

# Iran Kills US Gulf Hegemony. Irreversible Shift | Moeini & Kasradze

The scale of the strategic mistake the US made in attacking Iran is slowly becoming apparent, and it is leading to ever more desperate moves by the US-Israeli axis. Dr. Arta Moeini, who is intimately familiar with both the Iranian and US political systems, explains the extent of these miscalculations and their impact on the regional balance of power, while Lasha Kasradze examines the facts on the ground as they relate to the South Caucasus. Links: Institute for Peace and Diplomacy: <https://peacediplomacy.org> Neutrality Studies substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> (Opt in for Academic Section from your profile settings: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com/s/academic>) Merch & Donations: <https://neutralitystudies-shop.fourthwall.com> Timestamps: 00:00:00 Introduction 00:00:33 Khamenei killing and war outlook 00:06:19 Peace chatter and US setbacks 00:16:24 Iranian state and social resilience 00:24:19 Symmetrical war and strategic strain 00:30:03 End of unipolar order 00:40:00 Lessons for allies and Georgia 00:52:08 Final forecasts and Trump options

## #Pascal

Welcome back, everybody, to Neutrality Studies. I'm joined today by my two wonderful colleagues, Dr. Arta Moeni from the Institute for Peace and Diplomacy, and Lascha Casarace, who's been here with me on the channel many times—I'm pretty sure you know him. He's from Georgia, and Arta, you're working from North America. Welcome to both of you.

## #Lasha Kasradze

Thank you very much. Good to see you again.

## #Pascal

Twice, twice today—yes, in succession. And Arta, I'd like to start with you. You wrote a piece recently published on *UnHerd* entitled *The Dangerous Martyrdom of Khamenei: His Death Will Strengthen Tehran*. Could you give us a bit of your analysis of that piece, and more generally, where we stand today, on this March 25th, in the U.S.–Israel–Iran war?

## #Arta Moeini

Yeah, thank you. So the piece was written basically the day after Khamenei was hit and died, so it was very fresh at the time. My interpretation was that this was going to strengthen the regime—that it would turn him into a martyr, a kind of new saint—and that this would recharge and refuel the Iranian ideological capital for the regime. In fact, it would actually strengthen the Islamic Republic

rather than make it topple. I think the Americans especially had this idea of the “Venezuela option,” that they were going to decapitate the leadership, and after that, they’d get someone friendly who would accept the U.S. red lines, meaning Iran would join the U.S. bloc and everything would be great.

And that’s how it was sold to President Trump—that basically, you’re going to have a great win and you’re going to end this pariah status that we’ve had over the past 47 years. And so it’s all going to be great. Obviously, that’s not how it turned out, mainly because the Islamic Republic is, or has been, a modern total state. It’s been a systematic entity. It’s had parallelisms, multiple redundancies, a kind of horizontal layering—which means there are various institutions that, you know, work through the system and the government. There’s the IRGC, which is a very powerful entity, and then there are other organizations like the bonyads, the foundations connected with the economy and the political system.

So you have a multilayered system, and it’s not a personalistic one. The United States and the leadership thought they were going to have either a Venezuela situation or something like a Saddam situation—basically, that they’d remove what they called the Ayatollah, right? One person, and then the regime would collapse. They expected a regime collapse or at least a regime change. But they weren’t prepared for a long, attritional war—and instead, that’s what they got. Iran had already threatened beforehand to trigger a regional escalation.

And it was able to immediately hit all the U.S. bases in the region. It didn’t really spare any place, and its strategy was clear from the very beginning. It did what it had promised to do. It started hitting the radars, trying to blind the U.S. and Israeli defenses and overwhelm them—not overnight, but over time—by basically throwing a lot of stuff at them, knowing full well that their interceptors would hit their limits and eventually run out. So now, after two or three weeks—now in the fourth week—they had calculated, based on the 12-day war, that the United States and Israel would have serious problems dealing with Iranian ballistic missiles and drones.

And the last thing I would say—and then we can have a discussion about it—is that this is not a new war. This is the continuation of the 12-day war. It was paused and then reignited. The Iranians were always expecting this to come back. They expected the war to resume and had no illusions about that. But once the war happened, even though it looked great for America tactically—they were able to do whatever they wanted, hit whatever sites they wanted, and maintain corridors of air superiority—in practice, strategically speaking, the actual gains from the war have been a Pyrrhic victory, if anything, for the United States. It’s actually given strategic leverage to Iran, to Tehran, granting it things it didn’t have before.

Control over the Strait of Hormuz, disruption to the global economy, as well as to global energy networks—that’s what it’s going to use as leverage. And for the first time ever, it’s actually able to sell things—sell petrochemical products as well as its oil and gas—to many countries without having to worry about secondary sanctions, with the United States sort of pausing or terminating them. So it’

s been a very costly but strategically beneficial war for Iran. So it's a very questionable, very reckless decision to wage this war of choice. It's not in America's interest. We went into it because of Israel, because of Benjamin Netanyahu's personal agenda. And it may very well tank the Trump presidency.

