

Is This the End of US Hegemony? | KJ Noh on Iran War Escalation

We interviewed geopolitical analyst KJ Noh on the escalating US-Israeli attack on Iran and the growing risk of a wider regional war. Support Independent media to remain bold: <https://patreon.com/IndiaGlobalLeft> Link for donation: <https://paypal.me/sankymudiar> In this in-depth conversation, KJ Noh explains why the current confrontation could expand beyond Iran and Israel into a full-scale regional conflict across West Asia. He argues that Iran may hold a strategic advantage due to its ammunition reserves and war preparedness — raising serious questions about whether a prolonged war would accelerate the decline of US hegemony in the region. We also discuss: Could this war spiral into a regional conflict? Does Iran have the upper hand if the war prolongs? What would happen if the United States is forced to withdraw? Will Gulf monarchies reassess their alignment with Washington, or deepen their “vassal” relationship? Why is US war messaging weaker and more chaotic this time — is it Trump’s hubris or internal divisions? What can people inside the United States do to stop the war? How should the Global South respond and build solidarity with Iran at this moment? This conversation situates the Iran conflict within the broader crisis of US empire and shifting global power structures. If you’re following our interviews with voices like Scott Ritter, Jeffrey Sachs, Trita Parsi, and Chas Freeman, this discussion with KJ Noh adds another crucial perspective on the geopolitical stakes of the Iran war. Subscribe for more in-depth analysis on West Asia, US foreign policy, and the shifting balance of global power. 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> #Iran #IranWar #USForeignPolicy #IsraelIran #WestAsia #Geopolitics #GlobalSouth #USIsrael #MiddleEastCrisis #EmpireDecline

#Mudiar

Hello, and welcome to another episode of **India and Global Left**. If you’re new to the show, please hit that subscribe button. Also, consider becoming a YouTube member, a patron, or donating a small amount using the link in the description box. Let me welcome our guest tonight, KJ Noh. KJ is a political analyst, educator, and journalist focusing on the geopolitics and political economy of Asia. His latest book is **Killing Democracy**. KJ, welcome back to **India and Global Left**.

#Guest

Thank you. It's a pleasure to be with you.

#Mudiar

I wanted to discuss with you the latest conflict between Iran, the United States, and Israel. Could you start with your assessment of the significance of this conflict?

#Guest

Well, it is. I mean, it's huge. I think people who say it's the beginning of World War Three aren't exaggerating. It's a conflagration that could engulf the entire region, and it will have ripple effects throughout the global economy unless it dials back very, very rapidly—and that remains to be seen. The language we're hearing out of Washington suggests they're going to double down on a losing bet. So I think it's too early to tell, but it's significant, very critical, and the unintended consequences could be extraordinary.

#Mudiar

As you said, it's too early to tell, but if Iran gains the upper hand—and that's not unlikely—many analysts are saying that the longer the war goes on, the more expensive it will become for the U.S. defense system, particularly the interceptor systems, to keep up with Iranian missiles. So if Iran does gain the upper hand, could this be a significant moment marking the beginning of the end of the American empire in the region?

#Guest

I think it's really possible. There are many reasons for that. But the first thing I want to point out is, you know, we can talk about who will win and who will lose—it's all a matter of definition. The fact is, if Iran is not destroyed, it will have won, whereas if the United States doesn't accomplish its goals, it will be seen as having lost. It's like, for example, during the Tet Offensive: the U.S. technically had a military victory, but at that point the war was essentially over. They lost the war, even though they had a technical win. Same thing with the Suez—the British attack on the Suez.

In the '50s, you know, that was also technically a military win, but it was an economic catastrophe. So I think it could signal the end of empire. There are two things I think are important to note. One is, you can tell that the United States is making a lot of errors. The first error you can see is that it didn't conduct its information warfare in a coordinated fashion. I've said before that war is a three-stage process that involves information warfare, staging and provocation, and then kinetic war. And you can see that at each stage there was a lack of coherence. The information war wasn't coherent—it was shifting, the messaging was shifting from week to week.

The staging was impressive, but note that there were no ground troops in place—there wasn't a massive buildup. And you know that when you engage in a protracted war, if you want to pursue regime change, eventually you do need some kind of ground game, either through proxies or your

own troops. We didn't see any of that. In fact, troops were withdrawn, which shows the staging was incomplete and flawed. Then the provocation was half-hearted—it didn't really work. It was unclear whether Israel was going to strike first and trigger a counterattack, and then the U.S. would go in. Eventually, they all went in together.

