

Chas Freeman: How U.S. Decline Reshapes the Middle East

Ambassador Chas Freeman was a former Assistant Secretary of Defense, earning the highest public service awards of the Department of Defense for his roles in designing a NATO-centred post-Cold War European security system and in reestablishing defence and military relations with China. He served as U. S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia during operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. Read Chas Freeman's Substack: <https://substack.com/@chasfreeman662157> Books by Prof. Glenn Diesen: <https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B09FPQ4MDL> Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: <https://glenndiesen.substack.com/> X/Twitter: https://x.com/Glenn_Diesen Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/glenndiesen> Support the research by Prof. Glenn Diesen: PayPal: <https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/glenndiesen> Buy me a Coffee: buymeacoffee.com/gdieseng Go Fund Me: <https://gofund.me/09ea012f> Buy Diesen merchandise: <https://diesen-shop.fourthwall.com/en-nok>

#Glenn

Welcome back. One of the great American diplomats joins us today, Ambassador Chas Freeman, who was the former U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia, but also served as the Assistant Secretary of Defense. So thank you for coming back on the program.

#Chas Freeman

I'm glad to be with you, Glenn. Nice to see you again.

#Glenn

Likewise. Well, we're living through turbulent times, obviously. At least we're seeing the symptoms. After World War II, we set up our own international institutions, new international law, political alliances, military alliances, a very unique economic architecture. But all of this, of course, rested on a very specific distribution of power. And this was obviously modified after the Cold War to essentially expand the Western model, to try to make it global. But now that this era of hegemony is over, you would assume that everything from international institutions to alliances would have to shift, change, to adjust to the new distribution of power.

Most important, I would say, is all countries around the world now, including the U.S., are recognizing that there are limits on U.S. power, what it can do, and countries will have to adjust accordingly. So, I was wondering, again, as a former ambassador to Saudi Arabia, what do you see happening now in that part of the world? Because, well, there's a lot of things happening, but the most recent or interesting has been this new defense pact between Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and

Pakistan. I can't really get a firm grasp on it. That is, is it anti-Iranian? Is it intended to accommodate Iran in the long term? Is it meant to mainly do some superficial cooperation? Again, is it possibly used to replace a declining U.S., possibly defend against Israel? It's unclear. Maybe they haven't charted a clear path forward yet. But how are you reading this situation?

#Chas Freeman

Well, I think the tripartite alliance, if you can call it that—perhaps entente is a better word, limited partnership for limited purposes—is yet to reveal its full purposes. So you're not alone in being somewhat both intrigued and somewhat confused about it. But let me attempt to provide some answers. I think you opened with a statement which I completely agree with, and that is that other countries have concluded they cannot any longer rely on the United States for their security, and that therefore they have to develop self-reliance and new partnerships to protect themselves. This is an instance of that.

Basically, it is a declaration by the Saudis, the Pakistanis, and the Turks that American leadership in the region is no longer viable and that they have to chart their own future, their own destiny. Not without reference to the United States. They don't want to divorce the United States. It provides benefits to them that others may not be able to match. But they do want to distance themselves and establish their own agency, if you will. And within that context, what we have is an agreement to coordinate policy, to exchange intelligence, to build a common military-industrial base, and to come to each other's aid if attacked.

There is language very similar to that of Article 5 in NATO, but like Article 5 in NATO, the response to an attack on a member is left to the constitutional processes and political decisions of each member. There is no automaticity, even though many people imagine that was the case with the North Atlantic Treaty. Of course, it is not. The United States insisted that it would act within its constitutional processes, meaning by reference to the authority of the Congress under the Constitution to make war. Of course, the Constitution has been basically disregarded by the executive branch. So I'm not quite sure what that means. I guess it means if Donald Trump is feeling okay and someone gets attacked, maybe he'll come to their aid.

Maybe not. Maybe he'll come to their aid for half a day and then decide he's had enough. We don't know. Anyway, I think the same ambiguities affect this Pakistani-Saudi-Turkish pact. I would note a number of things. First of all, I think it is mainly intended to counter Israel and the Israeli regional Greater Israel project, and Israel's nuclear arsenal. Pakistan, by implication, has extended nuclear deterrence—extended deterrence—to Saudi Arabia and to Turkey. That is good from the Iranian point of view because it reduces the likelihood that either of those other two countries, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, will go nuclear. Pakistan is, of course, a nuclear power, the only such power in the Muslim world.

