

# Iran's Three-Front Threat | Dr. Pietro Shakarian

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## #Pascal

Hello, everybody, and welcome back to Neutrality Studies. My name is Pascal Lottaz. I'm an associate professor at Kyoto University, and with me today is Pietro Chakarian. For the fourth or fifth time, a good friend of the show, Pietro is a lecturer in history at the American University in Yerevan, Armenia. Pietro, welcome back.

## #Pietro Shakarian

Pascal, it's great to be on your show again. Thank you so much for having me.

## #Pascal

Thank you very much for saying yes. I mean, you're very close to one of the centers of international attention. Armenia is very close to Iran, and right now the United States has a second carrier group that just arrived there. We've had talks in Geneva that apparently failed between the Americans and the Iranians, although I must say the U.S. made impossible demands, in my view. What's the situation like where you are, and how are you looking at this very, very large U.S.-manufactured crisis?

## #Pietro Shakarian

Well, a lot of people here in Yerevan, in Armenia, are actually quite nervous about the situation because, again, this has clear ramifications for the South Caucasus, for Armenia. A destabilized Iran would be an enormous disaster, as I've said numerous times on this podcast, for the whole region, right? First and foremost, as we know, the Near East, the Middle East, but also the Caucasus, Central Asia, and so on and so forth. So there is quite a bit of concern in society. I can't speak to how the government might feel about it, but in Armenian society there is great concern about the situation with Iran, between Iran and the United States. And so, yeah, I mean, it is rather, rather alarming.

## **#Pascal**

And we are talking today on Friday, February 20th. I mean, the strikes on Iran could come as early as tonight. A lot of people are saying that if the United States strikes, it'll do so after the markets close, to give a kind of two-day window for things to maybe calm down, in case they're planning a surprise, sneak, kind of decapitation attack. How do you see it? How high do you think the danger is of the U.S. actually striking Iran now?

## **#Pietro Shakarian**

Well, unfortunately, Pascal, I have to tell you, it's very high. I don't want to say that—I mean, it's not that I want to, but unfortunately, this is where we are. We're at a moment where we could be going to war as early as tonight, maybe even in U.S. time. It's really, really concerning. And the thing is, where are the brakes? Where's the off-ramp here? Because, again, like I stressed, war with Iran is alarming. People here are rather concerned about that—about the implications of it.

Maybe even that would spill over the border—something like that—it could lead to the ethnic fragmentation of Iran, the “Syrianization” of Iran, you know. Um, although I have to say, the state is rather strong. And I think that even though the U.S. thinks it can—under Trump, I mean—win this war rather handily, if that's the calculation, I can't say. But I think they have another thing coming, because the government in Iran is quite strong, and I think it will be able to withstand this. That being said, once you open the Pandora's box of war, the outcomes are very unpredictable and very concerning.

## **#Pascal**

There's a lot of talk about the Chinese and the Russians now giving substantial support to Iran and actually propping them up. Have you seen, heard, or observed anything that makes you think this time it's going to be different from, what was it, the 12-day war about six or seven months ago?

## **#Pietro Shakarian**

I think it's definitely going to be different, because this particular crisis over Iran has enormous potential to become a major regional—if not international—war. The fact is, we have, like I said, well, actually, as you were kind of alluding to, these exercises involving the Chinese and the Russians—the naval exercises with the Iranians in the Gulf of Oman, right? We even had a temporary closure of the Strait of Hormuz just the other day by the IRGC. So it's something that I think, and actually this time, as you correctly noted, Russia and China will not let Iran go down. The stakes are much too high for both countries. We've also been getting reports about IL-76s—these are large, for our viewers to understand, large military transport planes—flying from Russia to Iran.

Also, China has made many moves to bolster Iran at this moment. So Russia and China are not going to let this go. Now, what's incredibly dangerous about this is that the U.S., under Trump, keeps on building up, building up, building up. And also, by the way, I should say that the Russians and Chinese do not want a confrontation. They don't want to see a war between the U.S. and Iran. And neither do most of the states in the Middle East, Pascal Lottaz. Certainly, with the exception of Israel—possibly the UAE, which is Israel's closest ally in the region—but nobody wants this war. Turkey doesn't want this war. Egypt doesn't want this war. Iraq doesn't want this war. Saudi Arabia doesn't want this war.

## **#Pascal**

Uh, Qatar doesn't want this war.

## **#Pietro Shakarian**

And yet we seem to be continuously, you know, moving toward that moment. I mean, President Trump has indicated that the only thing that would stop him—like I said, going back to what he famously told The New York Times earlier—is his own morality. So I don't know how this is going to end up, you know? I mean, yeah, we'll see, we'll see where the chips lie on that.