## **#Pascal**

Yeah, I mean, if success is measured by how many little schoolgirls you're able to kill, then yes, the United States definitely got the upper hand there. But I think the point is very important. Strategically, what has the United States gained so far? And as we speak on this March 25th—I read, sorry, it's your March 24th in the evening, actually—I read that apparently there's chatter in the New York Times that the Trump administration has sent peace terms, or something like that, to Iran. Lashad, have you read anything about that? What's your take on how the war is currently developing for the United States? Hey, very brief intermission because I was recently banned from YouTube. And although I'm back, this can happen anytime again. So please consider subscribing not only here, but 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.

## **#Lasha Kasradze**

Well, I've been listening and reading as much as I can on this. But I think every serious researcher, or even anyone just superficially observing, is denying that Trump ever had this conversation with the current Iranian leadership. I think Arthur would agree on his Truth Social. I think he completely made this up—that he told them he was giving them some leeway. Basically, Tehran denied that this conversation ever took place. But to your broader question, it's really about where the United States stands.

We can go back to what the Chief of Staff, General Kane, said and warned. Not to mention, only a few days ago, some high-level intelligence officials resigned—Cox, I think, or Fox, I can't recall the gentleman's name now—who said that this war was a disaster for the United States, or was going to be a disaster. And that the nuclear program, I think, was already eliminated, and that Iran, this time around, would not just let this bombardment go. There were warnings coming out of the intelligence community to the administration that this was going to be a quagmire for America. Hence, they resigned—or he resigned. And again, General Kane's advice was ignored.

And now Trump finds himself in this situation. If you recall, about a week or so ago, South Korea and Japan were asked to give back some weapons. Just imagine—this is tremendous, and very embarrassing—because there was a scarcity of the military arsenal that the United States needs. And so now the question is, this time around, are they going to finish the job, whatever that means? Every expert, anybody, any article you read says that if you're going to dismember Iran, if you're going to blow up the entire state, you have to have boots on the ground. And is America politically in the mood to do this? I highly doubt it.

And Trump, I think, knows this. Trump understands this. Again, I want to give the benefit of the doubt to the president of the United States, because had it not been for certain powers, he probably would have avoided this war, right? Let's recall his disposition toward Putin and the whole Ukraine saga. Instinctively, this is not a president who wants these wars—although that argument is becoming weaker and weaker as each day and week passes. So I think this is another headache. And what is America getting out of it exactly? Are there strategies out there? You know, I was just thinking, just to follow up on Arta's point briefly, this is what strategy is.

I mean, Edward Luttwak was talking about this in his famous books—how you have to go to great lengths even though you're experiencing enormous damage in terms of your sovereignty, your domestic infrastructure, your economy. There's some upper hand that Iran has, that strategic upper hand—the Strait of Hormuz, et cetera—that it can use even though it's facing this much superior military power coming after it. So I think, strategically, Iran, ironically, has an upper hand. The United States, even though the Ayatollah is gone and they've wiped out the theocratic elite in Iran, has not been able to change the regime, let alone conquer the country.

## **#Pascal**

Actually, I'm not sure about that. I mean, Arta—the Ayatollah is there, right? I mean, the Ayatollah is dead, long live the Ayatollah. So, institutionally, this kind of works. And on the other hand... no, it's... yeah, yeah.

## **#Arta Moeini**

No, you're absolutely right. I mean, if you want to finish your point—but, you know, ultimately, the theocratic elites, yes, they decapitated one person, Khamenei Senior, but everybody else is still there. And the irony of all this is that they got a person to become the supreme leader who, in my view, would never have become the supreme leader without the strikes. And, you know, the son of Khamenei, who is now the supreme leader, was somehow the only surviving member—at least according to Iranian media reports—the only surviving member of the strike on the compound. I mean, that in itself, for the Iranians, is quite a miracle.

You know, it's like God has told us who the next in line is. Now, that might be a kind of propaganda, but it's also important because, even strategically, militarily, he was basically the chief of staff for Khamenei, in a way. He knew everything. And he was never a public figure—quite shy, actually. I'm talking about Mojtaba Khamenei, the son of Ali Khamenei, who was killed, assassinated. And he's always been behind the scenes. It appears that he's running the country again from behind the scenes, but he was always the IRGC's choice. He was very close to the IRGC. He's quite hardened—known as a hardliner.

He might be pragmatic in certain regards, but in terms of Iranian defense, ballistic missiles, even the nuclear file, he's known as quite the hardliner, and he was the choice of the IRGC. So there was an

internal struggle, in fact, between the more military-security-affiliated people in Iran and the more theocratic—let's say, the more clerical—establishment in Iran. They're more conservative, they're older, they have less appetite for war. Again, they were a religious class before they became a political class. And so... this appears to have tipped the balance. And Khamenei was this... I mean, again, the Iranian system, for those who are listening, it was never a monolith.