The question of what the relationship to Iran may turn out to be, I think, is open. This is also intended to provide assurances against Iranian hegemony, to be sure. But we don't know what the future Persian Gulf security architecture will be, and therefore it's very hard to understand how this might relate to that overall architecture. I would say that one very important point that the Turks have emphasized is that this pact is open to additional membership. And we've already seen movements by Kuwait, which has a defense agreement, a much less complete, more ambiguous defense relationship with Pakistan, and therefore is a logical member of this. Qatar also has expressed considerable interest in this pact.

#Glenn

And that, of course, does immediately raise the question of Iranian views.

#Chas Freeman

As far as I know, the Iranians have not said much about this, if anything, which I think is wise on their part. It is very possible that the future security architecture in the Persian Gulf will, as Iran demands, involve an absence of any American military presence. And in fact, it looks to me, as I believe I've said before to you, that it looks to me as though Iran is deliberately trying to herd U.S. forces into a concentration in Israel, which everyone in the region would regard as an entirely legitimate target, whether it did anything or not, given its behavior in Lebanon and Syria and Gaza and its attacks on Yemen and Iran, its interference in Iraq and Kurdistan and other issues. So we have a big question, which is, what happens after the war?

Well, the war itself is not in any danger of ending soon. There is no prospect of a negotiated end. Donald Trump is practicing his usual denial-and-fabrication-of-narrative approach to an unpleasant reality. He insists the United States Navy controls the Strait of Hormuz, which is nonsense. But it is, in a sense, an admission to the world that the energy shortages we are now experiencing, and which are going to get much worse, are not the product of Iran, but of the aggressors against Iran who created this situation and are now actually enforcing a blockade in the Strait of Hormuz ourselves. So that was a very foolish admission. He also said that many tankers are passing through the Strait. That is not true. Five to ten a day are passing somehow, at best.

In order to remedy the oil shortages and bring the crisis back under control, somewhere between 80 and 100 ships a day would have to pass through the Strait of Hormuz. There's no prospect that's going to happen anytime soon. And I'll just say a final thing here. Of course, I should admit and note that the existence of this tripartite entente between Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, as they now say, does not include existing wars. So, in other words, those are just not included. We're talking about a future attack on one of these signatories. So the war in Yemen, the war between Yemen

and Saudi Arabia, which has been on and off again for quite a while, is not included in this. And there should be no expectation that the Turks or the Pakistanis would intervene in Yemen on behalf of the Saudis.

Nor is the war in Lebanon included. So that is, of course, a war on one of the resistance forces that remains formidable, Hezbollah. But let me finish up by saying that I think Donald Trump's reaction to all this is, as he says, to low-key it. Low-key has become a verb, I guess. And low-keying it means keep the headlines few and far between so people can exercise their skills at amnesia, which Americans are very good at. And, you know, we can hide our own Easter eggs, which is a talent that few have. So, anyway, the idea is to keep the headlines down. Well, because this is an embarrassment. It's an embarrassment. Despite his claims of everything being wonderful and under control, you know, this is the classic bureaucratic response to an unseemly event.

Nothing to see here. Nothing to see. Go away. Nothing to see here. Well, there is something to see there. And unfortunately, trying to, quote, low-key it, unquote, gives Iran a great incentive to create headlines. And it reserves the right to strike at American bases or American facilities, or allies of the United States or partners of the United States who are complicit in American aggression or Israeli aggression against Iran, at will. We've seen this with an attack on facilities in Kuwait that was not preceded by any provocation from Kuwait. So, I think we're going to see a return to what many might consider the normal situation.

That is, everything since the end of the Ottoman Empire has been turbulent in the region, and it's not going to stop being turbulent. And that isn't going to change even if, as must eventually happen, the U.S. Navy sails away from the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea. Why must the Navy sail away? Because equipment on board those ships is wearing out and breaking. The sailors have been at sea for far too long. The food is inadequate. It has to come from far away. We're hearing from families that the food is unacceptably limited. And we also know that the ship's stores, where sailors buy necessities like razor blades and toothbrushes and that kind of thing, these stores are empty now.

So you have wear and tear on families, wear and tear on the sailors, wear and tear on the ships, and it's ultimately not sustainable. And that brings me to my final comment, which is that what has happened is an ironic situation in which both Iran and the United States have exactly the same strategy, which is to inflict economic pain in the hope that eventually it will induce one side or the other to capitulate. And in that situation, Iran has all the advantages. It is much better prepared to absorb suffering than the United States. It is there. It does not have to sustain ships 9,000 miles away from its homeland. It may have been beaten militarily in the sense that the United States outmatched it, but it has the balance of fervor on its side. And it will persist.