## **#Pascal**

One thing that even the New York Times is reporting on today—and, you know, for the New York Times to pick up on this is already quite a big thing—is how come this time we don't even have a pretext? I mean, in the Iraq war, we had the WMD pretext. In Syria, we had the “let's save the children from gas” pretext. In Lebanon, in Libya, we had the “let's save the children from the regime” pretext. This time, we're completely out of pretexts. I mean, there's nothing.

## **#Pietro Shakarian**

I think, actually, Pascal, the way you phrase it is very interesting, because you're saying we're out of pretexts, right? So Trump was trying to kind of find one, where maybe Netanyahu was persuading him to do so. One pretext they were potentially going to use was that, well, Iran—it's the missiles, right? The missiles that clobbered Israel in the 12-day war, so now we have to get rid of them. Then it became the protests, the riots in Tehran—that we have to help, you know, bring democracy to Iran, right?

Which is really fascinating, coming from President Trump, who said that, you know, “I'm going to be the America First candidate. I'm going to be the anti-war candidate.” Right? That's how he was going into this election. And yet you saw him tweeting himself that he was basically going to pursue the exact same policy as Joe Biden—to keep pushing this kind of aggressive policy, American

imperial interests under the cover of democracy and freedom and human rights and all that. So that's what we're actually seeing, as a matter of fact, that he's moving toward.

I mean, Trump is—like I told the hosts of another podcast—Trump is morphing into George W. Bush. What we're seeing is really kind of Iraq 2.0, and with the stress on the 2.0, because Iran is an enormous country. And if it's destabilized—I mean, I understand that Israel thinks, well, we can just knock them out, turn it into another Syria, and then bomb it at will and all this and that—but the enormous, enormous implications of a country this size, over 90 million people, and with an area about the same size as Western Europe, are huge.

Actually, also, I mean, it's about the same size as Mongolia, you could say. I mean, it's a huge country—an enormous country by area, to say nothing of population. And so to start a war here—and it looks like if there is a war, it's not just going to be limited strikes, it's going to be a full-on war—which really concerns me, because they can't do something surgical, Pascal, like go in and take out the leadership or kidnap, I don't know, the Ayatollah. Or, excuse me, they can't just take out the Supreme Leader like they did with Maduro. They can't do that. They can't just sweep in like that. It's going to be much more complicated, and it's going to leave us with a disaster scenario, really. So, yeah.

## **#Pascal**

And, you know, Iran made it very clear. They said, if you shoot, it's not going to be a 12-day war—it's going to be a long, drawn-out thing. We're going to immediately start shooting at your positions, which are all within range of our missiles, and we're going to start shooting at Israel as well. And this time we won't stop, because remember, last time it was the Iranians who agreed after 12 days to stop, when Israel was basically in a really dire moment, right? They said, no, not this time—we're going to go full-blown after you. Last time the Iranians didn't go after U.S. military installations, and this time they've already said, if you attack, we will.

## **#Pietro Shakarian**

It's going to be a long war. Let me tell you, these people are going to fight. Because, I mean, the Iranians, like I said, between both the—how do you say this—the kind of passionate devotion to Shia Islam, right? That's number one. And number two, the nationalism—the sense that we're a great civilization, we were a great empire going back to the times of Cyrus the Great and so on and so forth. These people will fight. They will fight. And like I said, there's this belief that, well, we can fragment it along ethnic lines, but even many of those ethnic groups, like the Iranian Azerbaijanis in the north, are very integrated into Iranian society. They're extraordinarily integrated into Iranian society. Just look again at the Supreme Leader.

And really, at the end of the day, even though there's this effort to promote Reza Pahlavi as the leader of Iran, that doesn't resonate with the majority of Iranians. So I think if Trump goes down

this route, it's not going to end well. But I think we might—if Iran does something, like if the Iranians decide to do a limited closure of the Strait of Hormuz—then that would actually reduce the chances of a long, drawn-out war, because the economic impact would be felt immediately. And, you know, that's where I think we might be heading, frankly. They were actually sending a warning the other day—the IRGC was sending a warning when they did the temporary closure of the Strait of Hormuz. They were showing the world, "This is what we can do, so don't mess with us."

## **#Pascal**

Yeah, the one thing I don't really understand is that closing the Strait of Hormuz would basically punish everybody for this.

## **#Pietro Shakarian**

No, that's why I'm saying it would be a selective closure. They wouldn't do it against—well, they're very cognizant of not wanting to, for example, harm the Chinese, because, again, look at how much support China has been giving Iran. They're not going to do that. This is going to be a selective closure that disproportionately affects the West and the United States in particular—and also, inevitably, Israel. So this is what we're seeing: this is a nuclear option. It's not something they would want to do; they'd prefer to negotiate. But again, when you go into negotiations, you can't negotiate like this, where one side is putting enormous military pressure on the other. It's just not going to work, unfortunately. I mean, for the sake of negotiations, this kind of approach is really disastrous and extraordinarily reckless.

