

Jeffrey Sachs: Iran is the Graveyard of American Hegemony

Prof. Jeffrey Sachs argues that Trump is becoming increasingly irrational and that the miscalculations in the war against Iran reveal problems of a decadent hegemony. Jeffrey Sachs YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@JeffreyDSachsOfficial> Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: <https://glennDiesen.substack.com/> X/Twitter: https://x.com/Glenn_Diesen Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/glennDiesen> Support the research by Prof. Glenn Diesen: PayPal: <https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/glennDiesen> Buy me a Coffee: buymeacoffee.com/gdieseng Go Fund Me: <https://gofund.me/09ea012f> Books by Prof. Glenn Diesen: <https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B09FPQ4MDL>

#Glenn

Welcome back. We're joined by Professor Jeffrey Sachs. Thank you for coming on the program—it's great to see you again.

#Jeffrey Sachs

Of course. Love being here with you, Glenn. Thank you.

#Glenn

So we saw that Trump went for this new round of escalation, it seems. First he attacked South Pars, then the Iranians had a very brutal retaliation, and after that he gave them 48 hours to essentially capitulate by opening up the Strait of Hormuz. The 48 hours passed, and he said, "Well, we had two good days of constructive talks, so we're going to delay Armageddon now. We're not going to carry out this destruction of Iran's energy facilities, and Iran won't retaliate." However, the Iranians came out and said, "We never actually had any talks at all—neither direct nor indirect." How do you make sense of this? Is Trump walking it back, or is he simply waiting, preparing for his ground troops to arrive in the region? How do you make sense of this?

#Jeffrey Sachs

It's not easy to make sense of a president of the United States who just brazenly lies in a way that's exposed immediately. There were no talks—much less what Trump described as great progress and comprehensive deals. So there are, of course, many theories, and I don't think we can absolutely land on one of them as decisive. One theory, which I think really needs to be taken seriously, is that Trump confabulates—meaning he lives in a delusional world. I believe he is a mentally ill man, and a

lot of psychologists believe he's suffering from frontotemporal dementia combined with the underlying pathology of malignant narcissism—meaning the guy's a megalomaniac, the guy's a narcissist, the guy's a psychopath—and that's been true his whole life. But in addition to that, he's losing it. He's been nasty, but he's losing it.

Okay, that's the psychological interpretation. I think we shouldn't put it aside, because Trump is extraordinarily erratic right now. His sentences aren't coherent—sometimes even the words aren't coherent. And while this is often brushed aside to get to the political or tactical analyses, I think it needs to be taken very seriously. In fact, I've spoken for many years about Trump's mental state. His dark triad personality is obviously psychopathic, obviously narcissistic. What psychologists have told me for many, many years is that the conditions would worsen, and recent analyses by several psychologists say there's clear evidence of greater impulsivity and a lack of speech capacity—in ways that resemble phonemic paraphasia, which means you don't finish words properly. So this, I think, is very real.

Then there's, you know, a second kind of purely tactical possibility, which is Trump—idiotically, because I think it's undeniable the man's just not smart. He painted himself into a corner with an impulsive 48-hour threat he couldn't fulfill. The markets were tanking in Asia, and Trump can't stand the markets tanking in the United States, so he had to do something. And this theory is, you know, he's just so stupid that the best thing he can come up with is a lie that's disproved within moments. That's plausible too—that this is just backing off from something because he's not very clever. A third possibility, which many people subscribe to and which isn't mutually exclusive, is that he or his cronies are front-running the markets. The markets are swinging; they make announcements knowing this would cause stock markets to rise and oil prices to fall.

All you need is a one-minute advance notice of what the president's going to say, and voilà—you can make millions of dollars with the easiest possible pickings. There are people analyzing mysterious trades in the market a minute or two before opening, and so forth. I don't discount this at all, because the brazen corruption of this administration is beyond belief. What's also true, of course, is that Trump says anything, anytime. But the deeper movement of troops suggests we're going to have some kind of ground invasion. With thousands of Marines heading toward the region, it hardly seems like we're at the great diplomatic breakthrough Trump is talking about.

And as time goes on, from these announcements a couple of days ago, the Iranians have said repeatedly, "No, sorry, there are no negotiations with the Americans—this way, that way, directly, indirectly." But the Marines keep coming. Bottom line, Glenn, I think Trump is without any plan at all. I don't think there's any clear military strategy. I think he's flailing around. I think he's psychologically disordered. And so, if this is at least partly confabulation—that he thinks there were negotiations—it wouldn't shock me, although it's hard to prove. But if you cut through everything and ask a different question, not why he did it, but what's going to happen, I think we're on a path of escalation.