It was never a personalistic system, or one run by an authoritarian, one-person leader. It was a bunch of factions, and these factions were always being balanced. And Khamenei's genius, let's say, was being able to do that—to manage the security side, the clerical side, and also the moderates, the liberals in the Iranian system, like Hassan Rouhani, even Pezeshkian. I mean, Khamenei supported Pezeshkian to become president; he threw his own weight behind him. So again, the Iranian system is quite complicated. It's comparable to the Chinese system, the Soviet system, and perhaps, to a degree, the North Korean system—but it's a total state, a total system. So it's not about the person.

## **#Pascal**

I mean by "total"...

## **#Arta Moeini**

Yeah, by "total state," I mean a state that's really controlling or surveilling every aspect of society. It's a product not just of the revolution, but of the modern state model imported into Iran that goes back at least a hundred years. The Pahlavists, in a way, used the traditional institution of the monarchy for Westernization and modernization. The response to that was the Islamic, or Iranian, Revolution of '79, which then took on a more populist Islamist character. But those forty-seven years have also expanded the power of the modern state in Iran. So, you know, it's not a traditional state but a modern one, in the sense that it has multiple institutional levers. It has parallel institutions. Again, authority is no longer divided between the bazaar, the economic side, the cultural side, the religious side—everything is fused. So you basically get Hobbes's Leviathan in a country like Iran.

## **#Pascal**

I just want to ask, because I'm really interested in this—how much leeway is there, though? I had dinner the other night with a very close Iranian friend, and he wanted to bring me Iranian wine. He couldn't get it, but he was talking about it, and I was surprised. I said, "Oh, Iranian wine? I thought, you know, Muslim country—why do you produce wine?" And he looked at me and said, "Look, Pascal, winemaking, especially in the north, is much older than Islam." So how much leeway is there actually for society and these institutions in between—all the rules and regulations—to do their thing and to live, you know, as they... I mean, thereby be resilient against something like these attacks that are coming now?

## **#Arta Moeini**

Are you talking about resilience against the U.S.–Israeli attacks, or are you talking about the internal dynamics? Because those are two different situations. When you're talking about the domestic side—if we can pull back a little bit—Iran is a deeply polarized society right now. It has that liberal, westernizing side that, you know, we saw when we were in Georgia with Lasha a few months back, and it has very much that kind of character. It's a very Georgian type—people who aren't very religious, they're open, they drink, they don't identify with a Muslim state or as a Muslim people. And then you have the very Islamic part of society. So these two sides really live in two different ontological worlds.

They don't see eye to eye. That's why you have these rifts that Israel and Israeli propaganda try to sift through and exploit. That was the basis of the protests you saw—the reason they turned deadly was because they used the more urban, bourgeois, westernized population against the state. But my point is that the state in Iran has always been a bureaucratic, deep state, like the Chinese state. The Persian state is very deep and old, but the modern state has very different characteristics—drawing authority from various dimensions: cultural, economic, and religious—and fusing, concentrating all of that within this paradigm of the state.

And then the state is everywhere. It's not a person. So no matter how many people you kill, you're still going to have this thing called the Iranian state. And the Iranian state—even if you collapse it—will continue as an insurgency and then come back. That's why I go back to other examples of modern states we've seen. It will be very hard to change the state, the government in Iran, to do a regime change without elite buy-in. You can have change, but it would be a change in the sense of how Deng Xiaoping changed China after Mao. It's a very different society in China today.

## **#Pascal**

In 1979 they changed, right? There was a big shift, and that worked because you had elite buy-in back then, in '79.

## **#Arta Moeini**

Oh, no, no, no, I'm talking about today. The Iranian state was a semi-finished project. Since '79, it has become a modern total state. It was a pseudo-modern state by '79, and because it was personalistic—only tied to the Shah and his own personal power—a modern revolution followed. I think the greatest, in terms of the largest revolution of the 20th century, happened in Iran. It was a populist revolution, a sovereignist revolution. It demanded independence from both the West and the East—basically the two blocs, the Soviets and the Americans.

And from the very beginning, it found itself in a kind of clash of civilizations, especially with America, because America had invested in Iran being part of its security arrangements. And that's how

everything changed. The Iranian state, since '79, under both Khomeini and Khamenei, became more and more institutionalized and systematized to the point that, again, people talk about the theocracy in Iran. My argument is always that they're not a theocracy. They're actually a very modern state, and they're a Caesar–Papist regime.

So it's the political authority that's using religion almost like the Hobbesian head of state, rather than a Vatican situation where the power of politics operates within the domain of the religious system. Actually, if you think about it today, what Khamenei did was, in a way, bring everything together and politicize everything. This constant politicization of government—and then of life—is what I call the totalization of society. And this is something happening within Iran. So you do have these institutions of the Shiite clerical establishment, for example, in Qom. But Qom doesn't control Tehran.