## **#Pascal**

It's also an impossible ask. It was an impossible ask to tell Iran that not only does it have to completely abandon its nuclear program, but also basically scrap its entire missile program and, you know, make sure that it can, at any point in time, be targeted by Israel or the United States, while having no missiles to retaliate. I mean, it's an impossible ask after having been attacked, you know, last summer and after...

## **#Pietro Shakarian**

Even notwithstanding that—even notwithstanding the 12-day war—it's an impossible ask of any country when your request is that their defenses be dismantled. So that's more of an ultimatum, last time I checked, than a negotiating position. That's how I see it.

## **#Pascal**

I mean, it's an ultimatum backed by the U.S. Navy parked right in front, with the explicit threat that if you don't say yes, then we'll strike. I mean, that in itself is already a breach of the U.N. Charter.

## **#Pietro Shakarian**

Absolutely. That's to say nothing of the fact that Mr. Trump is apparently trying to create an alternative U.N. with this so-called Board of Peace. He keeps on talking about "peace, peace, peace." It's almost as if he thinks that if he keeps talking about peace, then peace will happen. But you know what? If you talk about peace and then go to war, or you make highly reckless, provocative moves that are going to provoke a war—even if that might be terribly damaging to your own presidency—that's not going to bring any peace of any kind. So we hear a lot about "peace, peace, peace," but what peace? I mean, he's creating the conditions for war, this president.

## **#Pascal**

Of course, of course he is—absolutely, clearly he is. But what I also wonder is, have you heard any talk about, you know, in the absence of an attack on the U.S.—on the United States or on its troops? And regarding the fact that he also renamed the Department of Defense into the Department of War, and that he put all of these people over there, while we have no casus belli from the other side—I mean, declaring war or using war powers, even under the U.S. Constitution, is not with Trump. It's with Congress.

## **#Pietro Shakarian**

It is with Congress. But I think that—even, well, I think Mr. Massey has raised that point—that Mr. Trump should go through the legislature. I mean, that's how it should work in a democratic republic such as the United States. It should be by the law. It shouldn't be this kind of unilateral decision by the president, as if he's a monarch, just saying, "Well, you know what, I'm going to go to war." But if you look at the kind of statements he's making, where he says, "You know what, the only thing that's going to stop me is my own morality," then already that shows you he thinks he's above the law.

It's almost like going back to Louis XIV, right? Like, "I am the state," and so I can do whatever I want. And that's incredibly alarming to, by the way, large numbers of Americans, Pascal—both Democrats and Republicans. So this is becoming a nonpartisan issue. And that's saying nothing of what's going on when you look at places like Minneapolis, when you look at the behavior of ICE. I mean, the guy is out of control. He's completely out of control. So I... And also, it's not just him, though. It's not just Trump. It'd be easy to write this off and say, "Okay, this is all about Trump."

But it's also the enormous power of the Israeli lobby—Mr. Netanyahu putting this enormous, enormous pressure on Trump to go to war. And you see, you know what the outcome is going to be. I mean, this is not a war that the American people want or need. It's certainly not a war that the Iranian people want or need, or anybody in the region. For instance, here in Armenia, we have—

well, it's a beautiful day today, beautiful weather. Nobody here wants a war. Everybody just wants to live in peace, and nobody wants to see a disaster hit their neighbor. Armenians have been neighbors with Iran for thousands of years.

And so... uh, yeah, I mean, it's not something anybody wants, but yet Trump is pushing this. And like you say, to do something like change the name of the Department of Defense to the Department of War—that shows you his intention right now. If we changed the name to the Department of Peace, if he made it the Department of Peace—which he would never do—then you'd say, "Okay, maybe he's serious about peace," right? Talk about the Board of Peace, you know. But I think he's more interested in making pieces out of various countries, including Iran, or whether it's, I don't know, Cuba now. Cuba—there's a horrible, horrible, horrible blockade, as you know, Pascal.

## **#Pascal**

Yeah.

## **#Pietro Shakarian**

What we're seeing right now—this is unprecedented. There's always been an embargo on Cuba going back decades, as we know, back to the Cold War, to the Cuban Revolution, with Mr. Castro coming to power. But now, under Trump, this blockade has been completely intensified. It's becoming a starvation blockade. And what's most interesting about this is that we've seen this show before. We saw it here in the Caucasus with Artsakh, when Azerbaijan unceremoniously kicked out the indigenous Armenian population.