Obviously, despite the great progress that Donald Trump talked about, there was immediately shelling by Israel of Tehran. There were counter-missile attacks by Iran on Israel. There wasn't the slightest hint of any pause in anything. And we know that the Marines are on the way. So this is an escalating battlefield—extraordinarily dangerous. I don't give any credence at all to bilateral negotiations. I have one feeling, maybe a vain hope, that that won't pan out at all. But I have one hope that's not based on negotiation, but on a different kind of diplomacy—namely, that Presidents Putin and Xi and Prime Minister Modi, who represent a large part of the world and are powerful countries, will say clearly to Donald Trump, probably in private, "You've got to stop this."

This is completely out of control and unacceptable. That hasn't quite happened yet, but I think that's, for me, the only hope I have for a diplomatic off-ramp. It's not based on negotiation; it's based on someone—or three leaders of considerable stature—saying to the President of the United States, "This is the reality. You can bullshit all you want on your Truth Social and all the rest, but this is the reality: the world's about to go up in flames if you continue this way. You've got to stop."

#Glenn

Well, I agree with your character description of Donald Trump. It's hard to disagree. But the problem seems to be much wider, though. That is, it's not just Trump. I saw the former head of MI6 give an interview where he made the point that Iran has the upper hand now, and it appears that the U.S. miscalculated. But it's not just this one miscalculation. It's not only the United States. We also miscalculated with Russia. We thought their economy would break in the first week. We thought they would be beaten on the battlefield. We thought they would be isolated internationally. We miscalculated with China. We thought their ability to resist this economic war—the tech war—would fail, that simply cutting them off from semiconductors would cause their economy, their industries, to fall apart.

Where does this come from, though? Do we seem to underestimate all our opponents these days? Is it simply that we have no respect for them anymore? I mean, same with the Iranians. I've made the point that the Iranian government has some popular support. It's powerful. The same with Russia—I make the point that they consider this to be an existential threat. They're powerful, and they will fight back. They have both the capabilities and the intentions to fight back. And yet, we always underestimate them. How is it possible that we're not able to assess our opponents in a rational manner?

#Jeffrey Sachs

Yes, this is extremely important. Basically, the quality of governance in the United States—even the governance to go to war or to launch an attack—is extraordinarily low, shockingly low. And, uh, this is a crisis of basic competence. Of course, it could be even worse; it may be a crisis of dementia. In the previous president, we also had at least two years of dementia as part of the U.S. administration. So it could be that we've basically had two presidents in a row with dementia. And

this is not at all impossible as part of the explanation. But there's something more that's real and dramatic. I was in Beijing earlier this week, and in recent days China just finished its Two Sessions meetings of the senior political branches and unveiled the 15th Five-Year Plan.

I spoke with many leaders in China and many participants in the planning process. We had a deep discussion about the 15th plan, which was developed over a two-year period. There were tremendous amounts of consultation—expert committees, think tanks across the country, leading academic specialists participating. It's actually a remarkable mobilization of brainpower and thought that goes into this. Then the premier, Li Qiang, last week presented the government's work program and reviewed the 2025 work program. It's about a 50-page document in English—the one I read—and it was a very detailed discussion of the work program. Now, when I compare that with the United States, of course, there's no plan at all. There's not a one-year plan, not a one-month plan, not a five-year plan—nothing. Then we had our State of the Union.

That used to be an occasion, dating back two centuries, when the president would send a report to Congress on the State of the Union. That used to be substantial documentation. What is the State of the Union now? It's a jeering show. It's a public TV event—this year for Donald Trump to rant, for the U.S. hockey team to stand up, for somebody with a medal to stand up, to tell stories, to berate the Democrats in the case of Trump's speech. There was no work program discussed. There was no state of the nation, other than phony soundbites. This was the opposite of any kind of serious approach to governance. So I feel this across the board. Of course, I'm not in military planning—no one asked me—but I'm watching the economic activities of the government.

It's completely haphazard—totally haphazard. The whole tariff war last year, which disrupted the world economy, was seat-of-the-pants impulsivity, with crazy, naïve explanations for what was done. And from my point of view, from the first day, it was absolutely doomed to fail in achieving any of the actual economic objectives that were stated, because it was so primitive in its formulation—and, I thought, brazenly illegal from the start—and the work of four or five people only. This was not the work of a bureaucracy with trained analysts who had made an explanation. There was an analytical—well, there was a one-pager from the U.S. Trade Representative that I wouldn't have passed a first-year trade student for producing.

