

Capitalism Ends US Empire: Iran-War is a Suicide Mission | Dr. Radhika Desai

The illegal attack on Iran—as many illegal wars before—is not a bug but a system feature. One, however, that is doomed to self-destruct its host. It is the inevitable outcome of the rent-seeking and society corrupting logic of the capitalist system the West is built around. The expansionary and often genocidal logic embedded in the core of the US empire drives entire classes within the West toward the ruthless application of force. But in a multipolar world this approach finds its ultimate—and eventually tragic—end. Today I'm discussing the Iran war with Professor Radhika Desai (@RadDesai) from Manitoba University. One of the world's leading Political Geonomists, Professor Desai explains the system inherent aspects of the war. Follow Prof. Desai on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/@RadDesai> Support us on Substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> Shop and Donations: <https://neutralitystudies-shop.fourthwall.com>

#Pascal

Welcome back, everybody, to Neutrality Studies. I'm Pascal Lottaz, and today I'm joined again by Professor Radhika Desai of the University of Manitoba. Radhika, welcome back.

#Radhika Desai

Great to be here, Pascal.

#Pascal

Thank you so much for making the time. And thank you for actually establishing your own YouTube channel—this one here, Radhika Desai, Geopolitical Economist. I'm very happy to have you there because you're one of those critical voices who've been out there for a long time. But I think you hadn't really had everything under a YouTube setup yet. So, when did you start this?

#Radhika Desai

We just started it earlier this month, and we've been making good progress with it—trying to put out a couple of things a week. And of course, collaborations like this one and many others are also going on, plus the shorts and so on.

#Pascal

It's fantastic. And you've already had wonderful guests—I mean, you've had Seyed Marandi on your show, Michael Hudson. So yeah, you're now interviewing these guests and also giving your own analysis. What is your channel going to focus on going forward?

#Radhika Desai

Oh, that's a good question. So at the moment, I've planned about three or four different types of content. One is, of course, that I'll continue **Geopolitical Economy Hour**, which will be at least once a fortnight, but if possible, once a week. Then it will be interspersed with **Geopolitical Economy Interviews**, where I simply talk to someone I find interesting, whereas **Geopolitical Economy Hour** is more of a conversational interview between me and another person on some broader themes. So there'll be **Geopolitical Economy Interviews**, and then I also do short explainers. I've only done one so far, but I'm about to do another one called **Whatever Happened to the Monroe Doctrine?**

You know, just a month ago everybody was still talking about the Monroe Doctrine, and here we are now with Trump in Iran. What does that mean for this idea that there were these spheres of influence and so on? Anyway, I do these short explainers—about twenty minutes or so—which point to some of the more fundamental things to pay attention to in any situation. I did one on Iran, I'll do this one next, and then, yeah, there'll be collaborations like this one. We'll produce shorts from some of the really interesting clips we can extract from our videos. So that's the plan for now.

#Pascal

I'm very glad to hear that, because again, these academic voices who also know how to package things are very important. I mean, Glenn Diesen is doing a stellar job, Jeffrey Sachs is everywhere on the internet, and now we've got you. But today we actually want to talk about your analysis—mainly on Iran. Let's see where the discussion takes us. You're a geopolitical economist, so how does your geopolitical economy look at what is, already in the third week, developing into something worse than Vietnam for the United States?

#Radhika Desai

That's such an interesting way of putting it. And certainly, whether it is intrinsically worse than Vietnam or not, given the much more weakened condition of the United States, its effects will definitely be worse than Vietnam. And by the way, I should add that about twenty years ago, Giovanni Arrighi—the very famous world-systems analyst who wrote some very interesting analyses of the international system—pointed out at that time, when the United States was in the Iraqi quagmire but the financial crisis hadn't yet happened, that defeat in Iraq was imminent. And in many ways, he said, it would be worse than Vietnam, because at least in Vietnam, Americans could console themselves by saying they weren't just fighting a nation of peasants.

This nation of peasants was backed by Russia, China, and so on, whereas in Iraq that was not the case. And if the United States were to lose then, what would that mean? Since then, of course, we've seen the Iraqi enterprise fade. In Afghanistan, we saw that ignominious withdrawal some years ago, and so on. So I think this is just the spiral of decline continuing—the spiral of decline accelerating. But, you know, you also pointed to geopolitical economy, and I want to give you my analysis of where we are right now. Let me also just say that what I mean by “geopolitical economy,” or what I try to do in it to the best of my abilities, is not just to examine international affairs as though they were taking place on a plane separated from all other planes.

Because there is always a political economy in every country in the world, and then the geopolitical economy of how they interact—and the two cannot be separated. So let me see what you think of the analysis I'm about to put forward. Basically, where are we right now? It's very clear that Trump badly miscalculated. There were no quick regime changes. All those calls for the proud Iranian people to rise up and take over, and so on, didn't work. Trump is getting increasingly desperate. The closure of the Strait of Hormuz—which, I read, Trump had been warned about—has now essentially, effectively occurred.