They did a blockade on it. Right. Of course, I also don't want to discount the fact that Mr. Pashinyan recognized Artsakh as part of Azerbaijan, against the will of the people of Artsakh. But there was this horrible blockade preceding the ethnic cleansing. Then you go to Gaza—you look at what's going on there. This complete, complete strangulation of the Palestinians, complete starvation, genocide, what we're seeing there. And the strategy now, with Mr. Rubio and his influence in the Trump administration, is being tried out in Cuba. So what can you say?

## **#Pascal**

No, it's that everything that's been tried out in Gaza—the fear is, of course, that the lessons learned there will be implemented in Cuba, that the same methods will be tested again. And there's one more element here that I find quite bizarre: in Geneva, very close to where I am right now, we had this moment when the same U.S. negotiators, Jared Kushner and Steve Witkoff, were in charge of two high-stakes negotiations—one about a war that had been going on for four years with the Russians, where the Americans and NATO were on the losing end, and another about a war that's probably about to start. It almost feels like the handing over of the staff from one war to the next.

## **#Pietro Shakarian**

Absolutely. That's pretty much where it is, because the Ukraine war right now is really in a disastrous state for NATO. I mean, you look at it—the Ukrainians, there's mass desertion. You know, it's been reported for a very long time in this war how these military recruiters are just taking young men off the streets, basically throwing them in vans, beating them up, and sending them to the front. And now it's worse than ever, and there's more and more resistance to this.

And actually, the Russians today were saying, as a matter of fact, that the Ukrainians are losing the war of attrition. And they truly are—they really are on the losing end of this. And to the Ukrainian people, how else does this look? I mean, this is basically a war fought to the last Ukrainian, Pascal. This is exactly what people like you and me have been saying for four years. Exactly. And unfortunately, the message hasn't really been getting through. But now, I think the war—like you say—NATO is very much on the losing end of this.

## **#Pascal**

So, yes, that brings me to one more point, which is that the war with Iran that seems to be around the corner this time looks like it's not going to be a NATO war. I mean, the Europeans have been quiet, even though I wish they had said, like, "Stop this stuff." The only ones who seem to be lending support are the UK, although I've also heard that Starmer isn't very keen on the U.S. using Diego Garcia as a launching pad. So, did you hear anything about that? Well, also, I just want to add this.

## **#Pietro Shakarian**

The U.K. now, thanks to the Epstein files, is in dire political straits. I mean, you can see that Mr. Starmer's government is in real trouble.

## **#Pascal**

The brother of the king was arrested. Yes, absolutely.

## **#Pietro Shakarian**

So the last thing—the last thing the U.K. needs right now—is this war. And yet, this is where we're headed, right? I mean, you know, there's no consideration not only for the U.K., there's no consideration for the Europeans. Actually, I have to say, it was painful watching the Munich Security Conference. Yeah. Because Rubio gave this horrible speech—this really, really terrible speech—condemning decolonization, calling for a new age of colonialism, a new age of imperialism. And the Europeans gave him a standing ovation. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. And then, in addition, that's not even counting the horror of the abysmal performance of AOC. Right? This was supposedly

the progressive alternative in the West, and yet she didn't sound too far from Mr. Trump on much of what she was saying. So, what can you say? I mean, let's just hope.

## **#Pascal**

Yeah. But it's really a moment—I mean, the American empire is going down one way or another. Even the way this war is being built up just shows you, in comparison to how the Iraq war was built up. Just for everyone to remember, Iraq at the time had a population of five or six million, right? Yes. Or sorry, is it more? Sorry. But it's significantly smaller—significantly, significantly smaller.

## **#Pietro Shakarian**

Absolutely, significantly smaller. You know, I mean, I don't have the population figures in front of me—they're very vague—but significantly smaller, yes.

## **#Pascal**

It's significantly smaller. And that war was built up with everything—WMDs and, you know, the Coalition of the Willing—and when the president wanted to join, then the renaming of the Freedom Fries, right? I mean, yeah, absolutely. All of this is absent right now. I mean, even with...

## **#Pietro Shakarian**

There was a great—I just want to say this, Pascal, if you don't mind me interrupting you for a second. There was a great line by Trita Parsi of the Quincy Institute. Back in the day, when we had the Iraq War, it was very good to have people like Chirac and Schröder dissent on the decision to go to war with Iraq. Because the idea was that within the Western alliance, you'd have some voices in Europe who would be, you know, the voice of reason—persuading the Americans to pull back. They would say, "OK, well, maybe this"—this is what Trita Parsi said, a great line—"maybe this is a little nutty, this idea. Maybe you should pull back and not get involved in regime change in Iraq."