The color revolution seems to have fizzled out. That didn't work. The excuses didn't work. So you see all kinds of mistakes happening. And at the same time, you see that Iran responded with overwhelming force, just as they had claimed they would. Combine that with the perfidy involved in pretending to negotiate while trying to set up a second surprise attack, as they did in June when the 12-day war and Operation Midnight Hammer broke out. Again, that didn't work. So you can see so many errors, so many missteps happening. And having created all these missteps, the U.S. looks to be wanting to double down, but it really doesn't have the capacity, as far as we can tell. As you pointed out, the missile magazine depth is a real issue.

The arithmetic—not the math, the arithmetic—tells us that the United States cannot sustain this, because Iran has anywhere from a ten-to-one to a hundred-to-one advantage, both in munitions and, more importantly, in financial terms. The other dimension, of course, is that war is a matter of military might, of logistics—but it's also a matter of resolve. And resolve matters when it comes to a war of defense. Iran has shown that it has steely resolve and has steeled itself. The U.S. has actually increased that resolve by decapitating its leadership. Again, in the Shia tradition, martyrdom is fundamental to the tradition of Shiism.

And so, by decapitating the leader who was already very old and disabled, what they've done is not only galvanized and rallied all the Iranian people around their government, but they've also set off a conflagration across the Shia world. That's why we're seeing attacks on the U.S. embassy in Pakistan and elsewhere. And this, once again, is a conflagration that could have unintended consequences. The last thing I'll point out—and I think this is important to consider—is that war is not simply a contest of military might, logistics, technology, or even resolve. It's also a contest of learning curves.

The side that learns faster and adapts faster is the side that will win. You can see that the U.S. learning curve is flat because it's trying to do the same thing it did during the 12-day war, and it's not getting traction. Meanwhile, the Iranians are adapting, changing, expanding, escalating horizontally—going up the escalation ladder in terms of their munitions. They're striking targets with tremendous precision. They knocked out a radar base, which is extraordinary. There are suspicions that the three F-15s that were downed may have been affected by electronic jamming, and I believe that's entirely possible. You know, one F-15 down—plausible friendly fire incident. Two—unlikely. Three—and I think you have to consider enemy action. That's probably what happened in that situation.

So the war is not going well for the United States. This isn't to say that the Iranian people are not suffering, or won't suffer further. But ultimately, if it boils down to a contest of learning curves and resolve, I think Iran certainly has the advantage. The last point I'll make—and I know I've been

talking too much—is that this will have ripple effects on the Gulf states. The main message it sends is that being under the U.S. security umbrella is actually not to your advantage; it paints a target on your back. Those Gulf states that have, you know, kind of been imperial vassals since 1917 are starting to realize they might not have made the right bargain. So we'll see what happens, but I think the ripple effects right now are extraordinary. We'll just have to wait and see.

#Mudiar

Iran has been very careful not to directly attack the Gulf states, though there have been some exceptions. Even then, Iranian officials say that the hotels attacked in parts of Kuwait and the Emirates were targeted because U.S. personnel had retreated from their bases to those locations. Overall, Iran is still insisting that it is not attacking the Gulf states, indicating that it doesn't intend to trigger a regional conflagration. However, the Gulf states have been condemning Iran throughout. I wonder, if the U.S. were to pull back—if it were to be on the run from the region—what possible paths might the Gulf states take? Would they realize that being a vassal has come at a great cost and move to realign, or would they cling to their vassal status until the very end?

#Guest

You know, it's hard to say. I think there are many factors, many dimensions, many dynamics at play. But the thing to understand about most of the Gulf states is that they are vassal imperial states of the West—they're U.S. outposts, U.S. bases—and they fundamentally lack legitimacy. In fact, I would argue that many of them don't even rise to the status of a state as far as international law is concerned. Remember, if we think about the criteria of a state: it has to have a defined territory, a government, the capacity to enter into independent relations with other states—which is questionable—and, most importantly, it should have a permanent population, right?

