

John Mearsheimer: "Iran Holds All the Cards" - The Strategic Defeat of the U.S.

Prof. John Mearsheimer explains why Iran holds all the cards and could devastate the US and the global economy by going up the escalation ladder. A U.S. defeat in Iran, which appears inevitably, will also result in a much wider strategic defeat of the US position in the international system. John J. Mearsheimer is the R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, where he has taught since 1982. 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 are joined again by Professor John Mearsheimer. Thank you very much for coming on the program. I was hoping today we could maybe first take a step back and look at the wider strategy of the United States under Trump, because I was quite optimistic about his reelection. That is, he seemed capable of breaking from narratives and ideologies that the political West had followed blindly over the past decades. And that seemed to be a requirement to navigate—or at least adjust to—the new realities of the world, namely that the unipolar distribution of power was gone. He recognized the U.S. couldn't be everywhere, so he more or less suggested, you know, we have to focus on the Western Hemisphere and East Asia, which means we have to pivot out of the Middle East and Europe.

And that meant ending the war with Russia. This trapped U.S. resources in Europe and pushed the Russians toward China, and also into the Middle East. He was quite consistent about ending the forever wars, so... But overall, what I'm trying to say is, although he's a man who's not very civilized in his demeanor, what he said was a lot more rational than what I heard from other politicians. So that's why I wanted to hear from you. What do you make of his direction now? What's going to happen to the pivot to Asia and this wider strategy, which we saw outlined in the National Security Strategy of December 2017?

#John Mearsheimer

I think, Glenn, the best evidence of what you're talking about—how people like us thought about Trump initially in terms of foreign policy, and what people think now—is reflected in the lineup of guests on *Judging Freedom*, Judge Napolitano's show. Of course, both you and I are regulars on

the judge's show. If you go back to the first six or seven months after President Trump was elected, virtually everyone who appeared on that show was quite optimistic that Trump would represent a positive shift in American foreign policy—that there would be no more forever wars, he wouldn't start any new wars, period, and there would be much less emphasis on a militarized foreign policy.

And I think, most importantly at the time, we all thought there was a reasonable chance he would shut down the Ukraine-Russia war. So there was a lot of optimism about him. And of course, many of the people on the show—the Americans—didn't vote for Trump. Some did. But everybody, I think, was generally pretty enthusiastic about the direction he was going to take the United States. I think now, if you watch *Judging Freedom*, almost everybody on that show is—and I'm choosing my words carefully here—very critical of President Trump. He's seen as having blown it, having missed a terrific opportunity to change the direction American foreign policy was going in.

And if anything, he's back on the old path. I think the key issue today is the Iran war. And all I can say is, it's truly remarkable that he allowed himself to fall into this trap. This is much worse than Afghanistan, much worse than Iraq. I mean, if you think about the Iraq war in 2003, at least in the initial stages, George W. Bush could land on the aircraft carrier and effectively declare "mission accomplished," which is another way of saying, "we won." Trump can't do that. It's been clear almost from the beginning that this is a lost cause. But more importantly, the potential for really serious damage here is enormous.

And here we're talking mainly about the international economy, but not only that. So he's entered a war he can't win and that could have—one could argue is likely to have—catastrophic consequences for the world, not just for him and his presidency. It's really quite remarkable when you think about where he's ended up in such a short period of time. You know, he was put in office on January 20th, 2025, and the war against Iran started on February 28th, 2026. That's effectively 13 months after he took office. So he starts off looking like he has a winning strategy, but 13 months later, he's jumped into a huge quagmire he can't get out of. Truly amazing.

#Glenn

Well, regarding the optimism, I wouldn't say it was rooted in being naive, because if you look at his first term—unlike all his predecessors going back to World War II—he didn't start any new wars. So he seemed to follow through on his rhetoric. That's why this has come as a bit of a surprise, you know, his foreign policy the second time around—why he went down this path. But how do you make sense of the demands he's making now? Because you said he can't really get out of this.

But if you listen to his language, he suggests that the Iranians are now begging for a deal. They're offering him all these ships full of oil, and he'll be so kind as to give them a deal. Meanwhile, the Iranians are saying they're not even talking to the U.S. at the moment. How do you make sense of

that? Because the demands he put to the Iranians were essentially full capitulation—no nuclear enrichment, no ballistic missiles, no partnership with regional allies. Yeah, capitulation, I think, would be a good description.

#John Mearsheimer

Well, I think the words he used that always stick in my head, Glenn Diesen, are “unconditional surrender.” And by the way, if you look at the 15-point plan he’s now putting forward to the Iranians as the basis for working out a deal, it looks like unconditional surrender. When I first saw the 15-point plan, I thought it was a joke. I thought this was disinformation that the Iranians or the Israelis had put out. I couldn’t believe it was a serious plan. But as you know, some days President Trump thinks we’ve won a great victory, that the war is over and we just have to sign the documents of surrender. Other days, you can tell he’s quite desperate.

And he understands that he’s made a huge mistake and that he’s got to find an exit strategy—and he really can’t. So he goes back and forth. His rhetoric just changes all the time. It’s quite remarkable. But the fact is, Glenn, he is, and we are, in profound trouble. Now, what’s going on here? We started this war thinking we would win a quick and decisive victory. When I say “we,” I’m talking about the Trump administration, because people like us, of course, understood that this was a cockamamie strategy from the get-go. But the West—the United States and Israel—started this war thinking they could employ a shock-and-awe strategy built around decapitation.

