

“The US Has Capitulated” — Trita Parsi on Iran War Fears

Is the United States preparing for war with Iran — or backing down? Support Independent media to remain bold: <https://patreon.com/IndiaGlobalLeft> Link for donation: <https://paypal.me/sankymudiar> We sit down with leading Iran analyst Trita Parsi to break down the escalating US–Iran tensions, the nuclear negotiations, and the growing talk of regime change in Washington. In this wide-ranging interview, we discuss: How close are we to a US military strike on Iran? Has Washington already capitulated in the negotiations? Is the conflict really about Iran’s nuclear program — or regime change? Is there consensus within the US ruling elite for war? How would Iran respond to a US attack? What kind of escalation could follow? Do Arab states have leverage to stop a war? Will Russia or China support Iran militarily? What kind of deal could allow Trump to claim he outdid Obama? With tensions rising in West Asia, this conversation explores whether diplomacy can still prevail — or if the region is heading toward another devastating war. Topics: US foreign policy, Iran nuclear talks, regime change, Trump strategy, Middle East geopolitics, Russia & China’s role, regional escalation. Follow us on Substack: <https://substack.com/@indiagloballeft> Twitter: <https://twitter.com/Indiagloballeft> Instagram <https://www.instagram.com/indiagloballeft/> Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61559411353392> Spotify: <https://open.spotify.com/show/69Y9iCWUv8ha3ATsPWtWk0?si=ee1f0de3de094f17> Telegram: <https://t.me/+WNIqoiv1Rhg5NjEx>

#Mudiar

Hello and welcome to another episode of *India and the Global Left*. If you’re new to the show, please smash that subscribe button. Also, consider becoming a YouTube member, a Patreon, or donating a small amount through the link in the description box. Let me welcome our guest tonight, Dr. Trita Parsi. Dr. Parsi is an author known for his work on U.S.–Iran relations and West Asian geopolitics. He is the co-founder of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. Dr. Parsi, welcome back to *India and the Global Left*.

#Guest

Great to be back.

#Mudiar

I wanted to start with a simple question: how close are we to a U.S. attack on Iran?

#Guest

Unfortunately, we are very close, and the first reports coming out of the talks taking place right now in Geneva are not particularly positive, given the position the U.S. has taken and the distance between that and the Iranian proposal. The U.S. position is essentially one of complete capitulation, and it's not even offering much sanctions relief, if any at all. I fear that this is creating a situation in which, for the Iranians, a war may actually seem to offer better chances than the offer the U.S. has put on the negotiating table. Because even though the Iranians know they're not going to be able to win a war against the United States, they do believe they can inflict significant damage on the U.S., and by doing so, force it to back off and adopt a more realistic negotiating position.

#Mudiar

I want to take a step back and ask you to describe for our viewers: why does the U.S. want to attack Iran? Because in mainstream media, it's been presented as if the issue is only the Iranian nuclear program — as if it's just about Iran's zero enrichment versus sanctions. But we know, as Secretary of State Marco Rubio has made clear, that it's also about the Iranian ballistic missile program. And it might be much more than that — about regime change and so on. So, if you could break it down for our viewers: why does the U.S. want to attack Iran?

#Guest

Well, I think at this point it's quite clear that, without pressure from the Israeli government, the U.S. wouldn't be in this position right now. Trump did attack Iran back in June of last year as a result of Israeli pressure. He said he had "obliterated the program." Now he's back again, saying they have a nuclear weapons program, following Netanyahu's visit with him on December 29th. So the Israelis are constantly pushing the United States to go to war with Iran — whether the pretext is the nuclear program, the ballistic missiles, or the protests. There's a constant push from the Israelis for the United States to take out Iran militarily and give Israel a very different Middle East landscape, one where its domination, or its desired domination, can no longer be challenged by any significant party in the region.

#Mudiar

And what's beyond the Israel lobby? I mean, does the U.S. imperial machine — I'm thinking about the military contractors, the intelligence apparatus that's been very active in the region for a long time, the ideological positions of the Iran hawks, and so on — does that matter as well, over and above the Israel lobby?

#Guest

Certainly. It definitely matters, but without the push from the Israel lobby, I don't think it would have led to the kind of showdown we have right now. It's also important to keep in mind that the military-industrial complex wants wars that go on for a long time, but not wars the United States

actually loses militarily. Afghanistan was a cash cow for them, and they were totally happy to keep it going for decades. But with Iran, it's a very different story. It's a real military power. It has ballistic missiles that can penetrate all layers of American and Israeli air defense systems, could clearly strike Israel, and potentially sink American ships. It's a much more costly endeavor — not one I think they have at the top of their agenda, but it is at the top of the agenda for the pro-Israel voices in Washington.