Now, what is the population of, say, Qatar? They have about 340,000 citizens, right? The rest—around 90% of the population—are migrant laborers. That's the same for most of the Gulf states. Between 60% and 90% of their populations are essentially expats and migrant workers. Essentially, they're trumped-up monarchies that have signed a bargain with the imperial devil and are using that security umbrella to lord over a large number of people who are, in effect, indentured slaves. In the 21st century, this is not a sustainable state of affairs. For example, in the case of Bahrain, the majority of the population is Shia, and it's ruled by a Sunni elite monarchical minority. So these are all unsustainable situations.

And if the Gulf states are thinking clearly, then maybe they should realize they need to change direction. Maybe they need to align with the Global South. Maybe they need to stop being vassal states of the imperial West. Maybe they need to stop oppressing their populations. And maybe this is the reason—and the opportunity—for change. They can all go and live in, you know, Miami if they

want. But I think there are some deep, uh, tectonic shifts happening in the region that will affect not just Iran and Israel but all of the Gulf states. I think there are some major shifts happening, and I think the U.S. doesn't realize it has opened a Pandora's box here.

#Mudiar

I want to ask you a little bit about the situation domestically in the United States, given that some polls have shown the war is unpopular among Americans, which hasn't always been the case. We saw during the Iraq War that most Americans rallied behind the flag, as it was said. Given that unpopularity—and we discussed last time you were on about the responsibilities of Americans to stop wars, to end empires—what do you think people in the U.S. should do to minimize the damage in Iran and the region?

#Guest

Well, I think they should put every possible pressure on their government to dial back and stop this absurd war. You know, Iran has never threatened the United States. To the extent that there have been any casualties, it's because the U.S. was waging war against it, or in its neighborhood, or using proxies against it. And I think the vast majority of Americans understand this. Once again, I said that the three-stage process of manufacturing consent and information war was done very poorly. And, you know, you can interpret that in different ways. Some people have said, "Don't I even get the respect of being lied to?" But I think that's perhaps too cynical a take. What is clear is that the vast majority of Americans—somewhere between 70 to 80 percent—are strongly opposed to this war. And that can only get worse once the bodies start coming back. We've heard there have been six U. S. casualties so far. I expect it's much higher, and it will continue.

#Mudiar

Iran says it's more than 600. The U.S. disputes that.

#Guest

Exactly.

#Mudiar

So it might be somewhere in the middle. Who knows?

#Guest

It could be somewhere in the middle, but given the level of force being exercised by Iran—with tremendous effectiveness, as far as I can tell—I mean, 27 U.S. bases have been struck, including the

key U.S. port for the Fifth Fleet. These are incredible strikes. So I don't think it's credible that only six U.S. troops have been killed so far. But we'll see; all of that will come out in the wash. The key thing is that as the casualty levels increase, and as it becomes more and more clear that the U.S. is not winning, anti-war sentiment will rise even further. Usually, pro-war sentiment starts very high—around 80 to 90 percent.

And then the U.S. almost always loses its wars. As it starts to lose, the U.S. public turns against it, because the public tends to be fickle—it doesn't like to back the losing team. But what we're seeing in this situation is that there's already about 80% opposition to the war. And as it becomes more and more evident that the U.S. is not attaining its goals, that it's suffering increased casualties, that it doesn't have a plan to win, I think that opposition will increase even further. This is heightened by the fact that we have the MAGA faction, a very large proportion of whom voted for Donald Trump on the explicit promise that he would end wars overseas.

I mean, this is just kind of the bottom line, you know. The demand is that we see our country going to the dogs, and we know a large part of it has to do with the endless wars you've been waging. We voted for Donald Trump and his administration on the promise that they would stop the endless wars. A vote for Trump is a vote to end wars. And now here we are, in this war that looks to be turning the entire Middle East upside down, with no conceivable exit plan or end in sight. I think that anger against Trump will come back to haunt him, most certainly in the elections.

I mean, there's a question right now, you know—did Trump want a short war that he could flaunt and show off as a success? If it gets protracted, what does that mean? Does that mean the elections will be delayed or circumvented? All of these are unknown factors, but we're really in uncharted territory right now. All I can tell you is that there's massive opposition, massive fury against this administration, as well as the pundit class, which is practically pulling out its hair because they don't know if we're coming or going.