We’d decapitate the regime, we’d shock and awe the people—the Iranians—and people would rise up in the streets, overthrow the regime, and we would live happily ever after. That was the basic strategy. We had to win a quick and decisive victory for this to work. And it failed. And by the way, anybody who has a basic understanding of international relations should have understood that this would fail from the get-go. It just wasn’t going to work. And it didn’t work. But then we found ourselves in a protracted war. Here we are. I don’t think most people fully realize it, but the Iranians hold almost all the cards in a protracted war. First of all, there’s no real good exit strategy for Trump.

And if he goes up the escalation ladder—which is the other alternative—the Iranians beat him at almost every step of the ladder. I think it’s very hard for most Americans to understand this, especially people who watch Fox News and are loyal supporters of the president. They think that we’re winning. They listen to him say, you know, we’ve already won—why haven’t the Iranians signed the surrender papers? But if you look carefully at what’s going on here, and you have a basic understanding of military history and military strategy, you see very quickly that we are in terrible shape as you go up the escalation ladder. So again, the point I’m making to you is, he has no exit strategy.

He can’t find the exit ramp now. And if he thinks about going up the escalation ladder, he gets stymied on every rung. Now, why do I say that? First of all, Iran can wreck the international economy—it can wreck the international economy. And one could argue that we’re sort of heading in

that direction. I like to say there's an iceberg out there in the water, and we're heading toward that iceberg. We are the Titanic. And I think President Trump basically understands that. I think his advisors understand that, and they're trying to turn the ship so we don't hit the iceberg. But anyway, my point is, my first point is that Iran can wreck the international economy. Furthermore, it can destroy—literally destroy—most of the Gulf states, because those states depend on desalination plants and on oil infrastructure.

And those targets are easy for the Iranians to hit. If the Iranians decided to go after a country like Saudi Arabia and take out all their desalination plants and their oil or energy infrastructure, they'd basically wreck Saudi Arabia as a functioning society. Then there's the whole question of the Israelis. The Israelis are running out of defensive missiles. The Iranians obviously have lots of missiles—they can do enormous damage to Israel. I don't think they can do to Israel what they could do to countries like Saudi Arabia or the UAE, but there's no question they can do enormous damage to Israel. Then there's the whole question of ground forces.

We should talk more about this. We don't have any serious ground forces option. This is a joke, right? There's just no ground forces option there. And in fact, if we go down that road, we're just going to make a bad situation even worse. Then, to take it a step further, what we have to do—what President Trump has to do—to avoid a catastrophe in the international economy is make sure there's a lot of oil out there in the global market. There's got to be a lot of oil. This is why he took economic sanctions off the Russians. Just think about that: we've taken sanctions off the Russians so their oil can get out into the market.

More importantly, for what we're talking about here, we've taken sanctions off the Iranians and we're allowing—just think about this—we're allowing Iranian ships to go through the Strait of Hormuz because we want that Iranian oil out there in the global market. So what's happening is that although we are bombing the Iranians, doing significant damage to their country, and murdering innocent people, at the same time the Iranians are not suffering economically. So what this tells you is that President Trump has to be extremely careful not to go up the escalation ladder, because if he does, the end result is that the Iranians will win and we will lose in a truly serious way. So we're in deep, deep trouble.

#Glenn

Yeah, it's a good point about the escalation ladder, because the Iranians have a lot of cards to play here. Not just shutting down the Strait of Hormuz, but if they use Yemen to shut down the Red Sea, as you mentioned with Saudi Arabia, then they're cut off from all access. If you destroy their desalination plants—easy—no water. Hit their energy fields—no energy. And in places like Qatar, where 85 to 90 percent of the population are foreigners, they would begin to leave, and it would just be a desert left, which is how they found it. So it's probably one of the most vulnerable countries in the world, this state.

So it is... but you would have thought they'd have considered this before going into the war, because the Iranians were quite open about what they could do and what they were likely to do. I know Trump said, you know, "Who would have ever thought they'd strike U.S. bases around the region?" But they kept saying, "This is what we're going to do. We're going to shut down the Strait of Hormuz. We're going to attack your bases." And even now in Iraq... I'm not sure if there are Americans left, but the Europeans are pretty much all out.

So after 23 years, they seem to be able to, at least so far, achieve some of the objectives they set out. But you've often made the point that in Ukraine, a political settlement is unlikely because the different sides are just too far apart—there's nothing to agree on. But in this instance, even if this were only Trump's opening position, demanding full, unconditional surrender, the Iranians also have their own conditions, which makes it very difficult even for Trump to declare victory and go home. So how do you see this playing out then? Is there any solution to this war at all? I mean, can Trump go home?

#John Mearsheimer

Here's the problem, I think, Glenn. It's twofold. First of all, as you noted, the two sides are miles apart in terms of their demands, right? There's no bargaining space here. And of course, you and I have made this same argument regarding the Ukrainians and the West on one side and the Russians on the other. There's just no bargaining space. The demands of each side are so high, so at odds with the other, that you just can't see how you get a deal. That's point number one. The second point I'd make is that if you're playing Iran's hand, you have no interest in cutting a deal now. You have huge leverage right now, right?