And I would say that, notwithstanding the super-profits that some of Trump's friends—oil majors, shale oil extractors—will make, and generally American oil majors will make out of this, because, you know, their costs haven't risen, the United States doesn't import much oil. But they'll be able to raise prices in the United States to world levels, which will allow them to make super-profits. Notwithstanding these super-profits, the closure of the Strait of Hormuz will actually affect the U.S. economy negatively, simply by causing inflation. And if this inflation triggers the typical reaction of monetary authorities in the Western world these days—which is to raise interest rates—that could very well create a recession.

So the whole Strait of Hormuz situation has spun out of Trump's control. Trump is now desperate enough to call on allies as well as adversaries to keep the Strait of Hormuz open. He's called on the Europeans, the Japanese, and the Koreans, but also the Chinese, to keep the strait open. None of them, of course, are biting. The trip to China has been postponed. This, of course, has to do with some other things as well. Basically, I think Trump has realized there's nothing he can bring back from Beijing that he can wave around and say, “Look, I won this wonderful victory in Beijing.” That's not happening. It's clear from the talks that have been taking place in the background.

Of course, the Gulf states are questioning the wisdom of their reliance on the United States—what will happen next. And the damage in Israel is considerable, but of course largely undisclosed. So that's the broad situation we're in. What do I make of it? There are many elements to this, but let me just state two or three points. The first is that the very fact that this enterprise—this is a very serious enterprise, by the way—the United States, successive U.S. governments, have been slaving over attacking Iran for a long time, but they haven't done it, for good reasons.

And Trump has sort of, you know, thrown the United States into this situation with barely a thought, which is why the goalposts keep shifting. One day it's about changing the regime, another day it's about Iran's nuclear weapons, the third day it's about missiles and what have you. And of course, now it's about the Strait of Hormuz. So these shifting goalposts, to me, tell a much more interesting story than Trump's inconsistency or his deliberate unpredictability—the idea that somehow Trump likes to be unpredictable so that he'll keep his opponents off balance—or even the conflicting aims of different parts of the Trump administration, or Trump's own psychological problems, which I'm sure are numerous.

So it's not about Trump himself—the deeper problem, out of which these inconsistencies and changes of direction emerge, is structural. Trump basically has not, and cannot, keep the promises on which he was elected. And since he cannot keep those promises, his numbers have been declining since a month or two into the beginning of his administration. Since late last year, he's been seeking some kind of spectacular success to boost his numbers, which is why we saw all those shenanigans around Venezuela, Greenland, whatever happened at Davos and Munich, and so on. But despite all these efforts, such a success has eluded him, and his numbers have not improved.

They keep going down, and such success will keep eluding him. By the way, Venezuela was not a success—we can discuss that later if you want. No matter what he stakes in this process, he's kind of throwing everything in. He's wagering more and more in his desperate attempt to achieve that success. The reason this is happening is that, basically, Trump—at one level, of course—portrayed himself as very different from Biden. The main difference lies in what he promised in order to win the election. But what Trump actually does in office isn't much different from Biden, in the sense that he serves the same corporate ruling class.

The only difference is that the corporate ruling class he serves includes many more maverick elements than was the case with the Biden administration. I think this is part of a larger syndrome—the deterioration of leadership in the United States and the West. Basically, you know, I mean, what are you doing? That's what brings to the fore leaders like Boris Johnson, Liz Truss, Donald Trump, Kaja Kallas. I mean, this is all a bit crazy. To me—and this, of course, today—cannot be talked about without mentioning the Epstein situation, the whole phenomenon, etc. I believe the Iranian government has been at the forefront of basically saying, you know, this is our war against the Epstein class, right?

#Pascal

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Mahmoud Marandi uses that phrase a lot—the Epstein class, the Epstein class. Although I... It's an interesting term because it's basically a proxy for the moneyed, ruling, capitalist class, but with an even darker spin, right? Hey, very brief intermission: I was recently banned from

YouTube, and although I'm back, this could happen again anytime. So please consider subscribing not only here but also to my mailing list on Substack—that's pascallottaz.substack.com. The link's going to be in the description below. And now, back to the video.

#Radhika Desai

Well, you know, the term "capitalist class" itself is kind of—well, I want to say a couple of things. You're so right about this. Number one, I read that—I myself said that, you know, Professor Marandi, in my interview with him, I said, "Professor Marandi, you've been the person, and I thank you for this, who helped popularize the term 'Epstein class,' because it's so important." Not "appropriate," right?—to describe this. But I've since read that this is actually part of the discourse of the Iranian government as a whole, and I found that out more recently. So that's interesting as well. But I think the reason why—the term "capitalist class" itself gives too much credit to the people we're talking about now.

I mean, of course they are the capitalist class, but the term "capitalist class" evokes, you know, productive investment and some kind of sagacity—some kind of concern with long-term predictability, etc., etc. So in this situation, I would say the Epstein class is essentially a highly financialized class. It's a class of takers, not makers. They don't produce the appropriate products. Rather, they derive their incomes through speculation, through debt, and so on—they appropriate the incomes of those who actually produce things, whether they're households, governments, or smaller businesses. From all of these sources, they're appropriating.

And of course, their venality, their depravity, is part of this deterioration of the ruling classes in Western countries. I think this deterioration can't be understood apart from the deterioration of their economies—their societies, that is to say—because once you reach a certain level of inequality, you can't help but have social malfunction. You can't help but have increasing tensions among different groups, because obviously the disadvantaged groups end up holding the wrong end of the inequality stick to a disproportionate extent.

