

Jeffrey Sachs: Iran War Broke U.S. Empire & Alliance Systems

Prof. Jeffrey Sachs discusses the unravelling of the US alliance system that has dominated the past decades and how a lingering imperial mindset prevents adjustment to new realities. Recorded 4th of April 2026. Jeffrey Sachs YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@JeffreyDSachsOfficial> Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: <https://glennDiesen.substack.com/> X/Twitter: https://x.com/Glenn_Diesen Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/glennDiesen> Support the research by Prof. Glenn Diesen: PayPal: <https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/glennDiesen> Buy me a Coffee: buymeacoffee.com/gdieseng Go Fund Me: <https://gofund.me/09ea012f> Books by Prof. Glenn Diesen: <https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B09FPQ4MDL>

#Glenn

Welcome back. We're joined today by Professor Jeffrey Sachs to discuss what's happening in Iran, but also in the wider world order. Thank you very much for coming back on the program.

#Jeffrey Sachs

Great to be with you.

#Glenn

So we see that the consequences of this war against Iran are difficult to measure. We see it in the global economy, the world order, but also in the alliance systems. Over the past decades — or you could even say the past 80 years — many countries, from the Gulf states to Europe and East Asia, have essentially bet their entire security on U.S. protection, linking themselves to U.S. hegemony. And now, as that hegemony declines and Trump appears to be becoming more and more erratic, we see the whole order unraveling very quickly. Of course, much of this came after Trump's last speech, which also sent some shocks through the international system. I was wondering, how do you assess this?

#Jeffrey Sachs

I think two things are happening simultaneously — here, in Ukraine, and in other crises. One is the extraordinarily erratic behavior of the United States government, personified in Mr. Trump's behavior. He shocks the world; he shocks most Americans. Nobody can really rationalize the brazenness, the lawlessness, the viciousness of U.S. actions and of Trump's rhetoric. His line about sending Iran back to the Stone Age shocked everyone, I think. And we can add that his partner in

this crime, Benjamin Netanyahu, gave a similarly shocking speech that fewer people saw, the day before the start of the Jewish Passover holiday.

And in the Passover holiday, which tells the story of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt, God visits ten plagues on the Egyptian people. In Netanyahu's speech, he visited ten plagues on the Iranian people. It's, again, a speech of shocking brutality and also conspiracy — a geopolitics, I would say, of maybe the 9th century B.C. The mindset, the biblical framing, Netanyahu casting himself as God — it's all so stark, so sharp, that anyone watching what's happening right now sees that we have an extraordinarily violent war that seems to draw its justifications from 9th-century B.C. mindsets, or simply from psychopathic ideas of sending other nations back to the Stone Age.

We heard Trump chortle about the destruction of a bridge where nine people were killed crossing it. It was a non-military target, and reportedly ninety-five people were injured in the attack. The president was delighted by that. So one thing that's happening, all over the world and inside the United States, is a sense of an absolutely violent and lawless regime in the U.S. The second thing is the battlefield. American hegemony ultimately rests on the belief that America dominates the battlefield.

All of the rhetoric from Trump and Netanyahu has been, since the start of this operation — but it's true in every U.S. operation — that shock and awe will overcome the foe, and that the inevitability of U.S. victory is so overwhelming that everyone will bow down to the United States. And more and more, that idea is unraveling. One could say that it unraveled decades ago in Vietnam. One could say that the same failure was shown in Central America during the Contra Wars. One could argue that the same has been seen throughout the Middle East and Afghanistan — that this overwhelming force doesn't prevail. But each time, the same proposition is put forward: that the might of the United States, the unprecedented ability to project power and force, is overwhelming.

Trump made that claim a couple of days ago, and then the next day two American fighter jets were downed, and counterattacks came in Israel and in the Gulf region again. So to many observers — many of the people you're meeting with and discussing this — the battlefield evidence is quite the opposite of what's being claimed by the United States. Iran seems to have continued massive retaliatory force. The depletion of anti-missile systems seems to be real. The breakdown of morale in the U.S., even reportedly forcing an aircraft carrier to return to base because of some kind of insurrection, insubordination, or collapse of morale among the sailors, as reported, seems to show the opposite.