For the reasons I described before. And the longer the war goes on, the more leverage you have. The longer it goes on, the more desperate President Trump is going to get. You know, the Titanic is heading toward the iceberg, and you've got to start changing course now. Otherwise, you're going to hit it. That's where we are. All you have to do is look at the yields on 10-year Treasury bonds in the United States, which many people see as being in a danger zone—and in a situation that's only going to get worse, right? This is really potentially disastrous. We have to do something to fix this problem.

This is why President Trump said on Monday that he was not going to attack Iran that evening. Remember, he had promised he was going to attack Monday evening—I think that was March 23rd. On the morning of March 23rd, he called it off. He said, "I'll give them five days," and then he said, "Now I'll give them ten days." What's going on here? It would be suicidal for President Trump to launch an all-out attack on Iranian energy infrastructure. That would be nuts. Again, as I said before, we have a deep-seated interest in making sure there's as much Iranian oil in global markets as possible.

By the way, just parenthetically, you know, there's all this talk about us conquering Kharg Island. And people say, you have to understand that 90% of Iranian oil goes through Kharg Island, and we can conquer it. I don't think we can conquer it, but let's assume we do. What are we going to do then—conquer Kharg Island and cut off the flow of oil into global markets? We're not going to do that. You remember when President Trump said that we bombed Kyrgyzstan? He emphasized very clearly that he only hit military targets. Why did he do that? Because he understands, again, that you have to get that Iranian oil, and you have to get that Russian oil.

You have to get all the oil you can out into global markets, because if you look at what's happening in the Strait—remember, about 20% of the world's oil comes through there—I would argue that today it's been reduced. What comes through the Strait has dropped to about 5% of what it was before February 28th. Just think about that: 20% of the world's oil used to come through the Strait. And we're not even talking about fertilizers here, which is another huge problem—just oil. Twenty percent came through the Strait, and at this point, only about 5% of what was moving through on February 27th is now going through. This is a huge problem.

So this tells you that we cannot go after Iranian oil and wreck their energy infrastructure. That means the Iranians have huge leverage over us. And the longer this goes on—when you think about the consequences for the world's food supply, with all these fertilizers not making it through the Strait—and then you think about the fact that only 5% of the pre-war flow of tankers through the Strait is now taking place, you see that the potential for disaster is huge. The Iranians have a vested interest in stringing this out, because the more they string it out, the more desperate President Trump gets. And the more desperate President Trump gets, the more leverage they have.

What's really going to cause President Trump to cave in a major way is when he comes to understand that if he doesn't shift course, the Titanic is going to hit the iceberg. And the pressure is already there. Again, that's why I believe he didn't attack this past Monday—he gave them five more days, and has now given them ten more days. And what happens at the end of ten days if the Iranians don't cave to his preposterous fifteen-point plan? Is he going to bomb Iran? Is he going to bomb their energy infrastructure? I don't think so. He has no option here. You know, just getting back to your original point from about five minutes ago—how we got into this situation, how we could have allowed ourselves to be put in such a vulnerable position.

The fact is, again, Glenn, they thought they were going to win a quick and decisive victory. I've studied a lot of military history—you see this in so many cases. Countries go to war because they're optimistic about their chances. It makes perfect sense; you don't go to war if you think you're going to lose. President Trump didn't go to war thinking he'd end up in the situation he's in now. He went to war thinking he was going to do another Venezuela operation—float like a butterfly, sting like a bee, bring the Iranians down, be able to proclaim victory, have a parade in New York or something like that. That's what he thought.

But once that doesn't happen and you're in a war of attrition—oh, you're in deep trouble. And you're especially in deep trouble in this case because the Iranians hold so many of the cards. Again, the point I'm making to you is we want a deal now. Trump wants a deal. But he wants a deal on his terms, and he can't get a deal on his terms. In fact, just to repeat myself—because I think it's such an important point—the Iranians have a vested interest in just letting this one go, and at some point down the road, when they have much more leverage than they do now, then trying to work out a deal that's favorable to them.

#Glenn

I think that's an important point. It's important for people to understand that time is on the Iranian side. If you look at the military component, the Iranians can keep pumping out these very cheap drones. They're easy to manufacture, they're cheap, and their industrial capacity can keep going. These \$5,000 drones are sent out, and the U.S. has to use a million-dollar interceptor missile. So they keep sending drones while the U.S. diminishes its own potential. Again, time is on their side. And also, as you said, in the economic sphere, they're actually making more money now that prices are going up. So while the U.S. is heading somewhere very dark and dangerous...

So I can see that if you were advising the Iranians, you'd say they're not in a rush to wrap this one up—especially when these are the deals or the terms being put on the table. But I was wondering, when he started this countdown—first 48 hours, then 5 days, then 10 days—it reminded me a little of what he did with the Russians. He was also saying 50 days, then went down to 12 days. You know, when the countdown was over, Russia was supposed to be hit by the toughest sanctions ever. And when the clock finally ran out, instead he called Putin and they agreed to meet in Alaska. So it just pushed the whole thing aside. But is there something similar that could happen here? Because I guess the difference is that the Russians really wanted a deal.

But for the Iranians, it's unclear what Trump can actually deliver. Because if they hold on to Hormuz, they can essentially put up a toll booth. They can get reparations from the Gulf states for this attack. They can demand that they expel the U.S. bases, many of which have already been blown up. And they can even compel them to ditch the dollar in their energy trade, which links the U.S. financially to the region. So they can get everything they want through military means, which means Trump really has to have something else to offer if he wants to get them to the table. I'm just wondering—what is it? Again, if Trump calls you, how do we avoid the iceberg? How do we get out of here? What can he do at this point in time?