But we don't have that moderating voice anymore from that time, by the way—from the time of the Iraq War. There were already policy papers from think tanks in the Beltway saying that the Europeans were much too autonomous, that our aim should be to subordinate Europe to us so they don't question our decisions, and also that they don't become an alternative—an alternative center of power. There was this obsession with the idea that, at all costs, even at the cost of American national security, we had to preserve what many elites in Washington considered to be the unipolar American moment. And even, like I said, even at the cost of American national security, they're willing to push this.

## **#Pascal**

By the way, everybody, I just had to look it up—the actual number is 25 million. Apologies, not 525. But still, that's significantly lower than the population of Iran. We're talking about a completely different situation here. And Pietro, just... did you hear anything from Azerbaijan, or see anything from there? Because one of the things that surprised me is that Azerbaijan was actually quite important during the 12-day war. What are you seeing over there now?

## **#Pietro Shakarian**

Well, right now, just to add to that, the biggest development in the Caucasus region—and this is the subject of an article I recently wrote in *\*The Nation\** magazine called "J.D. Vance, a Prisoner of the Caucasus"—was the recent visit of the American vice president to Armenia and Azerbaijan. What was most interesting about this? The first thing you notice is that it was a South Caucasian tour. He flew into Yerevan from Milan after being booed there during the Winter Olympics, but he skipped Georgia. So it shows you that Georgia—well, as we know, Georgia used to be the darling of the American neoconservative movement.

But the Georgians now—especially after Mr. Saakashvili's, you know, disastrous adventure in 2008—well, now all of a sudden Georgia is somewhat off the radar. Armenia and Azerbaijan are the main focus, right? Especially when we look at something like this trip, this Trump route for international peace and prosperity, which would basically give this area in the south of Armenia, in the Syunik province—right on the border with Iran—basically, we're talking about Armenia's border with Iran. Yeah, it would give Armenia's border with Iran over to a private American company.

Technically, by the terms of what the U.S. is angling for, it would basically create this kind of corridor along the Iranian-Armenian border. It would be controlled by a private company—partially controlled by the Armenians, partially by the Americans—but the Americans would have a 74% stake in it. So it would basically be, yeah, absolutely insane. And imagine what that does: it plants American influence right there on Iran's border. It opens the door for Israel, for American private companies there. But even more—that's what's going on here. That project hasn't been implemented yet.

Right now, that's on the level of rhetoric. Pashinyan is hoping he can, you know, kind of secure this agreement with Vance. Vance even went so far as to endorse Pashinyan for re-election, because in June, in Armenia, there are big elections coming up. And actually, Pashinyan's ratings are sinking. He has very, very poor approval ratings in Armenia, especially because he's been going after and attacking the Armenian Apostolic Church. Mm-hmm. So now what you see is a scenario where his position is weakening in Armenia. He's hoping to bolster it. Probably he told Vance, "Look, I have a problem with this election. Can you endorse me?" But then that backfired. How did it backfire? Because Vance went to the Armenian Genocide Memorial without Pashinyan present, which is unprecedented for an Armenian state leader to be absent from such a visit.

But Vance went there, laid flowers, and visited the Eternal Flame at the Armenian Genocide Memorial with his wife. He posted about it on Twitter—well, X—and then deleted the tweet because

he didn't want to upset Turkey by using the term "genocide." In Armenia and in the Armenian diaspora, that was received very badly. So even Pashinyan's endorsement from Vance backfired; it didn't work. Then what happened was, after that, Vance went to Azerbaijan, and this kind of picks up from what we were talking about. He went there and basically signed a sort of strategic partnership agreement with Baku, where the idea was to pledge more military assistance to Azerbaijan. We have to understand, Pascal Lottaz, Azerbaijan is one of the most militarized societies in the world.

## **#Pascal**

Oh, really?

## **#Pietro Shakarian**

Yes. Huge, huge, huge arms buildup there—versus, by the way, Armenia, where Pashinyan has actually been working to kind of, you know, reduce the Armenian defenses. He's been cutting down on strengthening Armenia's ability to defend itself in the case of a war with Azerbaijan. But conversely, despite all the talk of peace that Pashinyan is using—and that you also hear from President Trump—Azerbaijan is building up its military. And actually, this is making many people in Armenia wonder, well, you know, they're building up the military so much. Do they want to use it just on Armenia, or is somebody else in their view? And that somebody else is obviously Iran.

So there's major concern about Azerbaijan potentially participating in a war against Iran that would be led by the U.S. and Israel. President Aliyev, in his statements there with Mr. Vance, was praising the United States—the most powerful country in the world, the most powerful military in the world—which tells you a lot about where his allegiances are. He's not somebody who's looking to Iran, or to Russia, or to China, or to BRICS. He sees Azerbaijan's future with, you know, frankly speaking, the declining American hegemonic world. I mean, he sees that for some reason—maybe because he's very close to Western oil companies, maybe because he's close to Mr. Netanyahu in Israel.