And this creates all sorts of other tensions. So there's social and cultural degeneration. There is political tension—polarization, logjam, whatever you want to call it. Perhaps "polarization" is the wrong term because it implies that somehow there's a left and a right. But unfortunately, both the main forces duking it out in the political arena in most Western countries are right-wing forces at the moment. You know, there's the Trump type and the Biden type—they're all extremely right-wing forces. So anyway, there is a kind of political dysfunction, shall we say, and also cultural degeneration, as represented by the Epstein class—whether you think of that, or you think of the way in which unregulated platform companies are... you know, it's ironic that we're talking right now on a platform—but anyway, platform companies are allowed to undermine culture and so on to the extent that they have.

So anyway, all of these things. The Epstein class is very interesting. But just to finish this thought—my main takeaway about where we are is that Trump, because he needs to produce some kind of spectacular success to shore up his chances of re-election, is taking more and more risks. He has staked the health of the world economy, the health of the U.S. economy, and U.S. alliances. He has, of course, no way of mending or getting anything he can show American workers—nothing from China that he can wave to them as a victory. He's also, by the way, endangering the dollar system. So, you know, he's bringing forward the possibility of the next financial crisis. There are all these different things going on.

#Pascal

Isn't it also fascinating, about the Epstein class, that they really represent a kind of transatlantic—plus a few oligarchs from other places—class that obviously tries to extort each other and scratch each other's backs? But, you know, the names that are missing from the Epstein files are the Japanese names, the Chinese names, the Iranian names. Although I'm sure if we looked for them, we'd find something. But the core of what's happening is all centered around North America and Europe. The Norwegians are in there, the Germans are in there, the French are in there. Yeah, I'd call it the North Atlantic region—so the North Atlantic region plus a couple of outliers and so on—but that somehow produces this outcome.

And I find it really important to remember that the U.S. Constitution explicitly tries to constrain the war-making powers of individuals. That's why it's actually given to Congress—but Congress has given up on its job ever since 1945, on that front, right? And every U.S. president has done exactly that: they just make up some reason, then they create facts, and then Congress later on rubber-stamps it. And they call themselves a parliament. I mean, no, they—anyhow. So this is going on, and this kind of deployment of U.S. power has been possible, but now, for the second time in a row—a very serious row—it's running into a brick wall. And the brick wall is actually pushing back. The first one was the Russians, with the proxy war. And we know it was a proxy war.

People admitted to it. We know about the CIA on the ground. We know about all the things that happened. Jeffrey Sachs talks about this—his experiences when he was on the Maidan back in '14—and all the ways in which the scheming and plotting worked to get this war going. And now we have another one that also rests on the shoulders of decades of scheming. And there's this open question: was it Israel that dragged the United States into it, or is it the United States that uses Israel to do what it really means to do, in this kind of manifest-destiny way? There's no clarity. We've got arguments on both sides. But the point is, it's happening, right? And it's not succeeding at the moment. So what does this tell you about the distribution of global power in a multipolar world?

#Radhika Desai

Yeah, I mean, I would say that we're really looking at the advanced stages of a process that's been clear at least since the beginning of this century, if not a little earlier. Basically, in my analysis—again, in my geopolitical economy analysis, which I laid out in my most recent book, *Capitalism, Coronavirus and War*—it's there in an updated form. So, what are the main components of this analysis? Essentially, the post-war boom, the so-called Golden Age, was the result of a highly reformed type of capitalism, plus the existence of communism, and the genuine and reasonably successful efforts of Third World countries—the newly independent countries—to develop at that time.

So, you know, that whole configuration created a period of world growth that was unprecedented and came to be called the Golden Age. But, of course, the underlying system in Western countries remained capitalist—inevitably capitalist. That system fell into crisis by the 1970s, and at that point the world stood at a crossroads. Shall we deepen the post-war reforms of the system, because they gave us the Golden Age, or shall we roll them back because they're seen as the cause of the problems we have? The second camp—the neoliberal camp—won. And since then, we've been rolling back those reforms, and we're seeing more and more clearly what kind of capitalism we've been living with since the early 20th century.

Let me underline that it's not a mistake. In the early 20th century, capitalism had already become monopoly capitalism, at which point it sort of lost much of its dynamism, vigor, and its capacity to expand and advance production. So, you know, the realities of this type of capitalism were hidden as long as it was contained within a whole bunch of reforms that made it function far better than it would have done spontaneously, left to itself. Right. So now we're seeing more and more of that kind of capitalism. And it's no wonder that this era—although we were told that neoliberalism was going to revive productive growth and capitalism—has, in fact, shown consistently lower growth compared to the Golden Age.

It has continued to trend lower. Investment is bumping along the bottom, and so on. So that's one process. The other process, of course, is the rise of the emerging economies—with the important proviso that China is in a class by itself among these. Russia, over the last—well, at least since 2014—has been dragged willy-nilly in the direction of China, so it's also a reasonably good example. But in many of the other emerging economies—BRICS countries, whatever you want to call them—things are a little bit more dicey. You know, for example, take India. When India was following a more reformed type of neoliberalism, it grew quite well.