And the war in Iran is one about protecting Iranian national identity and autonomy. The war, from the American perspective, is extremely unpopular and will have a deleterious effect on Donald Trump and the Republican Party in the midterms to come, even if the anticipated skyrocketing in energy prices and shortages of diesel fuel and jet fuel do not eventuate. So in this context, the

tripartite entente, which you asked about, is a declaration of autonomy strategically, not declaring fealty to any external patron, not relying on any external patron exclusively, diversifying relationships, something that's been underway for 20 years, and basically making common cause with others in the region to stimulate self-reliance for the long term. So I think maybe there's a lot of evolution in this tripartite arrangement to develop, but I think its immediate purpose is pretty clear.

#Glenn

Maybe that explains also why Iran hasn't gone out and criticized it, because there will always be security competition. And, you know, even countries who see the U.S. as a major threat, such as Iran, would still have to recognize that the declining presence of the U.S. will have consequences. I mean, you see this around the world. If the U.S. were to pull out of East Asia, Japan might be pursuing nuclear weapons. So, you know, China should be careful what to hope for. Same as in Europe. From Germany to Poland, they're starting to talk about their own nuclear weapons, while in France they want to expand where their nukes are positioned. So when U.S. power is shown to be limited or actively pulls out, something has to fill the vacuum.

So if this is what fills the vacuum in West Asia, perhaps the Iranians see this as the best of, yeah, of the alternatives. So, yeah, that could be it. About Trump, though, his efforts to make the people forget about the war, it's not unique to him, though. I mean, this is what we did after Afghanistan as well. It was going to be the huge embarrassment for NATO. How would we possibly overcome it? But the secret solution is always the same: let's just stop talking about it, and then we move along. And it does work. And I got the same impression when Scott Bessent said, "Oh, the Strait of Hormuz is not even going to be relevant anymore." I mean, this for me sounds like a guy who wants to push the Iran war out of the headlines. But that's not much of a strategy for the real world, though.

#Chas Freeman

It's not any strategy at all. Of course, pipelines over the long run can relieve some of the importance of the Strait of Hormuz, but they can't replace it, and they won't. And in any event, it's no answer in the immediate circumstances, except in the context you cite, which is, you know, it helps everybody to focus on something else and not feel quite as bad about what has been going on. If the U.S. Navy stops its blockade, the Strait will be open on Iranian and Omani terms. I mean, the Iranians and Omanis have been negotiating a set of permanent arrangements for the Strait of Hormuz, which will come into effect when and if the American aggression against Iran ends.

And, of course, in that context, Iran is insisting that there will be no talks, no negotiation with the United States unless and until the United States agrees, implements the actions to which it agreed in the so-called memorandum of understanding. Those include no verbal threats, no attacks, no oil embargo, the release of frozen assets, and the establishment of some fund to reconstruct Iran, which I don't think the Iranians expect the Americans to pay. But they certainly will look to the Gulf Arabs to finance reconstruction. So it also includes an end to the war in Lebanon. The war in

Lebanon is not likely to end. We've just seen Netanyahu openly defy Donald Trump and the United States across the board.

The Board of Peace proposals are unacceptable to him and to his cabinet. The end of the war in Lebanon is not in the cards. There will never be a Palestinian state, he says, and so forth and so on. And so he has thrown down the gauntlet to Donald Trump. And this, of course, raises the question of why does Donald Trump, who normally responds to challenges, not do so? And the only answer—Occam's razor, William of Occam's insight—the simplest and most obvious answer is usually the right one. It is that Donald Trump is being blackmailed, both by Mossad, Netanyahu with the Epstein files probably and other material, and by his own plutocratic donor base, Jewish plutocrats who have financed his career in politics, brief as it is.

So I think he can't respond. He has put himself in a position where he has no ability to advance militarily. The weaponry that he would need to do that has been so severely depleted that his own military is counseling him that any further attacks on Iran would not only not work in terms of moving Iranian positions on matters, but would also further weaken the United States' ability to respond to other contingencies. And he can't—politically, he can't retreat because he's wired himself into this, and he doesn't know how to admit defeat. When he confronts defeat, he makes up something and declares victory and denies that he was defeated.