Tehran controls Qom. That's what we mean when we say political power is sovereign, overarching, and controlling over the religious establishment. This is why Khomeini's ideological shift in Shiism is so important—because Shiism, historically, is quietist. Like the Lutherans in Germany, like Martin Luther, they would say you don't have to be involved in politics. The political is a temporal sphere; we are in the religious sphere, on the religious plane. Khomeini changed that. He said, through this theory of the jurisprudence of the guardianship of the jurists, that the jurists will guard political society until such time as the savior returns—the Twelfth Imam, who is hidden and in occultation.

So this situation was provocative and even heretical to some Shiites. It was an innovation for many Shiite scholars and ayatollahs. None of the main ayatollahs—none of them other than Khomeini—accepted it. They saw it as breaking with tradition. So there was only one who accepted it, and he was supposed to be Khomeini's successor, but they eventually pushed him aside because he went against many of their own political and statist dictates, and against what Khomeini wanted to do. It's a very complicated situation, but I think all people should know that it's really about the concentration of authority in the political sphere.

This was justified by Khomeini within the paradigm of a new Shiism that was much more active and much more universalist, not quietist. And yet the origin of the revolution—which included leftists, right-wingers, nationalists, even atheists—was a sovereignist revolution against the bipolar arrangement and the fact that Iran was so tied to one side. And, you know, one of the biggest influences on the Iranian revolution was Heidegger—Martin Heidegger—and his idea of authenticity. So it's a very different circumstance. That's why I say the revolution in Iran was misunderstood from the very beginning, and it continues to be misunderstood by both its defenders and its opposition.

## **#Pascal**

Thank you, Arte. This is a lot of very, very valuable background information—really, very, very much. Let's maybe talk a little bit about what we've learned, the way this war is going. The French commentator Arnaud Bertrand made the point today, or maybe yesterday on Twitter, that what's new about this war is that it's not developing the way we've seen before. The United States has had

a lot of wars in the region. It had wars to the east, in Afghanistan, and to the west, of course, in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and so on.

What usually happened in these theaters is that, you know, the attacked group had to retreat into guerrilla warfare. In Vietnam, too, it was guerrilla warfare against the United States because the U.S. had such overwhelming power. Now, this time, it doesn't seem—after one month—it hasn't developed into that yet, right? The Iranians are striking back with very sophisticated weapons. There are no boots on the ground yet. What do you make of this type of warfare that's more symmetrical—actually, much more symmetrical—than other wars in the past?

## **#Lasha Kasradze**

Well, I think that question is probably most appropriate for military strategists and experts. I can just give you my two cents on that. Strategically speaking, we know that so far Iran has had the upper hand because of its oil, its location, and the Strait of Hormuz—what it can do there. Even Karg Island is now being talked about as a potential point on the ground, with Marines possibly being sent there. They're cautioning Washington against doing that. So I think in that regard, Iran is experiencing an upper hand. Clearly, we know it's a weaker power—that's the amazing part about this whole thing—and yet it's putting up serious resistance. It can ruin the West's day, or America's day, if you will, at least for now.

Psychologically, you want to think, how can America not win this, right? But then, if you look deeper, you get a clearer picture of why this could be a very complicated and lengthy process for Washington. Mind you, nobody's helping. Would you guys—I mean, would you agree with this? Here we have the Gulf states; I mentioned that earlier, Pascal. Here we have the Middle East, which is supposed to be of vital national security interest to the United States. And yet Washington—in Trump's White House—looks like it's washing its hands of the Gulf states as Iran is bombing them. You know, that's also a paradox, because on the one hand, it's supposed to be protecting this region from anyone, let alone Iran. So to me, that's, you know, the question: why is this being allowed?

Second is, where is Europe on this? You know, I think the allies that the Trump administration sort of destroyed its relationships with—one could argue, strategically, Ukraine was done to weaken Europe—but I'm not going to get into all that right now. Be that as it may, we haven't seen overwhelming support from Western powers and traditional allies. I keep going back to the first Gulf War, when Bush Sr. prevented—well, whatever the dynamics were behind the scenes, the reasons why Saddam Hussein did what he did—they immediately nipped it in the bud. They basically kicked Saddam out, gave him a slap in the face, and warned him. The second time, Saddam was not so lucky.

But you're just looking at this very strange process where it's basically Israel and the United States. And even Washington, I would argue, doesn't want this to continue. So that leaves Israel. And then, if the split happens—highly unlikely—but what if it does, and Trump says, "I don't want to continue

this anymore,” or “This is not winnable, we’re just going to destroy not just the country, which nobody cares about, unfortunately, but what about money? What about the economy?” Although there’s talk that some folks in the highest echelons of U.S. power are making money off this through stocks and by playing with fluctuating oil prices—be that as it may—what is the sustainable way of moving forward? And then what is Israel going to do if it’s abandoned, for example, quote-unquote?