But under Modi, when it's been kind of unbridled neoliberalism—unbridled servicing of the interests of a very small number of big Indian companies—the economy is doing badly. The advertised statistics about India's growth are very, very faulty. So anyway, the point I'm trying to make is that, nevertheless, to the extent that neoliberalism is modified, rejected, or not implemented at all, you've had growth in the world economy. So you have the decline of the West and the growth of some of the rest. And I think this is where we're at. And, yeah, I'd say this process is only continuing

because, you know, Trump told American voters he was going to revive the economy—make America great again, etc.

So, you know, he understood that you can't win elections by telling people the economy is doing well. So he said, yeah, it's doing badly, and I'm going to fix it. But he had no intention of fixing it—he only said all that to win the election. Once in office, he made a great show of tariffs. But then, you know, tariffs are on today, gone tomorrow—Supreme Court, whatever—all these things we can discuss. But in reality, you can't revive an economy just with tariffs. You need industrial policy. There's no sign of any kind of industrial policy at play in the Trump administration. So the economy isn't being revived, and this process is not only continuing, it's accelerating.

And one final point: the unpredictability that the Trump administration has created is actually going to lead to a situation where the world starts to move away from it. I mean, you see now, the Chinese went out of their way to say to Trump, "Look, why don't you come? Why don't we talk? Why don't we see if we can figure out our problems?" And now Trump has postponed this visit. So what does that mean? I think, at the end of the day, even if China continues to offer talks, there will never be any fruitful outcome because Trump will not get what he wants. He doesn't want a stable, productive American economy. He just wants to be able to win elections while serving the very people who are keeping the American economy financialized—growing in a financial way rather than in a productive way—and essentially ensuring its productive stagnation.

#Pascal

Yeah, it's really kind of a fascinating point, which I think we can only properly understand through a good part of a Marxist lens, right? Donald Trump's major signature policies all have to do with foreign policy, and they're all coercive in nature. They used to be tools to protect certain key industries—to infringe on the capitalist dictum of free markets and say, "No, no, no, we guard this market because it's so important to us." So we develop it, we protect it from the outside until it's big enough, and then it can go out and hopefully compete with similar sectors abroad.

But, I mean, this is very sensible—in terms of, like, if you think from the perspective of national well-being—a sensible approach. And actually, a lot of countries—Japan, Singapore, and so on—they all did that in order to grow their champions. And then from those, you had these trickle-down economies that fed large parts of the population. And it makes sense to a good extent. But Trump transformed tariffs into a form of sanctions-lite, with the idea of "let's punish others and let's squeeze them." And that happened even more extremely with these interventions—direct military interventions in Venezuela, the strangulation act against Cuba, and of course the war in and with Iran. So all of those are his big signatures.

#Pascal

The only domestic signature policies he has are...

#Pascal

Actually, you know, the big, beautiful bill—and in his first term, a very similar kind of relief, like tax relief for the ultra-rich. That's it. Apart from that, the big thing was maybe trying to clamp down on immigration, but again, in a way that hurts the poor and the people who are already at the lowest level even more. But that's it. It doesn't try to fix the inherent inequality within the system—not at all. It does the opposite. And it seems they feed each other, don't they, these two?

#Radhika Desai

Yeah, I mean, again, you've said so many things and suggested so many points to my mind. But let me just say, the big domestic policy of Trump, of course, is the repression of migrants, as you rightly pointed out. And of course, that is creating a loss for—well, you know, if you are part of the productive side of the American economy, you're left despairing at what Trump is doing, because he's cutting off a supply of critical labor. He's essentially making lots of people go home because, you know, why would they stay in a society where the color of your skin marks you out as somebody who can be attacked, imprisoned—whatever—at any time.

So, you know, all of this unpredictability that Trump is creating through the ICE raids and so on—and even there, he had to accept that something had gone wrong, because he had to change the head of the ICE apparatus. But, you know, I would say that all of this reminds one—I want to come back to the external orientation in a minute—but all of this, whether it's the external orientation and the desire for some spectacular success, or the ICE raids and the desire for spectacular success, is there.

It reminds one, no matter where you stand on the question of whether Trump is fascist or not—and I don't want to get into that debate right now—but what it does show, what it recalls, is the expression: the aestheticization of politics. Politics as spectacle, politics as something you're sort of a voyeur of, and so on. And I think this is a characteristic of fascism for very similar reasons to what I've described, which is that fascists basically take power by promising working people and small business owners all sorts of things they cannot and have no intention of delivering. So then you get this dynamic going. So that's one point. Secondly, the external orientation.

That's, you know, I would say that this tariff thing was, at one level, supposed to be about internal orientation—in the sense that it was supposed to create a productive environment for the American economy. It hasn't done that, for reasons we've already discussed. But there was also something else, another element to this, which is the idea that foreigners will pay the taxes and we'll have a low-tax regime—which is a completely idiotic idea. But, you know, in a show—and if you go to Wikipedia, you'll see that until about 1910 or thereabouts, in the early 20th century, tariffs made up the dominant part, the bulk, of American federal government revenues. And he dreams of recreating this.