So this is very bad in terms of the prospects for the end of this period of turbulence and tension in West Asia. This is not good. Let me just talk briefly about the probable Iranian view of the tripartite entente. From their point of view, since this is a counter to the Greater Israel Project, this is very helpful. And it actually creates a sort of buffer between Iran and Israel. And it complicates Israeli strategic planning, which is why the Israelis are very unhappy about it. I don't see much unhappiness coming out of Tehran for the reasons I've just mentioned. And I think Tehran believes that if Israel remains as obnoxious as it is, there's a good chance that this tripartite entente might develop a consultative relationship of some sort with Iran.

Probably not include Iran because they have an interest in countering Iranian aspirations for hegemony in the region, but not to pose an active threat to Iran, which I think is pretty obvious. They would be passive in that context rather than active. So this is a very important development, both in terms of what it says about the erosion of the American position in West Asia generally and what it says about the desire of the countries in the region to chart their own course. And by the way, I think this is not just limited to West Asia. If you look at East Asia, you see Japan resuming its role as a political great power, a military great power, not just an economic great power in the region.

When the United States defaulted on the Trans-Pacific Partnership, Japan picked it up and created an alternative, which continues to exist and to which the Chinese are now trying to apply, probably without success given the rivalry between China and Japan. Indonesia is emerging as an independent actor. Very significantly, there is to be a modest exercise between the Indonesian and

Chinese navies off the east coast of Taiwan in the Philippine Sea. This is something that Taiwan is deeply disturbed about, but it also represents an assertion of autonomy and agency by a major country in East Asia.

South Korea and North Korea are both charting independent courses. And that's true of Malaysia as well. If you look at Europe, I think the amount of hedging that is going on in anticipation of American unreliability is really very impressive. You know, a lot of increases in defense spending, still no structure. Maybe Europeans are waiting for the United States to retreat from NATO so they can take it over. But I know the Europeans don't have any strategy at all, of course, which is a sign of the age. I think by contrast, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan do have a strategy. And that is significant.

#Glenn

Well, about Indonesia, though, I think this is really a country which doesn't get discussed enough. If the Chinese can find a way of working closely with the Indonesians—not an alliance, but some way of, well, collectively trying to organize a security architecture for Southeast Asia—I think this will be a huge game changer. I mean, this is a massive country. It's like almost, I think, almost 300 million—285 million people. For the past 20 years, they've got, like, their growth rate always over 5%. They're a massive maritime power, I think. This is the fourth most populous country in the world. It's a real giant, though, and no one's really focusing a lot on it.

#Chas Freeman

It's very strange, and I think generally our analysis of what I call Pacific Asia, as opposed to Indo-Pacific—Indo-Pacific is an American invention—it doesn't really compute. India does not have the reach into Pacific Asia that that formula implies. And the United States, at the moment, is actually de-emphasizing the Indian Ocean. We've just returned the name of the command in Hawaii to Asia-Pacific rather than Indo-Pacific. Anyway, Indonesia is a future superpower, a regional power of great moment. And here I want to go back a bit in history. Some years ago, I wrote a talk, because I don't write essays, called "Refashioning the Asia-Pacific Balance" or something like that. And it's on my Substack. People can read it.

I argue that the West, in the person of John Fairbank, a great China scholar in the United States, got the tribute system wrong. That has got the pre-colonial, pre-Western order in Pacific Asia wrong. Tribute, I think, is properly understood in that context—this is 500 years ago or more—as state trade, a sort of potlatch, an exchange of what you have for what you want from the others. And so, typically, people who went to Beijing would come away with more wealth than they arrived with. This is not any concept that fits European political history. And this is sustained by a sort of three-body-problem kind of balance in the region. In Northeast Asia, there was Japan and Korea—Korea then united, not disunited—and these were a check on Chinese power.

Several times, the Chinese tried to incorporate Korea. They never actually invaded Japan, but the Mongols did when they controlled China. And they were checked by the Koreans and Japanese in that direction. In the south, in Southeast Asia, there was something called the Chola Empire, based in Tamil Nadu in South India, which included Sumatra and the Straits of Malacca and what is now Singapore and parts of Malaysia. And there was Srivijaya, a maritime kingdom similarly. And these balanced the Chinese influence in the region, which is why, if you go to a country like Thailand or Burma or Laos, you find that the root culture depends on Indian sources rather than Chinese sources.