Highly unlikely, again, but there was some conversation about Israel using a weapon against Iran. So this is a big mess. But the wider picture, as we also know, right, that sort of lurks in the background is: is this also directed against China and Russia? Is this also tied to the traditional strategy going back centuries—say, Great Britain and the British Empire—balancing and working with the Ottomans to weaken Russia? Does it follow that old philosophy of weakening, say, Catherine the Great’s Russia, that goes all the way to this day? Is this some sort of grand strategy where Russia and China have to be weakened to the point where Israel, the United States, and then Brussels will follow and control the region?

## **#Pascal**

Sorry, that’s a very good point. I just want to ask what you think about this. There’s an argument saying that, look, the way Trump is now not only attacking Iran but throwing all the Gulf states under the bus—all of them together—like, “You go, you burn, I don’t care.” Straight up, almost closed off: “I don’t care. It’s bad for China, it’s good for us, prices are going up, this is great.” Do you buy into that? Or is it just that everything’s going completely south and we’re trying to read some kind of strategic mastermind into it? You’re muted, Arta. You’re muted.

## **#Arta Moeini**

Yeah, so I think the way to look at this system, systemically, is very different. Israel has a very myopic understanding of strategy. You know, I sometimes say jokingly that my realist point of view regarding Israeli interests harks back to the Israeli strategists of the 1980s, because they had a broad, long-term view. They cared a lot about what was going to happen in 20 years, rather than this current version of Israel, which is very myopic. But from an American perspective, I think we’ve already established that what’s in Israel’s interest—and Israel wants a collapse of Iran, a civil war in Iran, even a “Syrianization” of Iran—none of that is in America’s interest.

And I think that has been made clear by Iran, and by various American sources in the government by now, including Ratcliffe, the head of the CIA, and people who left the administration, such as Joe Kent, who heroically resigned over the debacle. So there’s a lot of disagreement within the administration about what the purpose of this action actually is, because again, we went into it, I believe, willy-nilly. We had a short-term plan; we didn’t actually have a long-term one. But from my perspective, putting it in a more historical, systemic viewpoint, the unipolar moment started with the first Persian Gulf War in 1991. It announced to the world that we were here as the unipolar state and that nobody else could challenge us. And soon after, we had bases all over the Middle East.

We also encircled Iran. We made it very clear that we are the country that's going to protect everybody. That was the culmination of the Carter Doctrine. The idea was that instead of actually focusing on the major historical, natural states in each region—the middle powers or regional powers that have the historical task of balancing each other and stabilizing the region—we were going to start pumping money and establishing forward bases in many of these small, mostly artificial states that were created after World War II. We basically inherited most of them from the British Empire, if you look at the states in the Persian Gulf. And we were going to project American power, project the American empire, into all these different regions.

So we have Ukraine in Eastern Europe, we have Taiwan in East Asia, we have a bunch of these states in the Persian Gulf, and also Israel, which is definitely a smaller state that acted, at least initially, as an outpost. It was considered sort of an American state in the region. That picture—the 1991 picture—has changed since then: the Serbian situation, the bombing of Serbia, the shifts in Russia's posture, then obviously 9/11, the 2003 war in Iraq, the 2008 financial crisis. The writing has been on the wall for a while about the end of the unipolar moment. And I've written this, I've argued this—I think I've argued this to you before—that the Ukraine war was one of the first siren calls of the end of the unipolar moment.

And that process pushed us into a great transition, and I now believe that this war—this second Iran war, if you start from the June 12th, the 12-day war in June, or if you see it as the third Persian Gulf War—this war in Iran, the U.S.-Israeli war in Iran, is the rupture, the culmination of the end. We are now in different territory. And so we're seeing strategic adjustments that reflect that. One of them is—well, I think we can look strategically at the winners and losers. Israel sees any kind of weakening or instability in the region as a win, so that's a different kind of question. It's not very strategic, but it's how they see it at this point. But from the American perspective, Russia has been strengthened. We've allowed them to sell their oil at a much higher price. The whole idea of the sanctions is gone. Our outposts in the Persian Gulf have been decimated—and even more so than us.

And by the way, the Strait of Hormuz is now completely under Iran's control. This has never happened in modern Iranian history, because there was always the British Empire, and then the American Empire sort of inherited that role. So Iran never had this position—it didn't want confrontation and was very reluctant to go to war. This was never actually a possibility before. But now, because of the fall of the unipolar moment and because of Iran's resistance and resilience, that new situation in the Persian Gulf has become a reality. The biggest losers are the GCC Persian Gulf countries, and they're divided.

So Qatar and Kuwait look around and say, you know, we spent trillions with the United States—hosting them, investing in the U.S. economy, pumping petrodollars into it to keep it afloat, to invest in AI and data centers. That's basically the global economy's Ponzi scheme that everyone needs to

know about. This is the neoliberal idea: we take this energy money and pour it back into the U.S. economy, and the U.S. economy, in turn, sells military goods, missiles, weapons, and aircraft to these countries. It was an illusion of safety and security—but it was an illusion, a mirage.