This is not going to happen. And of course, this is completely contrary to his idea of reducing the trade deficit. You can only get more tariffs if the United States continues to import. But if reducing the trade deficit is the goal, then the United States should reduce its imports. So, quite frankly, it's not clear exactly how all of this was supposed to be oriented. Now, the final point is that I think this external orientation really became much bigger toward the latter part of last year, when he amassed the armada against Venezuela.

You know, he began to assemble this armed force in the Caribbean. And then, of course, since then, we've seen, as I said, this whole Greenland thing, and so on. I think this is because he knows that nothing is working at home and he needs to produce some sort of foreign policy success—whether by taking Greenland or, you know, Venezuela, and so on. And maybe one final point—you mentioned Israel. I have no doubt that AIPAC is very powerful and has a lot of money. But I think to say that it's all about AIPAC actually lets the United States' own imperial agenda off the hook.

I think that Israel is an important accessory to the larger design of a failing American imperialism. But that's that. And yes, it's quite possible that Netanyahu beguiled Trump into thinking there would be an easy success if he attacked Iran now—there's no doubt about it. But that doesn't really explain why this war is taking place, in a certain sense. I think the underlying instabilities of the U.S. system right now are a more important indicator, whereas the instigation by Netanyahu is just a small cog in a bigger machine.

#Pascal

You know, one of the things that's surprised me most in the last, I'd say, two months, in my discussions—I was talking to a colleague from California, an activist, Mr. Melo—and he was making the point that the United States today just isn't good at producing these weapons anymore. He said, I mean, not only do they lack shells and so on, the kind of cheap stuff, but they also lack the expensive stuff, even the know-how to make it. And they lack engineers. Even Palantir and others have a hard time recruiting people away from the rest of the tech sector.

And the nuclear physicists you need to produce even nuclear weapons are hard to recruit. The entire military-industrial complex—I always thought of it as this huge monster that makes sure it feeds itself and stays hyper-profitable—seems to be rusting everywhere. I mean, I'm happy. I was very happy to hear that. It's like, okay, finally, capitalism is eating away at its own means of producing implements of war. Fantastic—but it's quite a surprise. So, are we really that far down this road of self-destruction within a rent-seeking kind of capital economy?

#Radhika Desai

I think we are. The short answer is yes. And we can examine some of the mechanisms behind that. Basically, I'd say that, especially with the onset of neoliberalism, what you've had is more and more emphasis on—well, you know, when you had a more regulated form of capitalism, then at least,

although the military-industrial complex existed—President Eisenhower warned about it and so on—there was presumably some kind of government oversight over what was produced, in what ways, and in what quantities. And there was enormous government aid and involvement in the arms industry and so on.

And what we've seen since 1980, since the neoliberal era, is more and more deregulation. And when you have defense production whose purpose is not the defense of your country but the profits of certain private corporations, then things are bound to go awry—and they have. So essentially, the way I think about what's happened to the enormous military-industrial complex, on which the United States spends a trillion dollars a year—and Donald Trump now wants to increase it to \$1.5 trillion—it's basically a kind of trough on which the pigs, that is, the military-industrial complex corporations, feed greedily.

They're promised lucrative contracts—cost-plus contracts and so on. You've all heard the Pentagon stories about how, you know, a simple gun or whatever can end up costing many times what it should. So the American taxpayer is essentially subsidizing these people. It's a coddled military-industrial complex whose purpose isn't to produce cutting-edge weapons but to make profits. That's why they're not able to—well, they're there. And yeah, the second thing is, you have to throw in the element of deindustrialization.

This issue of not being able to produce weapons isn't new. I remember reading a report in the early months of the Ukraine conflict, back in 2022, from the British Royal United Services Institute, which is a kind of armed forces think tank. They were basically saying that with the deindustrialization of the West, the capacity to produce arms at the rate they'd be needed in Ukraine—let alone in any larger conflict—is just not there. And I'd say that, in this deindustrialization process, the United States has essentially enticed the Europeans to join them, and so they've gone along with it too.

So the European capacity to produce is also limited. And finally, on the technology matter—you see, we're now living in a time when not only small, inexpensive weapons matter, and there's nothing wrong with inexpensive weapons if they're effective. I think we've seen in both these conflicts, Ukraine and Iran, that they are effective. But I think the Americans aren't interested in producing them. They want to produce high-cost, super-profit-making, big, lugubrious weapons that are really not much use in the kinds of conflicts we have today.

So there's that. And plus, you know, since 2018, I believe, when Vladimir Putin announced that the Russians had a hypersonic—sorry, hypersonic—missile, since then, the United States... you know, that's a long time ago. Like, how come you haven't developed your own? The Americans don't have hypersonic missiles. The Russians do. The Chinese do. I understand the Iranians do as well. So this is an astonishing outcome, you know. And through all of this, the United—well, every country, I mean, most people in the mainstream media keep extolling the virtues of the American military forces.

You know, they're so big, so expensive, so mighty—blah, blah. The only thing really big about them is the expense. There's nothing else that's particularly big, impressive, or great anymore. And this is why, quite frankly, let's not talk about the Second World War. The Americans love to say, "We won it." They did not. Since then, the Americans haven't won any major war, other than, you know, overrunning tiny little countries like Grenada and Panama. Go on, put a couple more feathers in your cap for those sorts of paltry scores. But they haven't won a single military victory.