So there's a fundamental question: what is America's power? Ultimately, that comes down to its military and economic strength. And second, what is America's intention? That depends on the statements, the goals, the behavior of the U.S. government. On both counts, this is a shocking period. Let's say, on the question of aims and goals, it's shocking. We can't even piece together, as hard as we try, exactly why we're in this war. It really seems to be a war of whim — that's the best description I've heard of it. And when it comes to American power, the debate is open, and the days

ahead will tell what the real situation is. But at least for now, the American and Israeli claim of “shock and awe” overwhelming the Iranian government is not true.

Quite the contrary, it seems there’s a lot of worry beneath the surface that the ability to defend against Iranian missile attacks is waning — and in the Gulf region, almost non-existent. That’s why the whole world is watching this in amazement. We’re seeing fundamental things play out, and they’re extremely dangerous. They could escalate to nuclear war without question. On the Israeli side, I’d say the level of violence and dehumanization of Israel’s foes — the biblical language, the Old Testament story of the Israelites capturing their promised land — is so ruthless, so violent, so genocidal that the rhetoric and mindset coming from Israel suggest no limits.

That seems to be not just tactical — it seems to be actually ideological. The hatred for the other in Israel seems to be unbounded. A difference between the U.S. and Israel is that, in the United States, the public opposes the war quite overwhelmingly, and nothing that Trump has done has changed that. This unease and opposition are very widespread. In Israel, I’m sorry to say, it seems that most of the public backs the war, backs the violence, and backs the idea behind the war — the hatred of the other side and the belief that the other side is an implacable foe that must be totally annihilated. Which, again, is maybe a 9th-century-BC mentality, but it seems to be infused in this society.

#Glenn

A common friend of ours, John Mearsheimer, keeps making the point that no one has told him any story of how this could end in a positive way — that is, in a U.S. victory. And it’s a good point. I just find it difficult to see what the best possible outcome is. The whole idea seems to be that if there’s just enough death, destruction, and carnage, then somehow the Iranians would simply capitulate. But part of the problem with this is that what the U.S. demands of Iran — that capitulation — would then become an existential threat.

You know, if they had to give up even their conventional deterrent, what would stop the destruction of Iran? And there seem to be some parallels to the war — or the proxy war — against Russia. That is, if we just escalate enough, then we’ll get a deal. But when your adversary considers this to be an existential threat, there’s no bowing down. It’s only... Do you see any possible end to this war? How can this be ended? Because at the moment, it doesn’t seem that Trump is willing to pack up and go home.

#Jeffrey Sachs

Well, I think this is the point — the difference between “can” and “will.” Of course, Donald Trump can and should pack up and go home, but it’s very unlikely to happen. The backdrop to all of this is the continued American assertion of hegemony. That’s not only Trump; that’s the dominant American foreign policy idea — that America must be, and is, the most powerful country in the world, in every region, and must constantly prove or demonstrate that if there are any doubts. So a

war with Iran is not about Iranian issues; a war with Iran is about demonstrating America's full and unconstrained power, and it must be proved to the whole world that it is full and unconstrained.

That's the backdrop. It goes beyond the question of Trump. But on top of that backdrop — the problem, which is the assertion of hegemony — there's this claim that the U.S. believes in and promotes but cannot actually fulfill, because the U.S. doesn't have the predominant power to do so except through utter destruction. Then there's the personality of Donald Trump. And personalities make a difference in wars. Wartime leaders make a difference. The more we understand the situation in the U.S., the more the personality factor comes into play. You know, we can give structural reasons for the American demands on hegemony.

This is something that goes back decades. We can also talk about financial motivations and the pressures—or not even pressures, I should say—the lobbying and the money-making from the war profiteers. There's no doubt that a lot of Silicon Valley companies, Palantir being case number one, are great proponents of these wars. By the way, just parenthetically, they want to test their new AI-driven weapon systems. So this is also, for them, experimentation. It's lab work. The fact that people are killed and there's a war—well, all the better. It's very realistic. We can see how these weapons work.

There's a certain madness, greed—tens, hundreds of billions of dollars—driving this. The same is true in Israel. So there's a side of this that is... But I was saying that even with all those structural features—the claims of hegemony, the size of the military-industrial complex, the huge money-making and grift that go into this—the personal issues, the grift of Donald Trump and his family, who are the most corrupt officials in U.S. history, I mean, a corrupt family and president in U.S. history—there's a personal element of psychological instability here that I believe is at work, which is that Donald Trump is psychopathic.