Well, this should tell us that there was a pre-existing order in East Asia, in Pacific Asia, and it was not what we imagined. Europeans invaded and overthrew it. For a time, Japan resumed a role. It overthrew the European empires and the American presence in World War II, only to be defeated. And that vacuum was filled by the United States. There is no vacuum there anymore. These countries—Vietnam has shown how well it can take care of itself against both the French, the Americans, and also the Chinese. And a country like Thailand, which practices diplomatic agility as a national security policy, is doing it again. Indonesia, we've talked about, is a very important autonomous force. It has its problems with China. It deals with them forthrightly, and it maintains its independence.

If I were thinking about Australian security, I would think more about Indonesia than I would about China, because China actually is useful, potentially, as a distant counter to Indonesia against whatever it might do to Australian interests itself. Anyway, I think there's a very interesting new pattern emerging. And I say new pattern—it's actually an old pattern. It's a pre-colonial pattern. It's a pre-Western hegemony pattern. And I think in Europe, too, we're going to see a new order. I don't know what it will be. I can't believe that Western Europeans will continue to be quite as stupid as they have been about dealing with Russia and Eastern Europe and the transatlantic relationship. And, you know, that is a kind of vacuum which is waiting to be filled. Perhaps Norway will fill it. I don't know. I mean, the Vikings did that once, didn't they?

#Glenn

It's been a while since we arrived in the world.

#Chas Freeman

I know. I mean, so we all have Viking ancestry, I suppose, whether it was gently or violently acquired is a matter of doubt at this point.

#Glenn

Well, I think for the Europeans, adjusting to the pre... well, seeing the end of the era of Western hegemony is difficult. I think even having the political imagination to imagine something besides living under U.S. leadership is also too difficult, which is why... I think Washington can hurl any

abuse at them, but there's no other alternative because they're not sure where to go. And there's no debates, no discussions, nothing. Of course, there's some talk about Trump, but it's limited to Trump, as if it's all about him. And once he's gone, we'll go back to the good old days. But there's no discussion about the historical times we live in. That is the end of not just American hegemony, but indeed this whole 500-year period of Western dominance. Nothing at all. But I did want to pivot a bit back to the Middle East, though, because you were the American ambassador to Saudi Arabia.

And again, you can't help but see the Saudis as a key actor in that part of the world. So if you were standing now in Riyadh, how do you see the world? I mean, what do you do with Yemen, Iraq? How do you manage Iran and Israel? How do you position yourself between the great powers, that is, the United States, China, Russia? I don't know. Often when we're presented with Saudi Arabia, it's always either they're locked in a conflict with Iran or, to what extent are they willing to do what Americans say? But, you know, it's a very complex and quickly changing strategic picture for the Saudis. I'm just trying to, well, we can't predict what they're going to do, but at least get kind of the analytical framework in their minds. What are their options and, you know, competing considerations? Yes.

#Chas Freeman

Well, Saudi Arabia is obviously in a period of transition, both domestically and socially, politically, and now militarily, toward a more independent posture. Traditionally, any society that existed in the Arabian Peninsula of the size of Saudi Arabia was primarily concerned not about the Persian Gulf, but about the Red Sea and attack from Ethiopia or Egypt. And in fact, the Al Saud dynasty—this is the third Al Saud dynasty—the first two were overthrown by forces from Egypt, which objected to the Salafist philosophy that Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab inculcated in Al Saud. So it's not an accident, I think, that while Egypt is part of a four-party consultative group that's been dealing with the Iran nuclear problem, it is not included in the tripartite entente. I think it has a consultative relationship with the members.

Israel has been quite concerned about improvements in relations between Turkey and Egypt, in particular. The Saudi-Egyptian relations have had their ups and downs. Egypt and Pakistan really haven't had much in common, except a Chinese connection for the military. So Egypt is not in this. And I think the Saudis have had—they've adopted various identities over the years. Initially, of course, they are the point of origin of the Arabs, the Ur-Arabs. That is where the religious revelation of Islam took place. It is the place from which fervent believers in Islam, Arab believers, conquered the entire Mediterranean basin and Spain, eventually defeated the Tang in Central Asia, and established a border somewhere between where Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan now are and China's Xinjiang region.