#Pascal

No, I would say actually the most successful part of U.S. interventionism comes from covert actions. The CIA is a highly sophisticated organization that apparently managed to overthrow quite a lot of governments and helped the United States reach and kind of dominate at least the Western Hemisphere. But we know there are other parts that have also been successful—Operation Gladio and so on. Yeah. And the offspring of that, of course, is the National Endowment for Democracy and the very fine-tuned way in which the United States has developed the ability to influence abroad—which, by the way, they're very afraid of themselves. That's why anytime there's anything aired about Donald Trump or so in Russia or China, they cry foul.

Oh no, they want to influence our politics, meddling in our internal affairs. It's like, yeah, because—you're obviously aware of how much meddling was going on on your side, right? So that one is highly sophisticated. But actually, the real, the hard power—which we thought, at least for me, speaking for myself—I thought U.S. influence rested on that hard military power. But the more you look at it, the more brittle that power seems to become.

#Radhika Desai

Quite right. And, you know, I would say that in many ways this—well, first of all, I'd just like to say that the whole CIA thing, I mean, ultimately, the effect of all that, and then later on, once the CIA came in for enough criticism, particularly around Chile and all that, they launched the National Endowment for Democracy, which undertakes more open regime change operations and tries to sort of, you know, weaponize people and so on in other countries.

So, you know, you've seen a lot of that happening in countries like Bangladesh or Nepal or wherever—these kinds of color revolutions that are being fomented. But the result of all that is actually that, in many ways, countries that are alert to these dangers basically react in two ways. Number one, of course, they start controlling what goes in and out of their country much more. So you have, for example, Russian laws against foreign NGOs operating there and stuff like that. So, you know, insofar as there's a goal of promoting anything like democracy—which, of course, is completely false anyway.

But, you know, it certainly isn't going to do that. It's going to create more and more controls and so on. The other thing, as well, is that in the case of Iran, what you've seen is that the government has

prepared itself precisely for the kind of decapitation they've already suffered—and to withstand it. And I think that's going to be, you know, I mean, at the end of the day, assassinating political leaders elsewhere isn't going to gain you anything. Nor has the kidnapping or assassination of political leaders so far gained the United States anything.

You know, I said earlier that Venezuela is not a success. Because, you know, you can only count it as a success if you think that Delcy Rodríguez is sitting there doing the U.S.'s bidding—that she was put there by the U.S. But that's not so. Delcy Rodríguez, basically as vice president, has taken over the duties of the president in a constitutionally defined context where the president is not able to discharge his duties. So she has obtained this position through a totally normal constitutional process. Um, the idea that, you know, the United States and its oil majors are going to take over Venezuelan oil—the oil majors have already told Donald Trump that Venezuela is uninvestable unless he's going to produce, you know, hundreds of billions of dollars in subsidies for them. So this is not happening. I mean, some fly-by-night operators will go and do what they can in Venezuela, but beyond that, there's not much.

Plus, Delcy Rodríguez—I was reading somewhere, I think in one of Medea Benjamin's assessments of the situation in Venezuela—that, you know, Delcy Rodríguez is actually selling oil, yes, to American companies, but on a commercial basis. And the fact that she's selling to American companies should come as no surprise, because U.S. refineries, particularly in the southwestern part of the United States, were built precisely to handle Venezuelan oil, even before the days of Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution and so on.

So there's a compatibility between their refining capacities and orientation and the heavy crude oil that Venezuela produces. So fine. And finally, this point that, you know, somehow Delcy Rodríguez has this sword of Damocles hanging over her—that if she were not to do the Trump administration's bidding, somehow the Trump administration would mete out a fate worse than Maduro's to her, and so on and so forth. This is also rubbish, because the fact is that, other than her, they haven't got anyone to replace her with, and they haven't got the capacity to rule Venezuela themselves.

#Pascal

Venezuela is an armed society.

#Radhika Desai

How are they going to do it? You know, these days it's not so easy to just walk in and take over a country. You just can't do it. I mean, even in the days of colonialism—the heydays of colonialism—you had very substantial collaboration from the local ruling classes, right? And without that, you can't do it.

#Pascal

Yeah. And, you know, it seems to me that the U.S. and Europe, on the one hand, still have parts of their brains anchored in classic colonialism—as in, we go in, we tell them what to do, and if they don't like it, we kill them, because that's how it is. And part of it is that. The other part is this kind of unipolar moment when, in fact, the Soviet Union didn't break up because the United States wanted it to break up. It broke up for different reasons. George Bush Senior famously went in 1991 to the Rada in Ukraine, telling them in August, "Please do not declare your separation. Stay together. Let's keep the Soviet Union intact, because it's way too dangerous—many parts with nuclear weapons and so on." Everybody was afraid of that. The Soviet Union broke apart despite the United States wanting it to stay together.

#Radhika Desai

But then came the moment of, like, "Oh, maybe we can do more."