He sees that as the future for Azerbaijan. And, you know, for his part, Vance was praising Aliyev, saying, "Look, you know what, as I was coming here, I was thinking—the only leader in the world aside from President Trump who has good relations with both the Turks and the Israelis is Mr. Aliyev. And maybe that's because of the food, or because he's so charming, or whatever." Then he made this kind of joke about the fact that in Azerbaijan, Aliyev's wife is the vice president—which is actually true—and he said, "I hope Usha doesn't get any ideas from this."

This is what Vance was saying. And that comment was actually cut out of the press conference by Azerbaijani State TV, which just added to the whole absurdity of it. But Azerbaijan, you know, has been—and is being—prepared almost as a forward base for a potential assault against Iran. Israeli intelligence has been really active in Azerbaijan, particularly in these so-called smart villages in the areas that were formerly controlled by Nagorno-Karabakh, close to the Iranian border. In these

areas, there's been a lot of concern from Iranian officials about Israeli intelligence, Mossad, being especially active there. So that's where we are now.

## **#Pascal**

So, do you see a chance that what might unfold in the next days or weeks could turn into a tripartite war against Iran—with a simultaneous attack by the United States using its naval power, Israel with its missiles, and Azerbaijan actually moving troops across the border, like boots on the ground for Azerbaijan?

## **#Pietro Shakarian**

Yeah, I don't know if they would actually go that far yet. But there have been reports that if Israel and the U.S. are successful in basically turning Iran into one gigantic Syria, then President Aliyev would definitely take advantage of it. For now, as long as the Iranian state is strong and able to fend off these American and Israeli attacks, that won't happen. By the way, when we're talking about Vance and his visit to Baku, part of the deal was to provide assistance to the Azerbaijani Navy in the Caspian Sea. So there could even be attacks on Iran from the Caspian, from Azerbaijan. So, yeah.

## **#Pascal**

Okay, so we're looking at a lot of scenarios. But what about Iran's reaction in all of this? I mean, Iran is being very firm in terms of its diplomatic commitment, saying, like, we have our red lines, we're willing to discuss the nuclear issue, but nothing beyond that. Otherwise, they've been sitting pretty still, in my view. Okay, the cooperation with Russia and China is going on, and there are joint naval exercises, but that's about it?

## **#Pietro Shakarian**

Or did you see more coming from—well, and also, don't forget the IRGC exercises in the Strait of Hormuz, and the temporary closure of the Strait of Hormuz. Those are pretty tough signals. I mean, to close the Strait of Hormuz—that's not a joke. So that's a signal right there that they're not just going to sit by and let this happen. You know, the hardliners, particularly in Iran, are very, very—um—they're very much prepared for any eventuality.

They know, because there's been this whole buildup toward war, that they're not just going to sit there and allow this to take place. And that's not even counting the attempted color revolution we saw back in January. All of this is something they're taking into account. The Iranians are very, very cautious—they're like chess players. But we also see, especially with the IRGC exercises and the temporary closing of the Strait of Hormuz, that their patience is not infinite. We'll see what comes of this.

## **#Pascal**

What do you think Russia is doing at the moment? I mean, this is a very threatening development for them as well—despite, on the one hand, having the upper hand with Ukraine. If the United States gets distracted with Iran, they might be able to wind things down even faster. But at the same time, Iran is now a key—well, I want to avoid the word “ally,” but a key partner in BRICS and among the states in the region. So how do you think Moscow is now—what’s Moscow working on?

## **#Pietro Shakarian**

I think Moscow is very active in trying to keep up, first and foremost, with what’s happening diplomatically. So today, even though we can be very pessimistic—and rightfully so—about the state of negotiations between Iran and the United States, Mr. Lavrov had a phone call with Mr. Aragchi, kind of bolstering their diplomatic support for Iran. Actually, I should say the call happened at the initiative of the Iranian side. But still, it shows the closeness between the two.

First and foremost, on the level of the foreign ministries—on the level of diplomacy. But also, they’re very close, as we know, in terms of military-technical cooperation. They’re not technically or formally allies. I mean, the Strategic Partnership Treaty that was signed a year ago—over a year ago—was not an overt treaty of mutual defense. But there was a significant military-technical component in it that couldn’t be ignored. And what that was also doing was showing, as I think I said earlier on this podcast when the agreement was signed, that the agreement itself was really the culmination of where Russian-Iranian relations had developed up to that point.

And so now, by looking at that as a reflection of the broader relationship, I think we can also say that the military-technical ties are quite close—and diplomatically as well. Because even going back to December, on December 17th, there was that joint press conference with Aragchi and Lavrov, where they basically further deepened relations between the foreign ministries. So on all levels, Russia is—I’m sure they’re monitoring the situation. Actually, it’s not just that I’m sure; I know they’re monitoring it extraordinarily closely. All the evidence points to the fact that they’re constantly in touch with the Iranians.

