



thruMYeyes

with PROF. BOLAJI AKINYEMI

THE WEEKLY FOREIGN-POLICY BRIEFING

SESSION 110 · THURSDAY 22 SEPTEMBER 2022 · FROM THE ARCHIVE · Syncterface Media

FROM THE ARCHIVE

POWER IS THE ENGINE

A bus at a funeral, a mobilisation of 300,000, and a warning:
do not humiliate a nuclear power.

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Session 110 — a week of protocol, mobilisation, and a warning about humiliation.

FROM THE ARCHIVE

Power Is The Engine

A question about a bus at the Queen's funeral opens onto the week's real subject: what people do when they are about to be disgraced — and why humiliating a nuclear power is the most dangerous thing on the table.

A solo broadcast recorded four days after Queen Elizabeth II's funeral and two days after Vladimir Putin announced the mobilisation of 300,000 Russians. The moderator puts the questions; Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi answers, with contributions read out from Zoom and YouTube. **The through-line is his own phrase — in international relations, power is the engine. It explains the seating at a funeral, the calculation behind a nuclear threat, and why Britain still says "special relationship" when Washington stopped meaning it decades ago.**

An archive edition, recorded 22 September 2022. Events are described as they stood that week — the Kherson and Luhansk referendums had not yet been held, Liz Truss was seventeen days into her premiership, and the war in Ukraine was seven months old. Several figures discussed have since left office.

01 · THE BUS, AND WHAT IT WAS ACTUALLY ABOUT

The evening opens on a question the moderator calls light and the Professor immediately says is not: African leaders were put on a bus to the Queen's funeral while the President of the United States arrived in his own motorcade. Was that discrimination? His answer is that it was protocol arranged by power, and that power is the engine of international relations — no more and no less. European royalty rode the bus. European presidents rode the bus. The President of France, a country not given

to accepting diminished standing, rode the bus, which he reads as a measure of how widely the Queen's soft power was felt rather than as an insult absorbed.

He notes that the two leaders who visibly declined — Turkey's president, citing engagements, and Nigeria's, who sent his vice-president and went on to New York — could simply have come to London first and flown on. Nobody was compelled to attend. But he does not leave the question there. Having dismissed the racial reading, he grants the one detail that survives it: putting every African leader on the same bus looks deliberate in the photographs, and the organisers could have mixed the coaches so that each carried a multiracial group. That, he says, is worth revisiting.

“Protocol was unusual — but then this was an unusual event. The longest-reigning monarch, a 96-year-old great-grandmother. If you don't like her as a Queen, you would like her as a great-grandmother.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

Two ledgers, both open

Where the Professor lays the blame — and he lays it on both sides, without cancelling either

The West

WHAT GIVES THE GRIEVANCE SUBSTANCE

- Promised NATO would not expand eastward, then expanded it.
- Former office-holders boast in memoirs of breaking up the Soviet Union.
- A four-year presidency cannot bind its successor — Iran, Paris, and now this.

BOTH

Russia

WHAT HANDED THE GRIEVANCE TO ITS ENEMIES

- Invaded Georgia, annexed Crimea, invaded Ukraine.
- Provoked the enemies it feared into fulfilling their intentions.
- The result: Sweden, Norway and Finland now at NATO's door.

“A wise president in Russia would have tried his best to ensure that their assessment was not confirmed.”

SESSION 110 · POWER IS THE ENGINE

As argued on this broadcast

The evening's most even-handed passage, as he framed it — two ledgers, both open, neither cancelling the other.

02 · "DON'T HUMILIATE PUTIN"

On the mobilisation of 300,000 Russians — the first since the Second World War — the Professor repeats a warning he says this programme has issued before and will issue again. It is not a defence of the invasion. It is a claim about what a cornered nuclear power does, and his reading of Putin's mind is specific: what cannot be permitted is the disgrace of Russia itself.

He reads three signals as desperation rather than strength. The mobilisation. The emptying of Russian prisons of men who will be released if they fight six months at the front — which he calls an oxymoron, since these are exactly the people any regular army discharges, and since discipline is the one thing that makes an army fight like an army rather than a mob. And the nuclear reminder, delivered with the words "I am not kidding."

The world, he argues, is taking it seriously — which is why President Biden said "don't" three times in a single interview and then, wisely, declined to specify what would follow. His own read is that Putin is looking for a way to save face rather than a way to end the world, and he grounds that in something close to an axiom: nobody in authority wants to be remembered as the man who blew up the planet with himself on it.

“Don't humiliate Putin. He would respond in unexpected ways that may actually push the world onto the brink.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

03 • A PROMISE BROKEN, AND A PROVOCATION THAT ANSWERED IT

Asked whether Putin is right that the West intends to break Russia apart, the Professor answers, unhappily, yes — with a precise account of why the grievance has substance. American former office-holders have boasted in memoirs of winning the Cold War and dismantling the Soviet Union; a sitting president would be too diplomatic to say it, but a former secretary of state writing a book eighteen months out of office, with a Senate or presidential run in mind, has every incentive to. Those books are read in Moscow.

The second half of the grievance is the promise that NATO would not expand eastward, and was broken. He attaches a structural explanation rather than a moral one: an American president has four years, and cannot bind a successor. The rest of the world has noticed — the same lesson it drew when Washington walked out of the Iran nuclear deal and the Paris accord. Obama served eight years and still could not stop Trump unpicking agreements solemnly entered into.

Then he turns the ledger over. If you know an enemy means you harm, do not hand him the opportunity to act on it. By invading Georgia, by annexing Crimea, by invading Ukraine, Russia all but provoked the enemies it feared into fulfilling their intentions. A wise president in Moscow would have worked to disprove the West's assessment rather than confirm it — and the result is Sweden, Norway and Finland at NATO's door.