So this is a region that exploded upon the world 15 centuries ago. But when the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was established for a third time under Abdulaziz right after the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, the Saudis initially used their religious identity to establish their frontiers and their relations

with others. Later, in the 1950s, they developed an Islamic identity. They described themselves as the epicenter of Islam. This was to counter Arab nationalism. They didn't want to be the epicenter of Arabism because Nasser had usurped that ideology. So they came up with an identification as Salafi Muslims. They've abandoned that now. Salafi Islam, when I was ambassador, was very much alive.

The king was buried in an unmarked grave, with no pomp. There was no national day. There was no real Saudi nationalism. Now there is. There is a national day that is celebrated. There is Saudi nationalism. There is pride in being Saudi, not just pride in being Muslim. So Saudi Arabia has undergone a whole series of transformations, not just economic. King Salman, the current monarch, who is not in full command of his faculties, grew up in a mud-walled palace. His father had a generator and one light bulb and one telephone, and the telephone connected to his mother, whom he consulted daily about policy issues on the telephone. There was no air conditioning.

Riyadh was a village of 12,000 people, forbidden to foreigners, like Mecca. You could not go there. And now, of course, Saudi Arabia is a global powerhouse. So there have been tremendous transformations. I think the Saudis have come, with the exception of Yemen, which they badly botched, I think they have come of age in terms of statecraft. They're not engaged in the kind of foolish adventurism that they were, for example, in Syria, with the repeated effort to overthrow the Assad government. In Yemen, there are two answers, it seems to me, and eventually they will come to them. One is to return to a policy that many people called realpolitik, riyals being the currency. In other words, they would rent the Yemenis for cash. Yemenis like to be rented.

They don't like to be sold. And this worked very well. It kept Yemen at bay and not a problem. The other answer to this, of course, is Saudi Arabia really has abandoned its policies based on opposition to Shiism as part of its repression with Iran, but also as a sensible adjustment to the emergence of a predominantly Shiite Iraq. Tribal politics are important in the region. And the tribes that, for example, the Shamar tribe that goes all the way up to Syria, is present in Iraq and in Saudi Arabia. The late King Abdullah, his mother was Shamari. So the Saudis have ties to tribes in Iraq, some of which are Shia, some of which are Sunni. And they've gone beyond the religious schism that everybody talks about in terms of policy, not perhaps in terms of emotion.

So, I think they're quite capable of dealing with a world in which Iran remains Shia and powerful, Iraq remains Shia and neutral between Iran and the other Arabs. Their fellow Gulf Arabs are all wary of the Saudis. I mean, at one point the Qatari Al Thani family, "We put you in power, and we can take you out of power if we want." And so they have a kind of leading role in the Gulf Cooperation Council that is uncomfortable for some of the smaller emirates. Bahrain is, of course, almost a wholly owned subsidiary of Saudi Arabia. So I think they know they will cope, and they will cope with as much American backing as they can sustain, but they will cope with the backing of others as well. After all, it was China that completed the process of rapprochement with Iran for them, not the United States.

The United States is not in a position to be helpful in that regard. And the Russians have practiced a very adroit diplomacy in the region. So the Saudis have a good relationship with them. They work with them in the OPEC context, such as that is. So I think Saudi Arabia will have a policy that is like everyone else's policy, focused on its own interests and not deferential. We will never again hear the answer of the late King Abdullah to a question posed by my deputy when he was the chargé in Riyadh. He asked then-Crown Prince Abdullah to do something ridiculous that Washington wanted him to do, which had absolutely nothing to do with Saudi interests. And Abdullah's response was, "Well, a friend who doesn't help you is no better than an enemy who does you no harm, so I guess I'll help." I don't think we're going to hear that again. I think that's over.

#Glenn

That's very interesting, though. But how would the Saudis now link it to a very current event? How are their ties with Oman? Because if you're going to solve this Strait of Hormuz, I mean, yes, here we're close to a deal between Iran and Oman about the Strait of Hormuz. I mean, this is a deal for how to operate it, not to actually open it. To open it, the United States will have to, well, in the language of the Iranians, behave. But for the Saudis, certainly they would want to have their interests accommodated. So how close are they with Oman? And given that Oman has a lot to benefit from this position Iran is offering them, how can we understand this dynamic?

#Chas Freeman

Well, that's an excellent question. The Saudi relationship with Oman historically has been one of great tension. The artillery in Oman point towards Saudi Arabia, not the sea. Oman had an empire in East Africa and enclaves in South Asia and what is now Pakistan and India, and it has very much been oriented toward trade in the Indian Ocean Basin, not toward affairs in the peninsula. But the first thing any Al Saud dynasty does when it's established, usually, the first thing they do is they go and they sack Najaf and Karbala, the two Shiite holy cities in Iraq, and then they try to conquer everybody else, including the Omanis. So there's not a good history there, and quite different perspectives on things.