#Pascal

Then came the whole Yugoslavia affair and the breakup—the intentional breakup from the Kremlin. Then came the Iraq War, right? Then the interventions in Libya and Syria and so on, which were very classical kinds of military power projection tools. But it seems that this tool is now running again against a brick wall. And it seems that this change that's coming again—the one we all feel and talked about before the show, right?—we're going through a kind of 1989-type change. We just don't exactly see where it's going. We all hope it's not the Third World War, but we know it's on the cards. That one is now impacting very heavily.

And probably the Trump administration—do you think they have a hunch about this, and that's why they're acting so aggressively? Or is it... how do you make sense of this particular moment, right, in which violence now seems to fail to achieve its goals? Because again, yeah, as you said, Iran took away this tool, right? The decapitation strike. Yeah, sure—decapitators. We still run... okay, so go to it again—we still run. So it seems that this, and the Russians blocking our oil, doing everything, waging a proxy war—"We're not going to give in, you're not going to get this." This is quite a brutal change, I would say, for the entire political West, as Richard Sakwa would say.

#Radhika Desai

Yeah, exactly. Well, a couple of different points. Number one, I don't mean "definitely." Yes, we are living at a very important turning point—you're totally right. You can compare it to 1989. But more interestingly, people have been comparing it to the outbreak of the First World War. The Chinese speak of "changes unseen in a century," and so on. So, you know, definitely, I think we're at some such moment. Secondly, I would say that the Trump administration is not behaving aggressively because they somehow sense that this is the case.

I think its aggressive behavior is part of what makes this such a turning point. In the First World War, when it broke out, it was, you know, the result of the imperial competition among the major European powers, which spun out of the control of any one of them. The idea of German guilt was always wrong—they were all equally guilty. All the imperial powers, and the broader imperial system itself, were equally guilty. So in that sense, I'd say the First World War was—again, nobody intended it—but it was part of the structure of the situation that caused it. You mentioned the term "Third World War," and I've been pushing back against that, so let's see what you think of it.

So, you know, I've been thinking a lot about this because people have been talking about a Third World War for a long time. I did a little bit of research, and in the course of that research, I found that Engels had written an astonishing prediction of a world war to come. He actually called it that—a world war. I wish I had the quotation right in front of me, but he said things like, you know, millions of soldiers—ten million soldiers—will die, Europe will be laid bare as if a swarm of locusts had gone over it, crowns will tumble into the gutter, and so on. So, you know, all of these things were predicted in this remarkable passage.

But more to the point, I realized that people had started using the term "world war" in the late 19th century. I'd say it was part of the awareness of the destructive potential of imperial competition—the possibility that it would result in war. And why did they call it a world war? Well, that's very, very important. They called it a world war because, at that time, as Lenin pointed out in his famous pamphlet **Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism**, the European powers had already divided up the world among themselves. So if they went to war with one another, by implication, the whole world would go to war. That's not the case anymore, and we have to think about the implications of that.

And the reason I want to underline this is not because I want to belittle the dangers and the awful suffering being caused right now by the war. It is great—this war could be big, this war could be long. The real question is, will the entire world be involved in it? And I would say we are no longer there. Why? Because imperialism has declined since then. No matter that the United States can impose so much pain and suffering on the world today, there is no possibility that all these imperial powers will go to war. And, you know, today there's also this talk about "big powers," where we're invited to count the Americans, the Russians, and the Chinese. But the character of the Russians and the Chinese is completely different from that of the Americans.

They're not the kind of—well, they're not capitalist societies. China is not capitalist. Russia is sort of capitalist, but with a very different heritage, a very different orientation in foreign policy. And I would say, in many ways, insofar as the legacy of the foreign policy of the Soviet Union remains part of the thinking of the current Russian ruling classes, they would not be expansionist in the same way the European powers were. So, you know, their attitude is basically defensive. And if you doubt this, just compare a map of American military bases around the world with maps of the Russian and Chinese bases. There's no comparison.

#Pascal

No, I think this is a very important observation. I keep thinking that the terms “world war,” the world wars—the first and the second—are not actually very good descriptions, because they also give you the illusion not only that the world was at war, but that it was one world. Which it wasn’t. It was an amalgamation of different wars that started at different times, with different speeds, for different reasons. The Japanese only entered—attacked Pearl Harbor—in ‘41, at a time when ‘39 was already, like, two years in the past.

Yeah, it was already two years in the past by the time Japan did that and actually brought the United States into the Second World War. And from a Chinese perspective, the whole thing started more or less in ‘31, when they were first attacked by the Japanese, and then again in ‘36, and all of these things. I mean, of course, this is also the historians’ problem—they say, like, no, the way we put temporal bounds around this is problematic. But the thing is, my home country, Switzerland, was never at war. I mean, it was part of the system. The world wars were moments of intensification, when the global system actually retreated and resorted to mass violence.

But it was still a system, and it was still interconnected, and it still worked in... I mean, everybody tried to interpret what everybody else was doing, and we were still trying to trade. That’s the whole point. And I think it’s what you’re pointing out—that a large part of the globe is now emancipated and doesn’t need to follow this anymore. That changes the equation. We might have one more war or another, but this cascading effect of dragging in all the resources of the entire globe—that’s not going to happen anymore. So I think you’re right.