It's very clear that geography reigns—that Iran has strategic depth, geographical advantages, the high ground—and it can destroy these countries if it so chooses. And these countries are very vulnerable. No matter how much money you spend, you're still an oasis in the desert. So what changed is the Qatari and Kuwaiti position of, like, well, this is not security; we're actually worse off today. Moving away from the American security guarantee is what some of these GCC countries will now demand. Oman was always skeptical that this was the right way, because Oman is an ancient kingdom—it wasn't one of these created states.

It had experience dealing with the Romans, the Ottomans, and the Persians. And so that's what you get. Same with Georgia—we've had this conversation in Tbilisi as well. Their neutrality was something deeply ingrained as part of their historical identity. Then you have Saudi Arabia with the Omani model, but you also have the UAE. I think the UAE is the one country completely wedded to this Israeli picture of the region—as a small state that wants to see the bigger states in the region, including Saudi Arabia, by the way, if you recall the recent fights between the Saudis and the Emiratis—be internally problematized.

And so this new order is one in which Iran will be a regional power, and Turkey, Egypt, and Pakistan will be regional powers too. America will have to push back and pull back—exit the Persian Gulf increasingly—to focus, as the NSS says, on the Western Hemisphere. And it's very clear that China and Russia as well see that they need to control their own regions, specifically around them—their near abroad. So it's a new world. It's a multipolar world in the sense that it's actually a more regional world, dominated by middle and great powers and civilizational states.

## **#Pascal**

Yes. And, you know, Lasha, I mean, we talked about this already yesterday, but there's this pressure on states to learn a very interesting lesson—which is that being a forward deployment base for the United States might make you less secure, not more. Even in Japan, you know, Prime Minister Takahichi went to Washington the other day, right? And she came back very proud, saying, "Look, I explained to the President of the United States that we have Article 9 in our Constitution, which forbids us from deploying troops outside Japan," while she herself is the one who wants to change that. But I think the penny finally dropped that this article can actually be used strategically, to avoid being too entangled. And Lasha, in a way, isn't this the learning outcome of Georgia? Back in 2008—what happened, and how Georgia was at the brink, I mean, Tbilisi was at the brink of being invaded. And that's not security, right? Can you speak to that?

## **#Lasha Kasradze**

Yes, absolutely. Yeah, I was going to say we talked about this earlier, partly about some of the points Arta made. Yeah, look... when we talked about it, I remember saying that I attribute Georgia's choice of not getting involved in this whole liberal internationalist ideology and propaganda anymore to the fact that the international system has changed—to a large extent. Yeah. But just quickly, I also wanted to talk about what Arta said earlier about when this started. I would actually go back to 2008, during Russia's invasion of Georgia, the Five-Day War. And then we remember 2014 followed—the Maidan Revolution—both very tragic, horrible acts.

And then in February 2022, we had the invasion—the so-called special military operation. Right. But I think it had been building up, and statistically, if my memory serves me right, Georgia was sort of the first one that got sacrificed. It was at the tail end of the Bush–Wolfowitz–Rumsfeld–Cheney madness that was coming to an end. You know, that was kind of the apex of what Russia did—it was revenge, however you want to look at it, directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly, for Russia's inability to do anything in the Balkans with Serbia. And then there's just the basic, traditional fear of a former superpower—now a regional major power, a nuclear state—saying, "Look, these guys keep moving toward our borders, keep lying to us."

Putin, we all know, went out of his way from 1999 onward, after he became president, basically begging the Bush White House to accept Russia—admitting that Russia had lost the Cold War and wanted to become part of the West. The great book by Mary Elise Sarotte, *\*Not One Inch\**, covers this. So we know the history of lies and manipulation, and how certain academics on the West Coast—at Stanford, maybe to a lesser degree at Harvard—continue to defend this, not to mention some of the traditional think tanks in D.C. that keep denying, defending, and deflecting the truth, basically.

You know, the idea that Putin just woke up one day and said, "Let me march in—I have a poor country, I'm struggling to lift it off its knees, considering what it went through in the early '90s—and yet I'm going to wake up one day and spend more resources I don't have to invade a huge country next to me, Ukraine." That's not what Putin wanted. But again, this was a survival game, and red lines had to be drawn. Georgia was number one. And then what happened? We saw what happened.