It was an absurdity, and I see that repeatedly in any sphere of public policy issues I'm dealing with. It's rather clear that the same is true even on these military issues, because we hear the leaks—we hear from Joe Kent, we hear leaks from the Joint Chiefs, we hear leaks from the CIA—that none of this is planned, none of it makes sense. Explaining to Trump that the idea of a decapitation strike leading to regime change is very unlikely to succeed. We have stories—true or not, who knows—but stories that Netanyahu talked Trump into this at a personal level.

What we have is a complete collapse of institutionalized rational processes. This is true across all of our government—it's amazing anything works, really. There's nobody doing any serious work; everything is a game, everything is a soundbite, everything is an impulse. And it seems that this is

how this bombing went: they were going to bomb, and then Donald Trump was going to pick the next supreme leader, as he said, and there was going to be unconditional surrender, and we were all going to live happily ever after. And when that delusion failed within a few minutes, they didn't have a next plan. So it's improvisation from morning till night.

You wouldn't think this is how it's done. But you wouldn't think that a person like Trump could actually be president of the United States, much less the CEO of a significant business. I mean, it's just—it's amazing. But it's normalized, Glenn. You know, Trump says these things, and then all the newspapers, instead of asking, "Is the man crazy?" or "How could he say there were negotiations when there were none?"—they don't say that. They say, "Will Donald Trump succeed in the negotiations?" as if this is a serious thing, rather than a—technical term, sorry—shit show, because there's no seriousness in this right now. It's total improv.

#Glenn

Well, the situation isn't great on the other side of the Atlantic either. I mean, in Europe, there are so many of these countries—they're, you know, multi-party systems, so many political parties, so much media. But when it comes to war—be it against the Russians, Iran, or, you know, the way they view the Chinese—they all say the exact same thing. I often think about Walter Lippmann, who's attributed with the quote that when everyone thinks the same, then nobody's really thinking. And you have to ask yourself, how can they all think in the same way?

And it's just very strange. I try to, you know—if you make the point that the Chinese, the Russians, the Iranians, they have reasonable security concerns and interests, and they're quite powerful, and if you threaten their existence, they'll be able to fight back—then it's like, "Oh, well, that's very pro-Ayatollah, or pro-communist China, or pro-Putin." And that's where the discussion ends. So it feels like we're obligated to only underestimate and undermine. It's not a great climate for strategic thinking, is what I'm saying.

#Jeffrey Sachs

What's so strange is that politicians are supposed to be, at least in theory, incentivized or moved by public opinion—so they carry approval and win votes. That stopped happening a few years ago too. Any European politician who has, you know, a 20 percent approval rating is considered wildly popular these days. Most of them are basically near zero. They make no sense to the public; they don't even try to make sense to the public. But I think that's probably not independent of the craziness in the United States. I have to believe it's not just a contagious bout of craziness, but that, unfortunately, European subservience to American craziness is the big driver.

In other words, what European leaders have, to this day, basically been unable to do is speak honestly when the United States is being crazy. And it continues. The only one who's been impressive in this regard, in this war, is Pedro Sánchez of Spain. That was very clear. And, by the

way, the president of Germany today—this is great—President Walter Steinmeier said, “This is a terrible war. This is a huge blunder.” Of course, the German media started attacking their own president: “How dare you say this?” But being president, he can say it. The prime ministers, though—they’re so terrified of the United States. “What will Donald say? We’re scared of Donald. Donald’s going to hurt me.”

Donald’s going to do something terrible to me. And then Rutte, who is a caricature of a caricature, says NATO has to get behind this great cause of the United States of America. God, he makes Stoltenberg look like a genius. It’s just—honestly, sorry—it’s just unbelievable what comes out of Rutte’s mouth. How subservient can one get? How much can one crawl on the floor? And that’s what the Europeans are doing. And it doesn’t work. By the way, this latest crisis is just going to be another catastrophe for the European economy, which is slipping away. Because von der Leyen, Scholz, Macron, and Rutte—come on, are you kidding me?

#Glenn

Well, the Belgian prime minister made a similar point—you know, he also got attacked because he was saying that after this war is over with the Russians, we should normalize relations, because, well, that’s what a peace agreement means. You end the conflict and you have peace. And he was attacked for this because, you know, there can be no normalization—but then there can be no peace either. So it’s a very strange era to live in, when the warmongers claim the moral high ground and somehow the ones calling for normalizing relations and peace are the ones who are condemned. But let me ask, though, about the Iranians, because when the Iranians said there had been no talks at all, they also made the comment that the foreign minister said they are not interested in any ceasefire.

They want a political settlement so the Americans and Israelis won’t be back again in another six months to do more bombing and, you know, try their luck again. How do you see the possibility of this ending, though? Do you see a common meeting point where the demands of the Iranians can meet the demands of the Americans? Because Trump just released his demands, which were essentially the complete capitulation of Iran. I mean, it was an absurd list—which begs the question, of course, it might just be an opening position—but it doesn’t seem like there’s anything to talk about there.

