about the geopolitical services that we provide to companies and to investors. Also if you haven't already, check out [latampolitik.com](http://latampolitik.com). That is, let me just spell it for you now here, because it's spelled a little weird. That's L-A-T-A-M-P-O-L-I-T-I-k.com. That is our \$5 a month newsletter on the geopolitics of Latin America. It is published in both Spanish and English, so you can choose which language you want to engage with. I'm biased obviously, but I think it's really, really good. Last but not least, wherever you listen to podcasts, it helps us immensely if you leave a rating, leave a review or a comment of this podcast, or even share it with your friends.

Jacob Shapiro:

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