#Mudiar

The New York Times reported on a meeting — I think it was last Thursday, though I might be wrong about the exact day — that included the U.S. military chief, President Trump, the Vice President, the Secretary of State, the White House chief, and others. They discussed the outcomes and broader implications of the war. My question is, do you think there's a consensus among the ruling elites in the U.S. when it comes to a U.S. attack on Iran?

#Guest

Not at all. There isn't even a consensus within the White House. In fact, the person who seems most eager, or at least inclined to consider the option, is the president himself. A lot of voices around him are very skeptical, precisely because this would be a very dangerous endeavor. This is not going to be Venezuela. It's not something guaranteed to be quick and glorious, and it could have dramatic domestic political repercussions if it goes the wrong way. And with crucial midterm elections coming up for Trump, from a political standpoint, this doesn't seem like a particularly smart move for the president.

I do think the president wants a way out of this — that he wants to find a way to climb down and declare victory. It's embarrassing, of course, to have put half of the U.S. Air Force and a third of the U.S. Navy in the region and then not get anything for it. So I think he's looking for something that lets him declare victory. At the same time, he's suffering from an unrealistic view of how weak Iran has become over the last two years. It has become weaker, but not as weak as the president believes. And this exaggerated sense of Iranian weakness is driving maximalist positions by the United States at the negotiating table, which actually increase the risk of war — because those maximalist demands aren't going to be met, since Iran isn't as weak as the U.S. believes it to be.

#Mudiar

Can you tell us a little bit more about the kinds of responses or strengths that Iran has? We know about the ballistic missile programs, and we've also seen practical demonstrations of Iranian drones in the NATO–Russia conflict in Ukraine. There's talk about Iranian allies, particularly in Iraq but also in other regions. So, what kind of responses would Iran have against a U.S. attack?

#Guest

Well, I think you mentioned several of them right there. And I think, again, what the Iranian strategy would likely be in that scenario is not to achieve an outright military victory, but rather to inflict so much pain on the U.S. that Trump realizes continuing the war would come at the expense of his own presidency. The Iranians don't have to win the war; they just need to get as close as possible to destroying Trump's presidency before they lose it. And that can be done, they believe, by striking back at U.S. ships, U.S. bases, U.S. soft targets if necessary, oil installations throughout the Persian Gulf, and potentially closing down the Strait of Hormuz—which they can do more easily now with missiles rather than mines—and plunging the global economy into collapse to a certain extent. Fuel inflation, oil prices, all of these things would inflict a significant political cost on Trump.

In addition to the military cost—which, if the Iranian prediction or their assessment proves correct—would be something the U.S. hasn't seen, not even in Iraq or Afghanistan. The idea is to make it clear that, yes, ultimately Iran could lose the war, but it would come at such a high cost for the United States that it wouldn't be worth it. I think the Iranians are basing this, to some extent, on the experience of the Houthis, because Trump started this unnecessary war against them when they were firing missiles at ships, trying to pressure the Israelis to stop the genocide in Gaza.

And after seven or eight weeks, the United States kind of lost interest in it because it wasn't going that well. The Houthis didn't back down—they fired back—and he just let it go, declared victory, and even praised the Houthis. Now, the potential mistake the Iranians are making here is that the Houthis never actually managed to kill an American soldier. They never managed to hit an American ship. If they had—if you'd had 50, 100, 250 dead American soldiers—we don't know how Trump would have reacted to that kind of scenario.

We've never been in a situation where a large number of American soldiers were killed in combat under Trump's watch. That would trigger a completely different side of Trump's psychology. Assuming he would back off just because that's what he did when the Houthis fought back but didn't kill anyone is a big assumption—maybe a completely wrong one. So instead of getting the United States to back off by fighting back, there's also a chance the U.S. might actually triple down on the conflict and use far more firepower, including weapons that haven't been used since the Second World War.

#Mudiar

I'm curious about your thoughts on the nature of the attack itself. I mean, you've said that as a consequence of Iran fighting back, they could triple down. But just to start off, do you think it would be an outright bombing campaign or an assassination campaign, like we've seen in the region from both Israel and the U.S.? What kind of response do you think the U.S. might unleash on Iran?

#Guest

Well, it would most likely be the United States that initiates the conflict, and the Iranian action would be a response to it. The question is, what would the initial American attack look like? Would it target oil installations? Would it go after key decision-makers and military leaders? Would it strike only nuclear sites and ballistic missiles? Would it hit all of these at once? Would it aim to make the entire state collapse? Or would it try to bring down the regime without collapsing the state itself? It's still unclear which path the United States would take, because I don't think the U.S. has made that decision yet.