This is a clinical judgment that has been made by forensic psychologists and psychiatrists since he came on the public scene, and made repeatedly—and, I think, very cogently. This is not a man who gathers information and rationally processes it, who may be vicious but is highly tactical, closes the deal, and so forth. This is an unhinged man who is impulsive, paranoid, psychopathic, and a megalomaniac. This is not the kind of person one wants in the presidency of the United States. I would say that Netanyahu has similar psychological traits. These are very violent, unhinged people, and it means that stepping back is not easy.

Everything is a test for them of their own world, as well as, more broadly, a test of the American political class's mindset of hegemony—which, despite all the evidence to the contrary, is still believed in Washington. So we have a very big structural and individual problem in getting any kind of de-escalation or resolution. I have one, and only one, thought about this, frankly. It's not a very persuasive one, perhaps, but it's the one I've been holding: Donald Trump listens, to the extent that

he listens at all, to those he regards as his peers. And he does regard President Putin, President Xi, and Prime Minister Modi as peers he wants to be part of and live up to. These are leaders of superpowers.

He almost always, without exception, expresses respect for them—for the power they hold, for their leadership of superpower nations. They need to tell him to stop. I think that's extremely important. They need to tell him, "Donald, this is not going anywhere. This is not going anywhere good. This is not helping you. It's not putting the United States in a better position. It's not helping any country in the world. It's dangerous. It needs to stop." I don't know if that would even be remotely sufficient under these circumstances, but I think it's important to try. This isn't bluster—"we're going to enter the war against you." Quite the contrary. It's an attempt to explain why this has to stop, because if it continues on the path it's on, it's going to bring us all to disaster.

#Glenn

Well, certainly having some coordination and more cooperation among the great powers is something we need. If Putin and Xi are able to do this, that would be great. But what do you say, though? You've advised many governments around the world over the years—what would you tell the allies of the United States? Because it appears that the Gulf states have also embraced this principle of hegemonic peace, as have the Europeans. I mean, if we look at Venezuela, for example, their main concern was that Trump talked about oil rather than human rights. But the actual actions worked against that. And I assume as well that if he had included them from the beginning, they would have been much more supportive of the attack on Iran.

Instead, he let them wait until the war had failed before inviting them in—something they now don't want to partake in. But they also, especially the Europeans, have really embraced the idea of "peace through strength," which is a nice way of saying militarism instead of real diplomacy. The idea is, we'll be so powerful that our opponents will have to do what they're told, yet they shouldn't arm themselves to balance our might. So this kind of hegemonic idea of peace is something not just the Gulf states have benefited from, but also the Europeans still don't want to give up on, as we see in the conflict with the Russians. So how would you advise them today, if they still pick up the phone and call and ask—given the U.S. losing its position in the world—where do they go now?

#Jeffrey Sachs

Of course, I've been saying for at least the last decade: be careful of the United States. It's got a delusional foreign policy. It believes it runs the show, but it gets you into deep trouble. I've repeated dozens, if not hundreds, of times my favorite adage from Henry Kissinger—that to be an enemy of the United States is dangerous, but to be a friend is fatal. How many times have I said that to governments, or in the European Parliament, or to Gulf leaders personally in recent years? Not just because of this war, but because of all the circumstances that go back a very long time.

I do not believe, for example, that countries gain any security whatsoever from hosting U.S. military bases. I've argued for years—and suggested for years—that these countries should invite the United States to go home. You don't get security; these bases are a magnet for conflict. But more than that, they undermine your own sovereignty. European countries remain, eighty years after the end of World War II, semi-occupied by the United States. And the United States meddles deeply in European politics—to a shocking extent, actually. So my recommendation has been, repeatedly, that this idea of finding security in the United States is simply wrong.

The United States has its own rather bizarre ideas about the world—namely, hegemonic control. If you subscribe to that, you're subscribing to an unreality. And moreover, if you host the U.S. military and the CIA on your soil, then you're basically relinquishing your sovereignty. You can't speak freely. You'll find that if you're in politics and you oppose the United States, you'll be knocked out of politics within your own country. So generations of politicians arise who can't even find the words to express opposition to even the craziest American ideas. And there are so many crazy American ideas because hegemonic dominance itself is an unreality.

And if everything is built on the foundation of an unreality, there's a lot of craziness that goes along with it. So, Glenn, I was in the Gulf region last year speaking with leaders who were expressing exactly this sentiment. This was before the war. This is not some ex post idea that these bases won't protect you. I agree. I said to friends in the Emirates, "Why are you joining this coalition with Israel and the United States? Do you think this is really prudent, that this is correct, that this is accurate—together with Israel, which has committed a genocide before the world's eyes in Gaza? You're part of the so-called Abraham Accords. This makes no sense for you. This is no security."