Georgia, geopolitically, went from bad to worse, and we knew who the John McCains of the world—and all of them—were supporting in Georgia: Saakashvili's regime. Just complete madness, what was happening. And then we get Maidan. There, too, Putin wins, basically. And now we have Ukraine. So this is a pattern. I mean, of course, now we're talking about the Middle East, but this wouldn't be a stretch if we sort of piled it all up into one strategic vision of weakening Russia, if not entirely destroying it. But then let's remember, the whole thesis breaks down when we ask, are they going to destroy Russia? They won't, because when Russia was down and out, it could still manage to incorporate—brutally—the Northern Caucasus, Chechnya, and then South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

So even during the '90s—mid to late '90s—Russia was able to, you know, cement its position in the region, saying, "This is my traditional sphere of influence, period. No matter how poor I am, I'm

going to defend this region.” And I believe this. Of course, Russia has had its hand in separatist movements and in weakening Georgia and the Nagorno-Karabakh–Azerbaijan–Armenia conflict. But at the same time, there was plenty of room to talk about geopolitics and national security interests. There was enough room—or could have been—to avoid this extreme idealism of the early ‘90s and the false promises. And now, just to finish the point, these are the same promises that Pashinyan is being enticed by. So, you know, Putin—I think just a few days ago, Putin and Pashinyan, don’t quote me on this, but I saw it on social media—had a conversation.

I mean, we can only imagine. It’s quite plausible to think that Putin might have said, “You can pretend you want to do whatever you want with France, with the collective West, how they’re trying to put you in this Turkic world equation with Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Israel. Sure, play that game—but you know the red lines.” I wouldn’t be surprised. I can almost hear Putin telling his much junior partner exactly that. So what is Pashinyan thinking? I don’t know. But in terms of Trump’s trip and the geoeconomic projects going from Azerbaijan to Nakhchivan and then to Turkey—if Iran falls, it won’t be good for Armenia. It won’t be good for Russia.

## **#Pascal**

Not because Russia will do something, but because of the control.

## **#Lasha Kasradze**

They will lose the ability to control the region or have any say in it, completely. If Iran, one way or another, were dismembered or just completely—yeah. So we know this equation, right? Roughly, we know where everything stands.

## **#Pascal**

Yeah, we do. So, Arthur, do you want to react to this—and also to the connection between the two wars that you already talked about, right? The change, or the rupture, as you called it.

## **#Arta Moeini**

Yeah, so, I mean, I agree with many of the things Lasha said. My suggestion was that this actually had a snowballing effect, right? It started in the 1990s, and that’s when it began to show that things were going to go wrong—that it would be the kind of overextension and hubris all empires fall victim to. With Belgrade, with Serbia, with the bombing of Yugoslavia and getting NATO involved—and in the deal they made with Russia—ultimately, it did save NATO, if you look at it that way. But it really changed Putin’s perception. Something clicked for him. Because I always say that Putin, like many of these people, these states and their leaders, is fundamentally a liberal. Putin wanted to get along with the West, wanted to join.

They keep talking about international law. They keep talking because the impression in America is that—for example, I have this other article that maybe you can link—I've also heard about the liberalism of the "axis of evil." All of these states, especially China, Russia, and Iran, who are so demonized—my argument is actually that they believe in the fantasy, and from my perspective it was always a fantasy, of international law and fair acceptance of the law and equality under the law, more than the Americans did themselves, right? And so when they were talking about it, to the last—I think to the last week that Khomeini was alive—he was saying the American crimes have to be written down, and we need to go to the ICC and to the International Tribunal and argue there.

So this belief in the international legal framework as a fair entity really spans all of these adversarial, supposedly anti-Western states. But it's interesting, because when systemic collapse happens, it's the United States itself, with Israel, that's dismantling the very international regime it created. And the illusion of fairness—which was always an illusion—just went away. Now America very openly says, you know what, we're just going to... why don't we just take the Hark Island, because it has oil? It's like all the things leftists used to say for a long time—that it's all about material gain and resources—have become this sort of cartoonish caricature of themselves.

And it's, you know, so I do believe that we are moving toward that, but it's partly because America—under liberal internationalism, and then under a kind of globalism that doesn't care so much about democracy or international rules—just wants to project force, dominate, and be an intimidating, bullying power, right? Sort of gunboat diplomacy around the world. It kind of tries to adopt that as the American model. But I think that Boltonian view of American foreign policy—that we are unilateral actors, we can do what we want, we are the mightiest military, and therefore we can get away with it—doesn't work, because you're not going to be able to project as much power only with an aerial campaign, as we're seeing. And all the other regional and middle powers know this too.

## **#Pascal**

Yeah, and you know, this is so interesting. I mean, Lasha, you were the one who once made the point to me that the main problem of Georgia is that the United States would not take yes for an answer. However much Georgia tries to please the United States, it's never enough. You always need to go one step further. And then, in the end, when you implement these liberal reforms at home, you actually have to put somebody like Saakashvili in prison, right? You just need to root out the corruption, which actually fuels the process of adhering to these US-made rules. Just to finish off the discussion—your final thoughts, Lasha, two minutes, and then Arta.

## **#Lasha Kasradze**

Sure. To your point, that same problem—from my readings and basic research on Iran—I see those parallels. Let's just take, well, it goes back to the 1700s, but let's just take the 20th century. There was this hope, hope, hope that America would accept Iran, this exotic country that made wonderful Persian carpets—"carpet diplomacy," as it was called in the early '20s, '30s, and '40s. You know, the

United States was finally coming around to the idea of exploring this mysterious kingdom. The idea was that the Turks were against Iran, and Washington hated that. Iran was seen as an anti-imperialist, anti-British imperial power that was itself still forming. And so there was this sort of soft-power diplomacy taking place between the two countries that evoked feelings of sympathy for Persians.