But depending on what the U.S. does, it will impact how the Iranians respond. I don't think they'll go after oil installations in the Persian Gulf unless the U.S. targets Iranian oil installations and its ability to sell oil. So, you know, at the end of the day, the Iranians want to make clear that any attack will lead to war, but they still want to have an escalation ladder. I don't think they'll go all out right away, but exactly how they calibrate it remains to be seen. And hopefully it won't be seen, because I still believe that ultimately any kind of military confrontation, regardless of what Iran's response is, will end up being a lose-lose situation for both countries.

#Mudiar

And what about the Arab states—particularly the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia—that are traditional allies of the U.S. but don't seem to have any interest in a U.S. attack on Iran? Do you think they have any leverage or lobbying capacity to prevent such an attack?

#Guest

Undoubtedly, they do have a tremendous amount of leverage. Whether they're using it fully remains to be seen. I think the Qataris are extremely active, trying to find a mediated solution. They recognize that war would be a disaster for them. The Saudis also are not favorable toward a war. They haven't lobbied as hard as the Qataris have, but they still have the ability to do things that could potentially stop this war. The Emiratis are at least perceived to be closer to the Israeli position. Whether they've actually used much of their resources for that or not is unclear to me, but they're not on the same page as the Qataris, the Omanis, the Kuwaitis, and the Saudis on this issue.

I think, on the Saudi side, there's also a concern that if the U.S. doesn't do anything after bringing so much military power to the Persian Gulf—and then doesn't use it—that will embolden Iran in a way the Saudis feel uncomfortable about. But I think, between the option of them feeling uneasy about Iran getting somewhat emboldened and a war in the region that would completely destroy their prospects for their 2030 plan, they would still choose a path where the U.S. does not go to war, even if it means Iran becomes somewhat emboldened in the short term.

#Mudiar

And if you could talk a little bit about geopolitics, particularly Russian and Chinese support for Iran. We saw during the June attack that there wasn't very direct support—at least, that's my assessment. I interviewed many people from Iran, and they said that Russia and China support them, but it's primarily Iran that has to defend itself. What kind of support could be coming from Russia and China? People are talking about the S-300 and S-400 systems from Russia, the anti-ballistic missile programs, and also Chinese radars to counter the stealth of U.S. airplanes. Beyond that, militarily or technologically, what kind of support could be coming from Russia and China?

#Guest

I think the Russians and the Chinese are not going to give so much military support that they risk their own relations with the United States in a really detrimental way. The Russian priority, of course, is still Ukraine. The Chinese are careful not to accelerate the path toward any kind of confrontation with the U.S. But still, there are layers below that—things they seem to be considering, ranging from weapon sales to intelligence support. And it does seem like the Iranians are already using, and have tried to signal to the U.S. that they're using, intelligence that likely came from Russia or China.

So, for instance, a couple of weeks ago, an Iranian drone was flying toward an American ship in the Indian Ocean and was shot down by the Americans. Now, the Iranians don't have the capability to monitor that area of the sea because they don't have satellites covering that part of the world. That intelligence most likely came from China or possibly from Russia. And it seems to me that the Iranians wanted to make sure the U.S. knew this as part of their deterrent—to be able to say, "We have the capacity. Even though Iran itself doesn't have it, we have the capacity to get that capability from other states in order to see you where you think you are unseen."

#Mudiar

I'm coming to my final questions. If we were to avert a war—if there could be negotiations—can you lay out some of the frameworks that might be agreeable to both sides? We've heard from the Iranian side that they are committed to non-militaristic uses of the nuclear program under the NPT. What kind of framework could be acceptable to both sides?

#Guest

I think the framework that could be agreeable to both sides is one in which the pathways to nuclear weapons in Iran are completely closed off. The Iranians would be able to enrich on their own soil, but it would either be through a consortium or on a needs basis. There would be no amassing of a stockpile of enriched uranium on their own soil. The levels would be below what you had in the JCPOA, and the number of centrifuges would also be below what you had in the JCPOA—things that

would enable Trump to say he got a better deal than Obama, and that would enable the Iranians to say they have still stood firm on what they consider to be their inalienable sovereign right, which is to have nuclear energy for peaceful purposes.

#Mudiar

We'll leave it there, Dr. Parsi. Thank you so much for your time. Thank you for having me.

#Ayushman

Hi, my name is Ayushman. I, along with Mudiar Jyotishman, have started this platform. Over the last two years, we've tried to build content for the left and progressive forces. We've interviewed economists, historians, political commentators, and activists so far. If you've liked our content and want us to build an archive for the left, I have two requests for you. Please consider donating to the cause—the link is in the description below. And if you're not able to, don't feel bad. You can always like our videos and share them with your comrades. Finally, don't forget to hit the subscribe button.