This indicates to me the seriousness of this relationship. I should also mention that I’ve seen these images of the IL-76 flights coming from Russia to Iran, and the reports about them show that this is an extraordinarily strong relationship. Contrary to what you might read—if you read The Guardian, for example—they might say there are big differences between Russia and Iran in certain areas or something like that. In fact, these relationships are extraordinarily close. And if you really want to understand what’s going on, you have to first and foremost understand that these relations are very, very tight.

## **#Pascal**

Have you heard any discussions among your Russian colleagues about the idea that, if the United States is foolish enough to jump into this, Iran could become some sort of payback for Ukraine? You know, to create a quagmire for them that they can't get out of, where they're directly involved, and they'd have to commit a good part of their Navy to it. And that might be, you know, a chance to sink a couple of those sitting ducks.

## **#Pietro Shakarian**

You know, I don't think that's on the menu for the Russians. They're not interested in pulling the Americans into a quagmire. Their main interest in Iran is to ensure its stability and security, because that, in turn, helps secure the stability of Russia itself. And it's, you know, their Eurasian underbelly—those former Soviet republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus. So there's no strategic objective to lure the Americans into some kind of quagmire war. They're not interested in that. And they might not even have to, because, again, if there were a selective closure of the Strait of Hormuz, the economic impact alone could be enough to end the whole question right from the start.

## **#Pascal**

So you think it would be strong enough? I mean, would the impact on the United States be strong enough to really register?

## **#Pietro Shakarian**

I really think that an economic— I mean, I've been saying this for years from an American perspective— I think the one thing that could snap the United States back into focusing on its own republic, on the well-being of its own citizens, on the well-being of its own society, is if there were some kind of economic crunch or something like that. Because, again, we have to remember that so much of this military-industrial complex, so much of this war machine, is built on borrowed money. And something like this— the closure of the Strait of Hormuz— could send a huge shock through the whole system. It really could. And it would probably end Trump's presidency. It would be a huge blow to Trump personally, I think.

## **#Pascal**

Right. I mean, under any imaginable circumstance, you'd think the United States would have an interest in avoiding the situation they've maneuvered themselves into. It's just—the speech acts coming from Washington and the armada in front of Iran now—they speak a completely different language. I mean, it's quite... it's quite an irrational thing to do, actually, looking at it today.

## **#Pietro Shakarian**

It is very irrational, Pascal. But the problem is, in the United States, we have so many interests in Washington, D.C. The big money talks. And first and foremost is the war lobby. Then there's also, as we know, the Israeli lobby, and the energy lobby. There are many, many lobbies interested in profiting off this war. And that's why we're here. You know, realistically—going back to this idea of the founding fathers avoiding the temptation of going overseas and slaying monsters, and so on and so forth—in fact, we're going into this because there's been no effort to rein in these lobbies in Washington that have really been pushing the United States to pursue policies contrary to its logical national interests. And that's how I see it.

## **#Pascal**

We're at the point that Eisenhower actually warned about—the military-industrial complex as a highly, highly dangerous beast. And by now, it's beyond the military-industrial complex. It includes other lobbies, including the Israel lobby. And we're seeing where it's now taking the entire potential, and also the economic ramifications, of the United States. So it's just even more foolish than the Ukraine war, what we're in now.

## **#Pietro Shakarian**

Oh yeah, absolutely. I mean, there's incredible danger too, because who's there? I mean, we see, you know, again, when the Russians and the Chinese are there bolstering Iran, we're talking about—uh—and that's why, you know, we look at Iran and the Persian Gulf right now. Probably this is the most dangerous flashpoint in the world, on par with a Cuban Missile Crisis scenario, because right there you have the United States flexing its muscle. You also have the Chinese and the Russians basically sending the signal, "We're going to bolster Iran." And those are the three major atomic superpowers in our world today—the United States, China, and Russia. And so, to put them all in the same place in this incredibly flammable situation, I think it's beyond reckless. I mean, Trump is pushing this. That's what I'm saying—it's beyond reckless.

## **#Pascal**

What happens, in your view, if tonight or tomorrow night the strike begins—some sort of massive decapitation strike, missiles flying from all these naval assets, from the bases, and from Israel as well? And then, in retaliation, Iran strikes back at the bases in Qatar and so on, and a couple hundred U.S. personnel die. I mean, would that be—because the one thing the United States cannot and does not take is paying in its own blood, right? Would that destroy the presidency of Donald Trump? Or, on the contrary, would everybody go, "They attacked us after we attacked them—but they attacked us"? Which reaction do you foresee?