#Mudiar

I wanted to stay with your interesting point about the bad messaging this time in particular. I'm curious about your thoughts on why the messaging was so bad this time. I mean, earlier, the New York Times and the Washington Post would be marshaled to the side of the U.S. in the most subtle way they could. I'm thinking about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This time, yes, they still justified calling Iran a regime and talking about how horrific it is, and so on and so forth. And the New York Times, in fact, wrote an editorial saying that a war against Iran could be justified, but not in this fashion.

Nevertheless, they didn't care as much. As the talks were going on—the Geneva rounds, and then the Vienna round that was due—they just gave up the nuclear issue, which had been the façade for a very long time. The real issue has always been regime change, quote-unquote, but they just gave it up. And in Trump's war speech, he didn't mention the nuclear issue at all, which is kind of the

staged thing. He said, "We are doing this for regime change." So I'm curious—was it Trump's own hubris? People are also talking about the disagreement among top generals, including General Dan Kaine, who reportedly said this is not something we should get into, and so on and so forth. Why do you think the messaging was so bad this time?

#Guest

I think there are a couple of reasons for that. So, you know, the human rights allegations—the murders, the massacres, etc.—this is the, quote-unquote, "genocide and human rights regime" propaganda menu that you use. And then the other one is, you want to scare people. You want to make them feel there's a WMD-level threat happening. If we break it down in classical terms, you want to appeal to people's fear and pity. It's a formula that goes all the way back to Aristotle—terror, fear, and pity: empathy for the people who are being oppressed, and fear for your own existence. That messaging didn't happen properly. And I think there are several reasons for it. One is, you know, the WMD—"Iran is going to go nuclear."

That pretext, first of all, we all know is completely flimsy because, you know, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei had actually issued not one but two fatwas against the development of nuclear weapons. But during Midnight Hammer, Trump had boasted that he had destroyed Iran's nuclear program, and he was very, very proud of it. This was the thing he wanted to plaster all over the poster boards and pat himself on the back for. And so, having done that, you're in a very difficult contradiction—to say, "I've destroyed it, but we have to go after Iran because it has nuclear weapons." You can't have both. I mean, you can try to wind your way through that, but it really doesn't work. Either you destroyed the weapons or you didn't. And either way, you make yourself look stupid. So that messaging was jumbled and garbled. And if anything—if your message isn't clear, it's not going to stick.

And then the second one was around human rights. Now, this kind of appeal to, you know, "We have to take out the regime because it's a serial human rights violator and it creates massacres"—all of that messaging was also very, very jumbled. And it's really hard to push that message in a context where the U.S. has supported the ongoing genocide in Palestine for years now. So that rings really hollow and thin, because when you bring it up, the immediate counter is Palestine. And the U. S. has actually said, in certain circumstances, "Look, it's just about power. We just need to control things." And that's honest—the kind of realist view or realist ideology. They leak that out from time to time.

But I think a third dimension where the messaging was so poor is that usually, when you run these information warfare campaigns, you want to get all the mainstream media on your side. And Trump had been waging a war against the mainstream media because, you know, they're propaganda machines—dishonest propaganda machines—but they were also opposed to him. So he was attacking them too. Usually, the vast machinery of indoctrination and propaganda gets mobilized, but it was significantly disabled by the Trump administration's own disdain for the liberal

internationalist media, which is usually really good at playing up the pity and the threat inflation. So all of that resulted in a jumbled mess, and they ended up resorting to what you might call the canon doctrine—it just boils down to naked power concepts.

It's about controlling oil, controlling choke points. We are the greatest. We are the most powerful. We're going to make the U.S. great again by exercising a Monroe Doctrine—not just in the Western Hemisphere, but all over the world. Essentially, that's what it boils down to. It's this kind of assertion of complete and total will to power, this Wolfowitz Doctrine—a global Wolfowitz Doctrine. I think that's kind of what they've, you know, settled on. That's the understanding among themselves. It's hard for them to do the, you know, quote-unquote "human rights" shtick, because they actually don't believe it. And it's been too discredited at this point with the genocide of the Palestinians.