This is not realism. Whatever your favorite foreign policy position is, I think realism—if it's done right—means taking a realistic view of the situation. And the idea that the United States is going to protect you is not exactly realistic. You know what I heard? "Oh, but Mr. Sachs, we're getting NVIDIA chips, we're getting data centers. This is key for us." That actually was the currency of foreign policy, I'd say, in the last couple of years: we turn on or turn off the data centers in your country, the high-end chips. Well, these are now all being blown up day by day by Iran. A data center doesn't have anti-missile defense systems around it.

So governments need to take a much more realistic view. We're in a multipolar world—that's the foundation. The United States political leadership—and by that I mean the White House, the National Security Council, the CIA, the Armed Services Committees, the military contractors—they don't accept that. They don't get it. They don't believe it. They think, well, AI and NVIDIA chips in our weapon systems, in our Palantir-based target identification systems, in our AI-empowered killing systems—this is still dominance. They want to show it in Gaza: we can kill everybody, we can level Gaza. By the way, after a genocide, Hamas is still there and still operating.

Israel couldn't achieve its goals even in a small neighborhood that was bombed and leveled over two years. Now we're talking about Iran, with almost 100 million people and a formidable technological

and military base. This is something the mindset of the United States just can't grasp—that there are technologically sophisticated people everywhere, and Iran is one of them. They still view Iran as medieval, if not Stone Age, but they don't understand that Iran has highly advanced technological capacities, and those have also been put to military use. So I think the advice was right but not heeded. And today, I always say to any government: look at your neighborhood, be friends with your neighbors.

Don't let the American empire divide you, because your safety and well-being depend on your neighbors. And don't build—or think you're going to build—a wall, whether it's the Berlin Wall or a new wall to hem in Russia. And don't think, in the Gulf, that you can be on our side—on the western side of the Persian Gulf—but on the eastern side, Iran is the enemy. Don't think in those terms. Look at your neighbors. Make peace with your neighbors. Cooperate with your neighbors. Trade with your neighbors. And then, on a regional basis, understand that your safety and well-being depend on good relations with all the major powers. China is not your enemy. Russia is not your enemy.

India is not your enemy. The United States should not be your enemy. But we also need the United States to move beyond the mindset it shows now—either you're for us or you're against us. That's the American mindset, borrowed from the Athenians in the Peloponnesian War, when they told the Melians, "If you're not with us, we kill you." Unfortunately, that's part of the American playbook as well. But countries cannot give in to that without surrendering their own sovereignty and their own future. And now, in a multipolar world, they don't have to. So my basic advice, in general, is: don't let the American empire divide your own neighborhood.

I say it in Japan and Korea: China is not your enemy; it's your neighbor. I say it in the Gulf region: Iran and the GCC should be the first ones talking with each other. Not only do they share the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, but they share a lot of other things as well—culture, history, transit points, and ecological risks in a very dry part of the world beset by major water crises. I say this, and I say it to the Europeans: Russia is not your inveterate enemy. This Russophobia is a historical fiction. It's a complete misreading of history, but it's also a complete misjudgment about European security, which can only be achieved collectively with Russia, not in opposition to Russia. And so, this is the same everywhere: empires divide and conquer. The United States has used division as a way to extend hegemony.

It's always saying the one on the other side is the enemy. It's always trying to extend to the other side. The U.S. position, ideologically, in the Middle East is: we already run the Gulf; now all we have to do is bring Iran back into the fold—which we happened to succeed in doing in 1953, but then lost in the 1979 revolution. We need to bring them back into the American empire. So again, every region faces a divide that the U.S. stokes. The U.S. tells ASEAN, "Oh, China's your enemy." It tells Japan and Korea, "China's your enemy." It's stoking these divisions. And of course, it has stoked the division with Russia, because the whole point at the end of the Cold War—and I was there personally, watching at the highest levels—was that peace had come to a common European home. But the U.S. wouldn't have it.