## **#Pietro Shakarian**

I mean, the media will try to spin it in the second way, you know, but I think the first scenario is more likely. Again, if something happens in the Strait of Hormuz—if the Iranians do something there—that could send a very, very strong message. That alone could be enough to destroy Trump. So, like I said, he's playing with fire. I don't know if the idea was to have a quick war with Iran, but based on what he's aiming for here, it doesn't seem like he's just in for a quick war. And that, I think, is going to end his presidency. It's going to end any reputation he had. I mean, he was not the best American president to begin with, and this would just completely demolish his presidency. So—

## **#Pascal**

Yeah, especially with the peace faction of MAGA—the ones who actually don't want to go into another war.

## **#Pietro Shakarian**

He's completely swept them aside. I mean, there's a whole kind of anti-war element in the MAGA movement, and he's just completely disregarded that. So he's doing something else. I guess you could call it maybe the Donro Doctrine—or, I don't know, I don't know. I mean, it's a disaster. It's a disaster, and it will not end well for the United States, unfortunately. But, I mean, I would usually want to give you something, Pascal, by instinct—like saying, well, let's hope cooler heads prevail, let's hope we can avoid this scenario. But it's hard for me to see how you get out of this easily. Diplomacy would be the easiest way.

You know, just give peace a chance, right? As John Lennon would say—just give peace a chance. You know, just do the talks. But the problem is, he's not into this. He's not into this. Trump is— I mean, they're doing peace, but the negotiations are not, you know, successful. And there's also the lack of trust. Imagine if you're in Iran. The Iranians are negotiating in good faith, even now, because they don't want this war at all. But still, there's this memory of the June war—that they were betrayed, that they were negotiating, and then they were attacked. So I don't know how you get out of this. It's rather difficult from my point of view.

## **#Pascal**

No, the only way to get out of this is basically to drive one of the carriers or whatever through the Strait of Hormuz, say, "Look, it's open. We opened it, we kept it open, we won," and then leave. Trump would actually do that, right? I mean, he could just claim they won and leave, but...

## **#Pietro Shakarian**

But he keeps on building up. He keeps on building up, Pascal. He's putting all this American military hardware in the region, and that would indicate to me that they're ready to go—as he says, locked

and loaded for a war. I mean, I would hope there could be a scenario, maybe like the one you envisioned, where it's just about an aircraft carrier going through the Strait of Hormuz, and then that's it—call it a day and go home, you know? But it's not, it doesn't seem to be like that. And the other problem is, even if this were meant as a policy of, I guess you could say, threatening Iran and trying to be tough on Iran with the idea of improving your negotiating position—well, at some point, if you go too far with that, it's going to lead you into this slippery slope of war. It's like you're sleepwalking into war. Trump—actually, he's not even sleepwalking; he's more like he's screaming into war. You know? I mean, yeah.

## **#Pascal**

It's a bizarre moment. A very, very bizarre moment—on so many different levels. But anyhow, Pietro, thank you very much for your assessments from much closer to the whole region. Is there any place where people should go to find you and your writings?

## **#Pietro Shakarian**

Well, first and foremost, I've written a lot for the American Committee for East-West Accord, but I'd encourage your viewers to read my most recent piece in *\*The Nation\** magazine, "J.D. Vance: A Prisoner of the Caucasus," right? The title is derived from the famous poem by Alexander Pushkin. So they can check that out on [thenation.com](http://thenation.com). And they can read what I've written there about, you know, this continued saber-rattling in the north of Iran, right? A lot of our attention has been focused on the Persian Gulf, the south. But in the Caucasus, that's also a very, very significant front, as I was just explaining to your viewers—about Azerbaijan, about this effort to create this, you know, tripwire in southern Armenia, right?

And that's kind of where we are right now. But definitely, I'd advise your viewers to check out that article. I've also written a book on Anastas Mikoyan, an Armenian reformer in Khrushchev's Kremlin. It was the result of seven years of deep research in the Armenian and Russian archives, about the alternatives in Soviet history—about Mikoyan and Khrushchev reforming the Soviet state, rehabilitating former political prisoners from the Stalinist era, and so on and so forth. So if you're interested in that, check out my book as well from Indiana University Press. And Pascal, thank you for having me on.

It's a pleasure, as always. I just wish it were under better circumstances. I wish there were more opportunities for peace—real peace, not just the "board of peace" or, you know, whatever Trump is saying, or Pashinyan or Aliyev, whatever they're saying. Real peace. I hope we have more of that in the future, rather than peace as, kind of, a cover for more wars. So, on that note, thank you so much for having me. It's been a great pleasure, a great time, and—yeah—thank you very much, Pietro. We'll keep looking at the region, and we'll have you back on in the near future. Thank you for your time today. Thank you, Pascal.