“A wise president in Russia would actually have tried his best to ensure that their assessment of the negative feelings [about him] was not confirmed.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

04 • WHO CAN MEDIATE, WHEN THE SUPERPOWERS CANNOT

The superpowers are committed parties and therefore disqualified as mediators. That leaves, on his account, the medium powers and one figure who is more than a mediator: the Pope, whom he urges to get on a plane and ask to be received in Moscow and Kyiv. He has proposed this before on the programme and repeats it deliberately.

Pressed on whether others could play the role, he says yes, and points to what has already worked. Saudi Arabia brokered a prisoner exchange he had not thought possible at this stage. Turkey midwived the grain corridor out of Ukrainian ports. India, with one leg on each side, heard Putin himself acknowledge at the Shanghai summit that Delhi had raised reservations — as had Beijing. Neither wants a nuclear war over something that is not an existential threat to them.

His method is as important as his candidates: do not open with a comprehensive peace. Start with the side issues — grain, prisoners — and let the habit of talking take hold before the hard questions arrive.

“I have not yet met anyone in the world in a position of authority who thinks it is in his own interest to go down as the one who blew up the whole world, including himself.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

05 • THE SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP, AND OTHER COMFORTABLE FICTIONS

On reports that Liz Truss was uncomfortable with the phrase "special relationship" — Biden reportedly offering "closest ally" instead — the Professor is blunt, and teases the moderator for his

London vantage point. The Americans have not had a special relationship with Britain for decades. It is British politicians who like the term. He invites anyone to name the last time Britain got a deal from Washington that was not on offer elsewhere.

The last prime minister who could claim to have forced an American U-turn was Thatcher over the Falklands, and even then Reagan's support had limits. Since then it has been on American terms — the Good Friday Agreement among them, where the United States pressed for nationalists in government and where Congress has long been the nationalists' base. Brexit, he argues, has undermined that agreement by creating the customs problem it cannot solve: you cannot leave an organisation and still trade across its border without a barrier. And the promised compensating trade deal has not arrived, because Washington has other partners and no reason to pull Britain's iron out of a fire Britain lit.

“The special relationship has just been a term which had little substance in it.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

06 · SUBSIDY, AND THE POLITICS OF THE HONEYMOON

President William Ruto scrapped Kenya's fuel subsidy barely a day into office. The Professor's response separates the economics from the timing. On the economics he is careful: there is no country, in the global North or South, that does not subsidise something — touch American agricultural subsidies and you commit political suicide — but the North controls the world's economies and can cushion itself in ways the South cannot.

On the timing he is unambiguous. Politicians campaign against subsidy removal, take office, propose it themselves, and are then reminded of their own words while the unions take to the streets. If it must be done, it must be done during the honeymoon — which is exactly what Ruto did. He adds the Kenyan complication: an election split down the middle makes it easier for Raila Odinga to fill the streets, and easier still for Ruto to fill them back, which is why he hopes nobody tries.

“The best time, if you're going to remove subsidy, is to do it while you are still on political honeymoon.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

07 · A WATERSHED MOMENT, IF THE GLOBAL SOUTH CAN AGREE

Two shorter items close the analysis. On the referendums planned in Kherson and Luhansk, he does not bother with conditionals: territory under military occupation will vote the way the occupier requires, because a voter has nowhere to find the courage to mark the ballot no. A referendum conducted under occupation cannot then be presented to the world as free and fair.

On Turkey, he reads Erdoğan's interest in the Russian- and Chinese-dominated Central Asian security body as hedging rather than defection. The treaty does not permit dual membership, but he bought a Russian air-defence system and was neither suspended nor expelled, so he may reckon he can try again while everything is in flux — holding in reserve his veto over Sweden and Finland's accession, which requires unanimity.

The moderator ends on the General Assembly's theme, "a watershed moment." The Professor sees one genuine opening. With the superpowers entangled, none of them can afford to offend the global South — which makes this the moment to press for permanent Security Council representation. The condition is entirely internal: Africa, Asia and South America would each have to agree among themselves who takes the seat. On that, he offers no prediction.

"You don't conduct a referendum when militarily you have occupied a place and then tell the rest of the world that the referendum was conducted free and fair."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

THREADS TO PULL

- He rejects the racial reading of the funeral protocol but concedes the all-African bus looks deliberate. Can an arrangement be innocent in intent and still wrong in effect — and which of the two should a foreign ministry protest?
- "Don't humiliate Putin" assumes a cornered nuclear power is more dangerous than an emboldened one. What would have to happen for that calculation to reverse?
- If an American president cannot bind his successor, is any long-term security guarantee from Washington worth signing — and what should a smaller state ask for instead?
- The Pope, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, India: all proposed as mediators because they are not superpowers. Does that make them credible, or merely acceptable to whichever side is losing?
- The global South's Security Council opening depends on Africa agreeing a single candidate. Fifty years of that argument suggest it won't. Is the seat therefore a distraction from reforms that don't require unanimity?

Watch Session 110 in full on the Syncterface Media channel. New episodes every Thursday, 7pm WAT (7pm UK, 2pm ET).

More analysis: tmeinights.com · profbolajiakinyemi.com

Quotations are drawn from an auto-generated transcript of a live broadcast and have been lightly cleaned for readability — punctuation and obvious mis-transcriptions only, never sense. The recording renders several proper nouns poorly ("boss" for bus, "coin" for Queen, "least Trust" for Liz Truss); these are corrected in the newsletter and the raw forms are listed in the transcript header. The comparison of a named head of state to Hitler is the Professor's own characterisation, offered explicitly as deliberate, and is not reproduced as the newsletter's view.