And then they finally started to come around and understand the region and the country. And, you know, well, history doesn't repeat itself, right? In philosophy and political science, as we know, it rhymes. And we see that today with Georgia—or in Iran's case, for example—where the United States would send all these financiers to deal with the Qajar dynasty's incompetence and corruption, to "clean up the house," so to speak. Some of those professionals from the State Department—Baskerville, I think, Howard Baskerville—became these idealist protectors of Iranian culture, fighting for freedom-loving people, basically what Bush used to call "the freedom-loving."

And then, when the 1906 Constitutional Revolution happened, that fella was fighting on the side of the democratic forces within Iran—meaning against the Shah and against the autocracy. And he was being supported and called from Washington as, you know, sort of "our man in Tehran." Not to mention that he was turning to—well, not to mention—I'll just finish this in a second—very similar, you know, I would say, sort of disposition of the neocons toward Georgia. Freedom-loving folk. We're going to have to let these people, bequeath these people their freedom, you know, that they deserve. But at what cost? What are we talking about here? Just to be abandoned afterwards. So that's my rant. That was my final two minutes.

## **#Pascal**

Thank you for Asha's final rant. Arta, your final rant.

## **#Arta Moeini**

Um, where should I take this? I mean, look, I think ultimately I just want to make it clear where we are in this war. Maybe to go back full circle—the war did not, and has not, worked out the way anybody expected it to. This was believed to have been a costly intervention, or, as Trump called it, an excursion—or incursion, whichever one he mistakenly said. But it was never actually going to produce regime change. It was always going to be very costly.

And now he finds himself in a very challenging situation, where America is losing strategic leverage by the hour and by the day. It's playing Iran's game, and it has two choices, practically. It can either leave and let the chips fall where they may, and basically cut its losses—because he's Trump, he can say, "You know, I killed—how many?—I killed their supreme leader, the government is gone, I did a regime change because I replaced how many with his son. That's the regime change. And their navy is gone," and whatever. And also, maybe, if he were actually smart and shrewd, he would say, "I promised America First, and this was 4D chess for us to leave the Middle East. So I used the

Iranians, and now we're jointly— I told the Iranians to manage the Strait of Hormuz and ensure the freedom of navigation for us. No cost to the taxpayer.”

That's what he should do. But I'm afraid he's not going to do that. I'm afraid the Lindsey Grahams of the world, the Mark Levins of the world, and very shady characters like Miriam Ellison and others are going to whisper—and keep whispering—and threaten the administration, threaten him, frankly. Some of the reports coming out of Washington are disturbing. Basically, they're saying, “Yeah, you didn't get this because you haven't done enough. We just need to double down on it, and things are going to change.” I think Trump has two vectors for military action that he likes very much. He does believe, in my view, that a full-on, you know, Vietnam situation—with hundreds of thousands of troops and an invasion of Tehran—is not going to work. But he does believe that American military power, the technology, the conventional force, should work.

Look at this beautiful aircraft carrier. By the way, the aircraft carrier Ford is basically dysfunctional and now has to be out of service, I think for 12 months—Bloomberg was reporting that. But anyway, it's either an early or aerial campaign with massive bombs and massive ordnance, or special forces, which he also loves a lot. So he's only left with special forces, and my bet is that he's also going to try that—he's going to try to take an island. Maybe that's a false flag to try to find where the 450 kilograms of 60% enriched uranium are. Either way, I think this is going to be a disaster. Many Americans will die.

They'll be sitting targets. It will tank his presidency, and ultimately we'll be back to where we are today—where Iran has gained strategically and become a regional power. Then it will have to deal with what it wants to do internally: whether it can liberalize, what it wants to do with its people, because it's a very divided society. But in terms of the strategic question, I think the American push for this war—which the Iranians, very reluctantly, kind of like Putin, came to—has actually changed the situation and the circumstances to their advantage. And I don't see how America wins anything out of this.

It seems that the White House—the Trump administration—is tone-deaf. It keeps insisting on the same red lines: no enrichment, no missile capability. None of that is going to work. Iran is now the one saying, “We're not going to let this war end with a ceasefire unless we have a total, comprehensive peace—where we know you're not going to come back for us in two or three months to mow the lawn again.” This is no longer Israel's game. Who can play this game? Iran invented chess—they've known how to play it from the very beginning. That's how they see the world. And I think we're in for more intensity and more escalation moving forward.

## **#Pascal**

Your word in Trump's ear—let's hope he makes the 4D chess move. I doubt it too, but hope dies last. Lasha Kasparadze, Artem Moeni, thank you very much for your time today.

## **#Arta Moeini**

Thank you, Pascal. Thank you, Lasha. Thank you, Pascal. Thank you, Artem.