#Mudiar

I wanted to end by asking you one final question about the Global South in particular, because last time we had a very meaningful discussion about the role of the Global South in this late imperial phase, if you like, and how the Global South is divided, and so on. I really liked a phrase that you used—you said "connect to live." So my question is: how do nation-states in the Global South, whose options are not necessarily very wide, connect effectively to Iran at a time when Iran is facing such difficulties? We know about the sanctions—how vicious they are, how they've been instrumentalized and mobilized to cut off Iran from alternative development. Let's think about the support that Iranian oil could have given to a BRICS currency if they had been able to export oil much more freely than they've been allowed to. So my question is: what can Global South countries do at this very difficult moment?

#Guest

Well, I think they'll continue to build out their connections with each other, and those connections will be facilitated by both China and Russia. China actually has overland routes all the way to Iran through Kazakhstan and Central Asia, so it won't be a complete embargo. And of course, yes, we have to understand that what we're facing in the big picture is a crisis of capitalism. Capitalism, as we know, resorts to war when it hits its terminal contradictions. And it also knows that the Western empires are doomed. Right now, this is an opportunity for a real decolonization that never fully happened. We have to understand that the modern world we inhabit was never truly decolonized—it was only partially decolonized.

Essentially, the former colonial powers handed off their colonial control to successor colonial powers who created a regime of neocolonial control—largely through financial means, and also through control of the oceans, the choke points, and through a comprador elite. All of these things were built into the new system. But right now, what we have is an opportunity for a real abandonment of demonization, and that involves the Global South building relations, building connections, and solidarity with each other—through trade, through connections, by building out digital sovereignty,

by building out financial sovereignty, by building out energy sovereignty. And that energy sovereignty, of course—well, the lifeblood of capitalism is fossil fuels and oil.

But I believe that the energy that will power a potential socialist world will be renewables. So when we sever that relationship with fossil fuels, oil, the choke points, and the monopolies of the Western states and their vassals, that will shift the dynamics. But in the meantime, it's a long and slow process. It will take generations of struggle. There's no easy fix here. And people who think Russia or China should stop the U.S.—they have no idea what they're talking about. If that's the case, you can go and volunteer; I have no objection to that. But it will be a long, slow, generational process, one that involves shifting the entire structure of finance and the economy, dismantling capitalism, and building mutual relationships of benefit and security among all of the Global South.

#Mudiar

Well said. I think Iran's performance, as the days go by, will be very critical for global capitalism as well. Because if Iran performs and survives—I mean, it will definitely survive—but if it performs well, it will be a damning indictment of global capitalism. One of the threats given to Global South countries in particular is that if you decouple from the global economy, financial flows will move out, and that would lead to all kinds of problems: inflation, currency crashes, capital deficiency, and so on.

But Iran has been able to build an alternative while being forcibly decoupled from the global economy. And if they can build a resilient political economy under very difficult circumstances—I'm not trying to romanticize the political economy under sanctions—but what I'm trying to show is how Iran has managed to build a people-centered political economy that has been able to somewhat counter the ravages of sanctions and decoupling. And that can be a model for the rest of the Global South countries to counter global capitalism. Your closing comment.

#Guest

Absolutely. I mean, Iran is an ancient, powerful, and wise civilizational state. It has existed and continued for thousands of years. It won't be taken down by U.S. air power in a few weeks. It will resist; it will sustain itself. And it's also fundamental that—it's one of the key pillars of the rising multipolar world: Russia, China, Iran. I don't think it will fail. I don't think Russia and China will allow it to fail. They'll support it in every way they can—not through direct military action, but certainly through ISR, trade, and other economic and political support. And I think that ultimately, the resistance of Iran, and what it represents to the axis of resistance in general, will be a powerful force that delegitimizes empire.

I think we're on moving ground. There are powerful tectonic shifts happening. But the key thing for people in the Global North is to get out, hit the streets, hit the phones, talk to everyone they know, and make sure the U.S. doesn't escalate this any further—because nothing good can come out of it. The U.S. can only delegitimize itself, destroy its economy, and damage the economies of vast swaths

of the population. I think it's incumbent on everyone in the Global North to put pressure on their governments—if there's any pretense of responsive or democratic governance—to prevent further escalation toward war.

#Mudiar

We'll leave it there. KJ, as always, this was a very helpful conversation. Thank you so much for your time. I appreciate it.

#Guest

Thank you. Always a pleasure.

#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 and share our videos with your comrades. Finally, don't forget to hit the subscribe button.