#John Mearsheimer

The truth is, he's going to have to make major concessions to the Iranians. And it will be clear, when he makes those concessions, that the Iranians have won a clear victory. It will be a humiliating defeat for the United States. If he wants to end this—given what you and I have been saying about Iran—what happens is you go up the escalation ladder, and there's no easy exit strategy here. He

really has no choice, in the final analysis, but to cave in to most of Iran's demands and accept a humiliating defeat. And that will be extremely hard to do, in part because of Israel. The Israelis will not want us to make any concessions; they'll want us to continue the war.

But I think this will be a case where we'll be so desperate to avoid a global catastrophe that Trump will ignore the Israelis and do what he has to do. Now, he may not do that, right? He may feel that he just can't make the necessary concessions, that the Iranian demands are just too outrageous. And those Iranian demands would be hard for anyone to swallow—anybody in the White House, whether it's President Trump, President George H. W. Bush, Ronald Reagan, or Franklin D. Roosevelt. The demands the Iranians are making are really quite amazing. So even if you accept only 75% of them, or even 50%, that would be very difficult to do. And this is the enormous problem he faces.

One can imagine him not accepting a deal and just thinking he can stick it out. And the end result is we'll basically go off a cliff—uh, economically. You know, I think a lot of people don't see that as a serious possibility at this point in time. But if you look at newspapers like the Financial Times and The Wall Street Journal carefully—look at the business section, the articles about the economy, fertilizers, food, and so on—you see that we could very easily go off a cliff here. We're talking about a serious situation, and it's not clear what President Trump will do.

As I like to say, Glenn, when you study international history, there are a handful of cases that stand out where policymakers get into desperate situations. And when they do, they sometimes roll the dice—they do things that lead to catastrophe. My favorite example here is the Japanese decision-making process that led to Pearl Harbor. The United States was squeezing Japan economically between the summer of 1940 and Pearl Harbor, which was December 7th, 1941. We really began to apply pressure starting July 25th, 1941. This was shortly after the Wehrmacht invaded the Soviet Union, and we were putting real pressure on Japan after that. The Japanese were desperate because they were heavily dependent on the United States.

They were remarkably dependent on the United States for oil, scrap iron, and scrap steel. We had basically made it impossible for them to import those things from the United States. We had frozen their economic assets, and they were just desperate. They understood full well that attacking the United States at Pearl Harbor was likely to end in catastrophe. It's very important to understand this. The Japanese knew they were attacking Godzilla—it was likely to end in disaster—but they did it anyway because they were desperate. And when the level of desperation reaches a certain point, states, countries, leaders sometimes do remarkably foolish things that end up with catastrophic consequences.

And this, of course, is what happened with the Japanese. So the question you have to ask yourself is: what is President Trump going to do as his level of desperation increases? And by the way, you catch glimpses of how desperate he is on occasion when you watch his body language and listen to what he's saying about the war against Iran. He understands full well that he's in deep trouble. And I'm sure his advisors are telling him that if we don't shut this one down, we could go off a cliff. His

advisors—especially his economic advisors—are not fools. They understand what’s going on here. They’re looking for an exit ramp, and they can’t find one. And they understand full well that the Iranians are playing hardball with them. I’m sure they also understand that the Iranians have powerful cards to play.

And what's happening, I'm sure, behind closed doors is that the level of desperation is increasing every day. They're searching, you know, they're looking for a solution here. But as you and I were saying before—where is the solution? Where's the exit strategy? A number of my friends I talk to about this say what President Trump should do is declare victory and get out. He can't do that. Who's going to believe he achieved a victory? Furthermore, the other side gets a vote in this one, and the other side's not going to quit, right? They're going to keep putting pressure on the United States, and they're going to keep putting pressure on Israel, even if we say we won. They want us completely out of the Middle East. This is truly remarkable.

One of their demands is that they just want us to go home. Is President Trump going to declare victory and go home? I don't think so. He may declare victory, but he's going to stay there militarily—maybe not employ military force against Iran—but we'll be there, and the Iranians will continue to attack us. So declaring victory and getting out, so to speak, where does that leave you? Nowhere. So he's got to figure out a way to shut this one down, and that means reaching some sort of modus vivendi with Iran. How does that happen? You know, again, this goes back to our earlier discussion of that 15-point plan that Trump put forward and the various demands that the Iranians are putting forward. How do you find some bargaining space there? And again, I don't see how you do it. The Iranians have no incentive.

#Glenn

Well, the Iranian demands seem excessive. However, they're also achievable, it appears, because not only can they strike the bases, but, as I mentioned, as long as they control the Strait of Hormuz, they can squeeze the Gulf states to decouple—either by not rebuilding the bases or by not hosting the troops. They can, you know, decouple from the petrodollar. There’s a lot they can do, which they can continue to do even if Trump goes home and declares victory. So it’s a difficult position. But in terms of the pressure, I think this is also a problem with all the pressure that’s been put on Iran, because not only do they have a lot of cards to play if they decide to go up the escalation ladder, but they also can’t really afford to go back to the status quo either. I mean, they’ve been living for decades under these crippling sanctions.