But my sense is that the current relationship is not bad. And I know that the Omanis are very skilled diplomats. They are very careful to position themselves in a position of security between contending parties. And that includes the Saudis. They maintain a good relationship with Riyadh. I think that their dialogue with the Iranians must be partially coordinated with the Saudis because they understand that, as the Omanis understand very well, and I think the Iranians ultimately understand, that the Strait of Hormuz, in the end, has got to be under some kind of control that is legitimate in the eyes of Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf Arabs, not just Oman. So I think that's all I can say now. I mean, a great deal of what's going on is subterranean.

You cannot see it. That is to say, I don't know if you've ever been to a horse fair in India. It's a wonderful experience, or in Kashgar, for that matter. Same thing. You see people sitting at a table saying nasty things to each other about the price of a horse that they're angling over. Underneath the table, their fingers are talking to each other, and suddenly there's an agreement, but you didn't see how that got there. And I think this is a metaphor for a lot of what's happening in the Persian Gulf region at the moment. There's a lot of chit-chat going on that we can't hear. And, well, I suppose intelligence agencies may be able to hear some of it, but not very much. These are very opaque societies in terms of how they make decisions.

Oman, I would say, Oman is a very attractive place. And not just because the former Sultan, Sultan Qaboos, was gay and turned the whole place into the equivalent of a gay guy's apartment, everything in order and looking wonderful. But because Omanis have limited natural resources. They have oil, they have gas, but not much, and they have to work. So, you know, they can't sit around drinking tea and clipping coupons the way a lot of people in the rest of the Arabian Peninsula do. They have some drive and initiative, and as is shown in their diplomacy, which has been very adroit, they are survivors. So I don't worry about Oman too much. And I'm sure they are taking care of their own interests with the Saudis.

#Glenn

Well, thank you for sharing your great perspectives and, well, let's be honest, educating me on West Asia. So I very much appreciate it. Any final thoughts about where we're heading, though, with Iran? Because, again, close to a deal, but not with the U.S.?

#Chas Freeman

There will be no deal. There was a deal in the Iranians' eyes, and that deal needs to be implemented or at least finessed. You know, I mean, the answer to all this probably is not a deal. It's what happened with Ansar Allah, the Houthis in Yemen. That is, after a billion dollars and a year of wasted effort, a lot of equipment losses and bombing of Yemen, the United States sailed away. And, of course, we have not mentioned the fact that the Houthis, for their own reasons, which have very little to do with Iran, have now blockaded Saudi shipping through the Bab el-Mandeb, or shipping destined for Saudi Arabia, as part of their war with Saudi Arabia, which originated actually not with the Saudis directly, but with the government they support in Aden.

Yemen has once again divided into at least two realms. The prospects that it will reunite at present are not good. So the Saudis will have to deal with that. And that, of course, is nothing new for them. They know how to do that if they just recall what an older generation did. So I'll leave it there. But I would say, you know, West Asia, Saudi Arabia in particular, is pretty inscrutable. And the reason for

that is Saudi Arabia is literally the only place on the planet that was not penetrated by the West—by Western missionaries, Western militaries, Western colonialists, Western merchants. When the West came to Saudi Arabia, we came as hired help. That creates a very different mentality.

And it also accounts for a lot of our ignorance of the kingdom. Because for a long time, it was easier to go to Tibet than it was to go to Saudi Arabia. And arguably, Tibetan culture is closer to our own than the earlier version of society in Saudi Arabia was. Gender apartheid is something that the West does not adapt easily to. And so anyway, I'll just leave it there. But thank you for the opportunity to ramble about something that I can really only scratch the surface of here. Saudi society is very interesting. The Saudi political system is so generous, and, you know, as usual, if you don't understand the political systems, the political cultures, and the societies you're dealing with, you have a tendency to make grave errors of judgment.

I think that's been the case with the Russians, by the Europeans and the United States. I think it's the case with the Israelis. We have not understood them, and I don't think we've understood Iran at all, or we wouldn't have gotten into the mess that we're in. And I don't think we understand the Saudis terribly well either. There are some people who do, who have really understood that kingdom, but they are mighty few and far between, in my experience.