#Jeffrey Sachs

And the Iranians won’t talk about that, and there won’t be any bilateral discussions because—by the way, they know that the moment they’re most vulnerable to being literally assassinated is when they’re talking with the Americans. So there won’t be negotiations over these fifteen points of capitulation. I think the question—and it’s a very, very difficult one to solve, and the reason we should expect the war to continue with very grave consequences unless some near miracle occurs—is that Iran is facing an existential threat. That’s not paranoia; that’s just listening literally to the

words of the president of the United States and the prime minister of Israel, who said, "We are going to topple you, and I am going to run your country," says the president of the United States afterwards.

Okay, it doesn't get more basic than that—unconditional surrender. So Iran is facing an existential threat. Iran has watched how Europe has been completely pathetic, not even defending the most basic principle of non-aggression. And so Iran has a real question: what are we negotiating? If the fighting stops one day, they attack two weeks from now, a month from now—it means this is probably going to, like the war in Ukraine, come down to battlefield realities more than anything else. And there's a fundamental question. I mean, there are three ways for this to stop. One is that the United States crushes Iran, of course, with force—grave devastation, war crimes, everything horrible—but crushes Iran. A second possibility is that, no, that can't really be done. It's almost never done by air.

It's never done in a country as large and populous as Iran. Serbia, which is a small, weak country compared to Iran, was bombed for 78 days by NATO before finally capitulating in 1999. So there's a lot longer to go on this one. And the argument—which many of the people you've discussed this issue with have made, I think with a lot of cogency—is that Iran has more missiles than the other side has missile defenses. That's the most basic point, perhaps: Iran can blow up the Gulf, and it can probably blow up a lot of Israel in the interim. So that's a second possibility—that Iran basically wins the missile war and devastates the other side. The only other answer I can see is that the other great powers unite, speak clearly, both publicly and privately, and tell the United States it's over.

Go home. You can't do this. We can rally 180 countries around the world to be honest about this, and you go home and you stop. And the Gulf countries, as part of this, say these military facilities are closed—they're done. We do not host U.S. military facilities anymore. They don't protect us; in fact, they are the cause of war itself. With that, the fighting could stop. It wouldn't resolve all issues, but it would stop the fighting. Those bases would be non-operative, the United States would go home, and Israel couldn't fight at all without the United States. And the only ones I believe can bring this about are India, China, and Russia. If they're united, I think they could actually succeed in bringing it about.

#Glenn

Well, I was hoping that all these countries in the East would help facilitate a multipolar system—one that the U.S. would be integrated into. Indeed, they have a leading position. But instead, the unfortunate situation is that it could take on a very anti-American form if it continues like this. None other than Brzezinski, who actually wrote what we often refer to as the Bible for the unipolar moment, made this point. He wrote a book back in 2012 where he argued that, as the unipolar moment ends, we have a choice: if a multipolar system is emerging, we can either push back—so that the multipolar system forms against us—or we can help facilitate it and then have a privileged position within it.

#Jeffrey Sachs

Now, the U.S. made that choice clearly—that we're still after hegemony. This is basically what we're seeing. But I wouldn't say in a farcical way; it's in a completely tragic way, because the U.S. is trying to be the global hegemon in a world that's already multipolar, and in which the U.S. can't even strategize an hour ahead anymore. So it's flailing around to keep hegemony. Of course, this is what Brzezinski wrote about fifteen years after he wrote **The Grand Chessboard**, where he laid out how we were going to be unipolar, because he said Russia could never resist the advance of NATO and Europe.

And it will never join with China, so it will accede to Western demands. And with that pivot—Ukraine and Russia ceasing to be great powers—the United States has the keys to Eurasia. That was the blueprint. It failed. It's failing again. Trump—he's not a clown. He's far, far, far more dangerous than that. But he's absolutely incapable of a strategic idea or of success. So we're watching destruction, continued escalation, until that non-Western part of the world—which, after all, represents the vast majority of humanity—stands up and says, "No, you can't destroy the whole world. We won't let you do it."

#Glenn

Well, thank you for taking the time. I know it's late over there in Hong Kong, so I'll let you go.

#Jeffrey Sachs

And by the way, I just want to clarify my last statement. When I say "we won't let you do it," I don't mean they're going to go to war with the United States. But I do mean they'll create a united diplomatic front that includes the vast majority of the world, because the African Union will certainly join this. Actually, the Arab world will join too. And the message will be: the U.S. has to stop this delusional approach. And Israel—for God's sake—thirty years of war across the Middle East, stop. Go live within your own borders and stop bothering the rest of the world.