They had two surprise attacks on their country only a few months apart. They don't want another one. And even if they get an agreement saying, “Oh, we promise not to attack you,” those surprise attacks happened during negotiations. There's no trust anymore. So I think they’re in a position where not only do they have a lot of cards to play, but they’re also willing to absorb an immense amount of pain in order to put a final end to this—which, as you said, would be to expel the U.S. bases. And again, it sounds excessive, but they’re already pulling out of Iraq, and this is after 23

years. So it's not inconceivable. Again, as you said, they can shut down the Gulf states as well if they don't fall in line. So it's just hard to see—except, you know, if he's reaching for a nuclear weapon—what else he can possibly do to push this one back.

#John Mearsheimer

But—sorry, you were... Yeah, I just want to make two points. Sure. Just to piggyback on what you said, one thing we haven't talked about, which is enormously important, is the Houthis and the Saudis—I mean, the Houthis and the Iranians together—can shut down the Red Sea. About 20% of the world's oil and gas comes through the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, but another 12% comes through the Red Sea. And if the Houthis join in with the Iranians, which is a serious possibility, and they shut down the Red Sea as well, that will further exacerbate the situation.

So we don't want to lose sight of that. But also, Glenn, just building on what you said a minute ago—and of course, I completely agree—it's important to emphasize that Iran is dealing with an existential threat here. The Israelis especially, but also the Americans, want to wreck their state. They talk about regime change, but the Israelis are interested in more than that. They want to destroy Iran. They want to do to Iran what happened to Syria. They want to break it into pieces, to make Iran a number of states or one single state that's remarkably weak. This is an existential threat.

And when you face an existential threat—and as you pointed out, they've faced this existential threat for a long time—they know they can't trust the Americans or the Israelis. Given that dimension of the equation, they have a deep-seated interest in continuing this war and in pushing the Americans and the Israelis to make huge concessions to them. So if you look at their incentives and combine that with their growing capabilities up the escalation ladder, which we've talked about and which you were just mentioning, you just have to ask yourself: how do you end this one quickly? It doesn't make sense from an Iranian point of view. And given that they get a vote, you can't get a deal.

#Glenn

Well, this is why it's so dangerous when a strategic situation boils down to all or nothing. That's when countries are willing to do a lot of crazy things. But if there were a possibility—for example, if the U.S. realized it can't dislodge Iran from the Hormuz area, if it recognized the difficult position—then maybe there could be a situation where, you know, Trump could offer the Iranians something like, "You can co-manage the Strait of Hormuz with the Gulf states in return, and we'll remove the sanctions."

You know, Trump can say, "I'm bringing our troops home from the Middle East according to our grand strategy. The Iranians now have peace with the Gulf states. He solved the Shia-Sunni problem." I mean, it could come as a victory, but it seems hard to achieve now that he keeps

doubling down on this very dangerous rhetoric. I even watched Sean Hannity on Fox News arguing that the Iranians should also pay for the war—for all the bombs we had to drop on them. I think his rhetoric is becoming a key problem, though, by overselling this victory he proclaimed. Yeah.

#John Mearsheimer

If I can just say something very quickly here, Glenn, I think what happens in situations like this is that when the war goes south, the people who got you into the war don't want to retreat. They don't want to say, "We were wrong, let's pull back." That's almost never their response. Instead, the response is, "Let's double down." So the Wall Street Journal, Sean Hannity, Lindsey Graham, General Jack Keane—that whole crowd that helped produce this disaster—fully understand what's happened. And they don't want to retreat now and concede defeat. What they want to do is double down. They're putting pressure on President Trump to up the ante, and they're making arguments that we can win, that we have cards to play, that we can go up the escalation ladder.

So the problem that Trump faces is that he and his advisors surely understand there's a great deal of truth in what people like you, Glenn Diesen, and me, John Mearsheimer, think. They understand that. But at the same time, they have all these people on the other side—these close supporters, their compadres who helped get them into this mess—telling them we can get out of it. And they're, of course, spinning all sorts of stories about how to do it. This means the war will probably go on for a couple more weeks before... well, we're on the verge of falling off a cliff. And at that point, it may just be too late. So this is why we shouldn't be too optimistic about President Trump realizing he's in a desperate situation. In that case, what he ought to do is back off and try to work out a deal.

#Glenn

Well, an important component of this war, of course, is Israel. They're the ones who launched the first strike here. And you often make the point that if U.S. and Israeli interests and security were completely aligned, there wouldn't be a need for the lobby. But again, there is a lobby, which suggests that these differences have to be ironed out. How do you see this being impacted when the U.S. has to get out of this war? Because, you know, the Israelis have been lobbying for this war for, what, 30-plus years? For an attack on Iran—they finally got it. If the U.S. leaves now, Iran's probably going to end up in a much more favorable position. So do you see a break—or at least a further break—in U.S.-Israeli relations as a consequence of this war? I know it's not over yet, and there are still some unknown directions this war could take. But what are the risks, do you think, of the U.S. and Israel parting ways to some extent?

#John Mearsheimer

Well, as you know, I think that in almost all cases—certainly in the past—when Israel's interests and America's interests pointed in opposite directions, the United States always did what was in Israel's interest, largely because of the power of the lobby. And I've argued—or I should say Steve Walt and

I have argued—for a long time that this is not in America's national interest, obviously, but it's also not in Israel's interest either. But this could be a very different case, because if we're in a situation where it looks like the global economy is going to crash, I think that would lead President Trump to just tell the Israelis, and to tell the lobby, that he doesn't care what they think.