It needed to expand NATO. It needed to keep an alliance against a country that no longer existed—for a threat that absolutely didn't exist. But it needed, for American hegemonic purposes, to expand NATO—and not just expand it, but push it right up to Russia's borders, to install anti-ballistic missile systems, and to abandon treaties that had been signed with the Soviet Union, of which Russia was the continuation state. So that was the mindset. Europe fell into it so dutifully—privately uneasy, publicly without a murmur. And by the way, as crazy as this mindset is, let me just add two points. Europe has its own hegemonic mindset that remains even 80 years after the end of the European empires. Europe ran the world in a rather vicious way for a long time in Asia and in Africa. That mindset's not gone.

So that's why the subservience to the U.S. imperial mindset isn't so hard—because it's also seen, to an important extent, as keeping the West dominant. And so the Europeans—yes, they're subordinated to the United States—but in a way, it continues to be a projection of Western dominance in the world. They view the United States as, therefore, in a way, helping their empires that no longer exist to continue their international control. So that's really part of what's happening right now. Europe goes along because the idea of controlling the Middle East—that's a totally European idea. That's not just an American idea; it has deep roots. The worst of this is the British. The British absolutely still maintain the trappings and mindset of an empire that's been gone for almost 80 years, but it's still there.

And so we hear the most remarkable rhetoric coming from Britain—vis-à-vis Russia or other showdowns—where Britain has no influence or power to deliver on any of this, but makes a lot of rhetorical and political mischief. What's interesting is that even in the Iran war, there's been a little bit of hesitation by the British. This shows how completely outrageous this war is, because the British rebels never hesitate to support an imperial venture and have always said America is basically our successor empire. But in this one, it's so outrageous that the British have tried a little bit—"Don't bring us in." This is almost unprecedented. The British jump into every American war, but not this one, because it's so completely outrageous, what's happening right now.

#Glenn

I think that's the inherent contradiction of the so-called hegemonic peace. If you want to be a hegemon, you're very dependent on the alliance system, because you divide regions into dependent allies versus balanced or contained adversaries. And I don't think European leaders often appreciate that once you're in conflict with your opponent—be it Russia or whoever—that's what makes them so dependent on the U.S. That's why they have to sign all these horrible trade deals. That's why they end up in this situation. The same goes for the Gulf states.

I mean, their conflict with Iran is the reason they've become hostages to the U.S. I think it was acceptable when the U.S. was a more comfortable hegemon, but now that it's declining... And as Mark Rutte said, NATO's not just for protection—it's for power projection. If this is about power

projection for the U.S., and they're being used to go after rising powers while the U.S. is no longer in a position to defend them, then it looks like a disaster. It's just shocking to me that there aren't more efforts to readjust to current realities. Right.

#Jeffrey Sachs

What's so interesting about it is that it doesn't deliver. It delivers insecurity. It delivers economic crisis. And the publics know it. So the politicians who continue their subservience to the U.S. in Europe are profoundly unpopular. They're running strongly against public opinion. The leaders in the Gulf region who continue their subservience to the United States and Israel—because this is a U.S.-Israel war—are also facing opposition from what's called "the street" there, which is really just public opinion.

The public in the Gulf region does not want to be an ally of Israel in this, but that's the position their governments have put themselves into—by saying, "Our security is an F-35," or, "Our security is an F-16," or, "Our security is a U.S. military base." Unfortunately, it's a very naive idea, but it's the idea that got them into this, and it traps them not only in terms of their national interest, but also puts them in direct opposition to their own publics. And you can see, step by step, how Trump is reviled in Europe right now. His net approval rating is something like minus 70%, and that was before the Iran war. In other words, maybe 15% approval and 85% disapproval. The man's despised—and for very good reason.

He's a despicable person. But the governments have continued to try to appease him, to support him, to say that we're on his side—and they lose support. We're seeing this in Italy right now, where Prime Minister Meloni basically built her politics around being Trump's best buddy in Europe. That was her calling card for a while, and no doubt it made some people in Italy feel, well, at least we have the United States on the inside track. But now it's completely turning, because young people are saying, what is this? We're siding with this? This is madness—madness. And so you see everywhere in Europe, if you side with Donald Trump, you lose your own political base. That doesn't necessarily mean you lose power immediately, given the constitutional order. Maybe you have a parliamentary majority that can last two or three years, but you don't have a political base within the country.

#Glenn

Well, thank you for taking the time, and let's hope that governments start embracing reason again and adjust to the new realities.

#Jeffrey Sachs

Very good. Glenn, great to be with you.

#Jeffrey Sachs

Talk to you soon.