#Radhika Desai

And, you know, part of the reason those wars happened is because people were still coming out of a time when European powers could easily overpower non-European populations whose armed strength was very low. Today, it’s impossible to think of going to war like that. You know, for example, the question now is whether Trump is so desperate for regime change in Iran that he would deploy ground troops. I doubt he will. And even if he were, most European powers are not going to assist in that.

Even the Ukraine war is being fought by these cynical European governments. But, you know, it’s being fought through Ukrainians—“to the last Ukrainian,” as people have been saying right from the start. So, you know, you can have proxy wars. But all of these... and sometimes I joke that we live in an era when parents won’t let their children walk to school alone. Do you think they’re going to—I mean, in the West—do you think they’re going to let them go to war? I mean, it’s ridiculous.

#Pascal

The sad answer to that question is yes, because war can be sold, and war is also a sickness of the mind. And once you reach that stage, you basically reach a moment when mothers will say, "Take my children, please, because this is for the people."

#Radhika Desai

In a defensive war, yes, I would say that can happen. But in an offensive, imperialist war, I doubt it. Although I will say one thing—I thought you were going to make a different objection to my point, which I actually thought of even as I was speaking. In a professional army, when you don't have a draft, what typically happens is that people from lower classes end up enlisting, because they see going into the army as a step up in life, even though it brings the danger of losing life, limits, and so on. Typically, the personnel of armies have always come from the less well-off social classes, the less well-off regions, and so on, in any country.

#Pascal

Now, the only thing I have is, like, if you can—and we've seen that—if you can induce a mass psychosis, a mass formation, as I think Matthias Desmet is his name, would call it. If you do that, then people become willing to sacrifice themselves and others, even for aggressive purposes, because they do it under a defensive framework. It's like, "We need to do this in order to save the world." And mass psychosis can be induced in several ways. I mean, religion is one. The fight against a virus can be another one, right? When we need to mobilize everything we've got, including our children, in order to fight the good fight. So luckily, at this point, I don't see it. I mean, maybe in Europe—the Germans seem to be on the way of saying, like, "Look, we need to go and fight the Russians. Now we need to do it ourselves." They seem to be working themselves into that mindset.

#Radhika Desai

But I'd just like to come back to that a little bit, because, you know, first of all, Trump was elected because he promised there would be no more wars. And that tells you that the bulk of the American population, including the right wing, do not want wars. Secondly, I'd say that the young people of Europe—I don't know where they're at. I remember, soon after Macron announced that he was considering reintroducing the draft—this was on the BBC, actually—some BBC reporter was walking around the streets of Berlin, interviewing whoever he could find, all young people. There was one kid he asked, "Would you like to be drafted?" And he said, "Absolutely not." Then the reporter said, "Well, what if the Russians come to occupy Germany?"

And this kid says, "I'd rather be occupied than dead." Exactly. I thought that was a very sensible thing to say, because, of course, I think at some level the populations of Europe and the United States—the populations of the Atlantic region—at the end of the day, they recognize that these are all wars of attempted imperialism. You know, people can say "power projection" or whatever, but

what is power projection when it's at home? It's imperialism. And they're not willing to fight it. You know, they are willing to say, "OK, if my country is invaded, of course I will go and pick up arms and defend it. But I'm not going to go and fight just because you want to protect your power and serve big European or American corporations through that."

#Pascal

I'm glad about that, but I'm really glad for these kinds of statements. Europe is in a much more militaristic place at the moment, in terms of their mindset. I hope they spin out of it, but they could spin the other way around. And that's my—my kind of argument: if that happens, if they really go into deep militarism and, you know, just think about this—a sort of "Corona-type" mindset, like, "we need to mobilize everything in order to win and survive"—then the only way to survive is to march into Moscow. They did it. They've done it several times already, the Europeans.

#Radhika Desai

Yeah.

#Pascal

And yes, the whole rich class enlisting the lower classes to fight a war is one thing, but the other thing is making them willing to do that. The American system doesn't actually produce that. We haven't seen it, I believe. Yeah. Good, Radhika. This was a very interesting overview. And I just want to remind everybody that your channel can be found here. I mean, everybody, if you've listened to this interview until now, please, you ought to immediately switch to Radhika Desai's channel. You can find it at [youtube.com/@RadhikaDesai](https://www.youtube.com/@RadhikaDesai). It's called *Radhika Desai, Geopolitical Economist.* That's also how you can find it on Google. Radhika, any other place where people should find you, and anything you'd like to add at this point?

#Radhika Desai

Sure. I mean, no, I just—I hope that, you know, what you're saying... I think the European governments are definitely trying to whip up war hysteria. And we can discuss the political and geopolitical economy of that at some other point. But I wonder how much ordinary people are fighting. But, you know, I agree that it's a danger. Certainly, you see a lot of this, and people are discussing it more and more. Where to find me? Yeah, the channel is one. Secondly, [radhikadesai.com](https://www.radhikadesai.com)—that's my website. I have a Substack as well, so if you'd like to join and subscribe, that would be great. And I'm also on Patreon, so you can find me there. Facebook, Twitter, of course. So hopefully, yeah, people will take an interest.

#Pascal

Sign up to Radhika Desai's YouTube channel. Thank you very much for your time today.

#Radhika Desai

Thank you so much, Pascal.