He's going to do everything he can to avoid going off the cliff, that sort of thing. So this could be a different case. This could be a case that, in a sense, contradicts the basic argument that Steve Walt and I lay out in our work on the lobby. There's another dimension to this that bears mentioning. It's a very sensitive subject, but almost everybody I know believes that Israel and the lobby led us into this war. And if it's a catastrophe, there's a great danger that people will say the Jews are responsible for causing this war—which is simply not true, because huge numbers of Jews oppose it. The Israel lobby is made up of Christian Zionists as well as Jews, and by no means do all Jews belong to the lobby. So it's very important to understand that.

But nevertheless, there's a real danger here that if this war goes south in a serious way—we go off a cliff, hit the iceberg, whatever phrase you want to use—and people see it as a war that Israel and the lobby are principally responsible for, that would cause a wave of anti-Semitism, not just in the United States but outside the United States as well. And I actually think that a lot of people inside the lobby, a lot of Israelis, and certainly a lot of American Jews understand this danger. So I think if it looks like we're going off a cliff, the lobby would not put much pressure on Trump to cut a deal with the Iranians, because of the potential threat of a massive increase in anti-Semitism as a result of a lost war—a catastrophic war that's blamed on Israel and the lobby.

#Glenn

I think you're probably correct on this. But it also has to be said that a lot of the leading critics of Israel in the U.S. are American Jews. It's not as if all the hardcore Zionists are Jews—many are actually Christians. So to just equate everything Israel does with Judaism would be, you know, the wrong direction to take. But of course, racists are rarely purely rational in their rhetoric. So yes, I see that danger as well. How do you see the Europeans in this? Because they've played a very strange role. You know, they initially—well, they weren't invited—and then they suggested they would send weapons.

Trump didn't want their weapons because he'd already won. Now he wants them to open up the Strait of Hormuz. They don't want to because, you know, it's too late. I think he used the iceberg and Titanic metaphor. I think it was a French general who said that the Titanic has already hit the iceberg, and now Trump invites us to join. You know, like he says, he should have invited us before, at least. That's more or less the argument. How do you explain the European position on this? And, to widen it further, do you think this would affect NATO? Because Trump has already, on more than one occasion, argued that NATO is now a paper tiger.

Mark my words, because you'll remember this in a few months' time. We will remember that you betrayed us—you didn't come to help us. We do everything for NATO. Marco Rubio said, "Ukraine is not America's war, it's Europe's war, and we helped you, and you don't help us." So it looks like they're building up a case against the Europeans and against NATO. I was just wondering, how do you see this dimension of the war? Because it is important—it would have further ripple effects, that's my point.

#John Mearsheimer

There are a lot of points to be made here. One thing that gets lost in the discourse today, because the focus is laser-like on Iran, is the Ukraine war. And if the Ukraine war were to go south this summer—if the Ukrainian military were to start losing in a serious way on the battlefield—this would have disastrous consequences for Trump, for NATO, and for transatlantic relations. So we want to keep in the back of our minds that there's this other, I would say, impending disaster out there that could make a bad situation worse. But just focusing on the Iran situation—you know, here we are again with the Americans doing something, not consulting the Europeans, getting into trouble, and then asking the Europeans for help. And the Europeans, of course, understand full well that this is a lost cause, and they don't want to get involved.

I mean, the idea is that European countries should send their navies to join the American Navy as they try to push through the Strait of Hormuz with naval power alone. This is crazy. The American Navy—the most powerful navy in the world—won't even go near the Strait of Hormuz for fear that Iranian cruise missiles will sink those American vessels. The idea that the French Navy or the British Navy is going to be this huge force multiplier that allows our navy plus their navies to forge through the strait is kind of crazy. Who believes that? You know, we're talking about 1915 all over again, when the British Navy tried to push its way through the Dardanelles, ran into mines, and had to turn around. I mean, it's just not going to happen.

And, you know, there's all this talk about maybe using ground forces. This is not a serious argument. Ground forces—and European ground forces, few in number. Do you really think the European armies are ready to invade Iran or conquer, you know, Karg Island or any other island? I mean, this is just not in the cards. And of course, what's happening here is Trump is desperate. And now he's blaming the Europeans, right? He understands that he's going to lose, and he's got to blame somebody else. It can't be him. After all, he's a genius, right? He's one of the great strategists of all time. So this disaster can't be his fault. So whose fault is it? Well, it has to be the Europeans' fault. All we needed was for them to come into the fight and we would have won, right? But they didn't come into the fight because they're useless.

They're just free riders, and that's why we lost. It wasn't my fault. So that's what's going on here. And the Europeans play right into his hands because they hardly ever stand up to him. As the Iranians, the North Koreans, the Chinese, and the Russians have demonstrated, there's only one way

to deal with President Trump—and that is to stand up to him. If you behave like Mark Rutte, he's going to walk all over you. He's a classic bully. Everybody should have figured that out by now. If you show weakness, as the Europeans consistently do—with the exception of the Spanish prime minister—if you show weakness, if you behave like Mark Rutte, President Trump is just going to slap you around and keep slapping you around, because, again, he's a bully.

#Glenn

So I guess, yeah, the U.S. will blame the Europeans for Iran, and the Europeans, seemingly, are planning to blame the U.S. for Ukraine. So, you know, there will be a big blame game going around. But it's an interesting dynamic because, as you suggest, if the Iran war—which can't be contained—starts spreading everywhere, that alone would be one thing. But there are so many other variables at play that won't stay constant. At any point, we could have an unraveling global economy. The Ukraine war could spiral into collapse. So it's very difficult, I guess, to bet on wider strategic stability as things in Iran go terribly wrong.

But at this point, do you see any final—if Trump decides to go up the escalation ladder—is there any possible final solution he can turn to? You were dismissive of a ground operation, sending in boots on the ground, because this appears to be—no matter how foolish it is, and leaders often double down on foolishness—but the troops are on their way, thousands of U.S. soldiers. It's unclear how they're going to use them. I thought the way that would make the most sense, I guess, would be to invade Yemen or something, to make sure the Red Sea wouldn't be closed off. But anything else—and that as well, by the way—sounds like a disaster. I'm not sure. What do you see as the possibility of using these troops for? I would just point out to you that when we did Desert Storm back in 1991, uh...

#John Mearsheimer

Remember, we invaded—or rather, we attacked with ground forces—on February 24th, 1991. The attacking forces totaled about 700,000 troops, and of those, 540,000 were American. A lot of those forces were mechanized infantry divisions and armored divisions.

#John Mearsheimer

Then in 2003, when we invaded Iraq, the total force was about 300,000. I'd estimate around 190,000 were U.S. troops and probably about 45,000 or so were British troops. And again, many of those units that went into Iraq in 2003, like in 1991, were...

#John Mearsheimer

They were mechanized infantry and armored divisions. And as you know, Iraq is a much smaller country than Iran geographically, and it has a much smaller population. What are we talking about here? We're talking about sending a couple of thousand troops.

#John Mearsheimer

Maybe 10,000 at the most. I don't think the number's 10,000. I think, you know, all told at this point, we're more or less committed to sending probably about 5,000 or 6,000. When you look at what we're actually doing—and just don't listen to the rhetoric—but even if it's 10,000, they're light infantry. Ten thousand? Just think about those numbers I gave you for Desert Storm in '91 and for the Second Gulf War in 2003. What are you going to do with light infantry? Then the question is, where are you going to put them? You know, we have about 13 bases in the Middle East. Almost all those bases have been evacuated because the Iranians have hit those bases.

They've done great damage to American military bases in the region. This shows that our bases are vulnerable. So where are we going to put these troops so they don't get hit like those bases did? What bases are we going to use? And what kind of equipment are they going to have to go into places like Kharg Island or the Iranian mainland, or wherever else? And what's going to happen when they get there? Are the Iranians just going to say, "This is a fait accompli, there's nothing we can do about it"? Or do you think the Iranians are going to fight back? I mean, we know the Iranians are going to fight back. So what are you going to do with a handful of troops?

And they talk about taking these small islands in the Strait of Hormuz. There are three of them—one is bigger than the other two. I don't think that's going to work out very well. The Iranians will go to great lengths to defend those islands. And if we take them, they'll pummel the troops stationed there. Furthermore, they've told the UAE that if that happens, and they cooperate with the Americans—and the UAE seems bent on cooperating with the Americans—they're going to basically wreck the UAE. So what are we going to gain by taking those small islands? Well, people might say we can open the Strait of Hormuz. I don't think that's true at all.

First of all, if you're on the verge—if you, the Americans, are on the verge of opening the strait—they'll mine the strait. And mines are a deadly effective way of preventing ships from coming through. But let's assume I'm wrong and the ships make it into the Persian Gulf. It'll be like a shooting gallery, right? Those ships are in a narrow body of water, and the Iranians will be on one side of the Gulf facing this target-rich environment. They have huge numbers of cruise missiles, all these fast boats, and additional mines they can lay in the Persian Gulf. They can wreak havoc. But let's assume I'm wrong—then we go to Kharg Island, right?

Uh, we have an amphibious assault on Kharg Island. To put it in Lindsey Graham's terms, we have Iwo Jima 2. What are we going to do then? As I said before, are we going to cut off the flow of oil at Kharg Island? No, we're not. Not if we're smart, because we're letting all this Iranian oil out on the

market now because we need it. So invading Kharg Island and cutting off 90% of the flow of Iranian oil into global markets makes no sense at all. And furthermore, once you take Kharg Island—let's say you take it—do you think the Iranians are going to sit there and just leave you alone? They're not going to do that. They're going to bomb the island, they're going to bomb your troops with ballistic missiles and drones, and make life miserable for you.

And furthermore, what's the story of how taking Kharg Island, or taking those three islands in the Strait, actually produces a lasting settlement here? Again, the Iranians—you don't want to forget—are facing an existential threat. And when you're facing an existential threat, you have to fight to the death. You have to fight to the death. That's the way this works. You're dealing with an existential threat, and they have lots of cards to play. Again, we were prepared to win a quick and decisive victory. We had this cockamamie strategy that didn't work out. We ended up in a war of attrition, and once you're in a war of attrition, they hold, I would argue, almost all the cards.

And if you don't think they hold almost all the cards—they hold many cards—and they have the ability to cause enormous trouble, as we've talked about on the show here. So, you know, the ground forces option—I don't know what people are talking about. And by the way, Glenn, just to, you know, beat a dead horse here, you remember how long we prepared the troops for Desert Storm? When did Saddam invade Kuwait? I think it was August 2nd, 1990. August 2nd, 1990. And when did we launch those ground troops against the Iraqi army? It was February 24th, 1991. So you went from early August of 1990 to late February of 1991. That was the time it took to build up the force, train the force, and then launch the offensive.

That's a long time. And as I said before, it was a huge army—540,000 troops. The same thing was true with the 2003 offensive; we didn't do that overnight. President Trump made no preparations for a ground war before February 28th. This is something he and his advisors have recently invented as a way to deal with the problem. They just sort of pulled it out of their back pocket—"Oh, well, do ground forces. Let's see what we can do to invade Iranian-held territory." So that's what they're talking about doing now. There was no planning for this. There's no strategy there. We're basically screwed.

#Glenn

And as you said, Iran is about four times as large as Iraq. It's mountainous, facing down on the other Gulf states, which are essentially flat deserts. They have the whole coastline. I mean, it's a fortress, and it's populated by more than 90 million people. They've been preparing for this ever since Bush put them in the "axis of evil." So you're right—putting together a few thousand troops, shipping them down there, and making up the plan as you sail does sound very cartoonish. It's not the way one fights a war. Yeah. It's not reassuring, though, when you have this kind of desperation and this much at stake. It seems like someone's going to do something very rash when things start

to go very wrong. I don't know. I'm just very afraid that someone might reach for nuclear weapons as a quick fix. But that's another chapter we can look at another time. Do you have any final thoughts before we wrap up? Just one final thought.

#John Mearsheimer

You know, people like us are frequently critical of the deep state—and people on both sides of the political spectrum are critical of the deep state. But the reason you have a powerful state, the reason you have powerful institutions like the CIA and the Pentagon, and analogous institutions in Russia, China, and so on, is because you need a lot of expertise. You need a lot of people who can help you solve problems. In other words, if you decide that you're going to invade Iraq in 2003, you just can't do it by yourself if you're the president with a handful of advisors. You have to have lots of experts, lots of help thinking about how to deal with the problem and how to execute the right strategy, and so on.

And the problem with President Trump is that he doesn't have any respect whatsoever for institutions, and certainly not for the deep state, which he views as a mortal enemy because he thinks it opposed him in all sorts of ways during his first term. So you have this actually very interesting situation where he does not rely on experts at all. He relies on Steve Witkoff, Jared Kushner, and Lindsey Graham. These people are not serious strategists. They're not people capable of thinking through how to deal with major foreign policy issues or questions of war and peace. They just can't do that. And again, the reason you have a deep state is because inside that deep state is all sorts of expertise. I don't want to paint too rosy a picture of it, but there is an upside to having a deep state.

And Glenn, it's very important to understand that all the evidence in the public record now shows the deep state was at least very doubtful about whether this war would work, and maybe even opposed to it. If you listen to what General Kane, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was saying before the war and what he's been saying since it started, and you listen to what the Pentagon was saying—absent Pete Hegseth, of course—and you look at what the intelligence community was saying, especially the National Intelligence Council, it's quite clear the deep state was highly skeptical of this operation, and for good reason. Because, as you and I know, anyone who understands basic military history knows that the idea you're going to get regime change with air power alone is a delusional perspective, right?

So the deep state in this case was not consulted, did not provide any expertise, right? Instead, what President Trump did was rely on himself because, of course, he thinks he's a genius. And to the extent he relied on anybody, it was people like Jared Kushner, Steve Witkoff, Lindsey Graham, and Rupert Murdoch, who was calling him all the time, and so forth. You know, people on Fox News and you name it.

But you don't go to war relying on people like that. You need experts. You have to really think these things through. As we know very well, you and I, when you go to war, the potential for disaster is great. It's the realm of unintended consequences, right? This is one of the central messages in Clausewitz. For anybody who's read Clausewitz, you understand very quickly that going to war is, in many ways, a giant crapshoot. And you want to do everything you can to maximize the chances that you'll be successful. The way you do that is by relying on smart people. You tell smart people to turn their critical faculties on and think about what's the best strategy for pursuing a particular goal, and at the same time ask, is this goal worth pursuing?

Can we come up with a strategy that will allow us to achieve the goal? And so forth and so on. But you just had none of that with President Trump in his decision-making that led up to the war that's now ongoing. And on top of all that—not to get too carried away here—but he relied on the Israelis, who were selling him a bill of goods. Really quite remarkable. He was bamboozled by Prime Minister Netanyahu. So here we are, and... and again, I just want to say one more time, what happened here was foreseeable. It was foreseeable. You did not have to be a strategic genius to understand what was going to happen. And again, the deep state, I believe, understood this.

#Glenn

I understand why Trump would have been distrustful of the intelligence agencies and the permanent bureaucracy, given the whole Russiagate affair during his first presidential term. But again, I couldn't agree with you more. That being said, you still need those guys. The idea that you can replace them with a crew of people you trust—your friends from the real estate business, your family members, some people from the media, from Fox News—and that this will be the replacement... I mean, that sets up a whole new category of problems. So no, it's a real mess.

#Glenn

Anyway, whenever we talk about the Ukraine war, it ends on a very dark note. I don't think there's any positive spin one can put on this war. It's going to be a real mess. So, thank you very much for taking the time.

#John Mearsheimer

Welcome, Glenn. All I'll say is, I hope that before I die, you and I have a conversation where we can actually reach an optimistic conclusion to what we say over the course of the show. It does seem like we're a long way from that point, though.

#Glenn

Yeah, I look forward to that—hopefully, that opportunity. So, thanks.

#John Mearsheimer

You're welcome.