Robert Pape: Political Violence in the West, Iran as a World Power & Death of NATO

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#Glenn

Welcome back, everyone. We are joined today by Professor Robert Pape, one of America's leading scholars on international security, terrorism, and political violence. He's a professor at the University of Chicago and has advised every White House administration since the September 11 attacks, which were a quarter of a century ago. So thank you very much for coming on the program for the first time.

#Robert Pape

It's a great pleasure, Glenn. I've been watching you for, I would say, years, really. So it's really terrific, and it's great to meet you.

#Glenn

I wanted to ask you about this difficult time the U.S. is entering. The U.S. is in a difficult position. It has extreme political polarization at home, coupled with some degree of societal instability. And all of this, of course, could get worse if we have these likely impending economic problems or a crisis as well. And if we add to that the fact that the U.S. is involved in two wars, with Iran and Russia, both of which are extremely unstable, and, to add to the mix, we now have this historic election defeat for the Republicans, the U.S. will have a big change in its government, perhaps giving us a messy transition. And I see that Trump has now even contested the legitimacy of the election. So I guess, long story short, there are a lot of variables at play. All of them seem to be interconnected as well,

and none of them are stable. So what can we expect from the Trump administration in the transition period over the next eight weeks?

#Robert Pape

What we can expect is that all those variables you just laid out—and I think you did an excellent job—are all pointing in very dangerous directions, all at the same time. So we have three fundamental bands of problems. Number one, violent populism issues. Now, we're seeing violent populism unfold in France and elsewhere in Europe. So this is not a hypothetical problem that we face. It's a problem that really has afflicted mature democracies. We are not facing the problems of, say, a Brazil or a Venezuela and so forth. We are facing problems dealing with major social changes in mature democracies, which are radicalizing politics in those democracies and then leading to years, actually, of violent protests and strings of political assassinations and assassination attempts.

So that's issue number one. Now, that doesn't mean, by the way, that violent populism happens every day. It moves in cycles. But that is not the only issue here. That's already quite an issue because we're now in the transition period: two months, eight weeks between now and the time that the transition of power in Washington will actually occur. And if we recall, six years ago, when Trump lost in the November 2020 election, the dangerous period was not in November. It wasn't the day of the election. It wasn't even in early December. The closer we got to the actual transition of power, the higher the tension became. And that's when January 6th, of course, happened. But the other two issues, as you just pointed out, are both hot wars.

So we are not talking about hypothetical wars. In Europe, you're likely facing the coldest winter you will have had in many, many years. We're now four and a half years into this major war between Russia and Ukraine. And what you are seeing is Russia ramping up the pressure on Ukraine and also threatening Europe at the same time. I'm sure Russia feels that they have reasons for this. But at the end of the day, as that pressure unfolds, it will also create economic and other pressures that interact with what I've just described here in the United States. And then third is the Iran war, which interacts with both of these. Of course, we're now in the ninth month of the Iran war. People want to think as if it's not happening.

But the fact of the matter is, we are in a situation where we have a major U.S. blockade of Iran. We have Iran declaring that it will enforce an end to this position of no war, no peace—this halfway point of a blockade. And we have possible peace negotiations here. JD Vance, I think, is doing his good soldier work to try to bring that about. I really think we should give him lots of credit for what he has done. That said, I think it's going to be extremely hard to see a deal that is face-saving in any way whatsoever for President Trump, either in the short term or for his legacy. And as these different pressures unfold, I'm sorry to say, it is very, very, very dangerous because we already have a world economy that's teetering. You escalate this, and you are likely to see major economic consequences beyond what we have currently seen.

#Glenn

Well, you focus a lot on political violence, and I am glad you brought Europe into the mix, because how would you compare the two—that is, the European countries versus the United States? Often, people seem to assume that political violence is more likely in the U.S. However, the American economy appears to have more resilience. It has a stronger foundation than Europe's. At least in the U.S., one can see a pathway to recovery. I don't see this in Europe, necessarily—not a good path, at least. What are the similarities and differences in the challenges they face and the likelihood of political violence?

#Robert Pape

Yeah, so let me talk then about my book, Our Own Worst Enemies, which came out in September. Now, that book is about American political violence, and I'm going to talk to you about the causes there. But Chancellor Scholz in Germany flew me to Berlin for five days in September 2022 to brief every top member of the German government. And that included the Green Party, not just his party. I have been consulting with the Canadian government and the British government. So even though I'm focusing very much on the United States in this book, that's not to say this doesn't have carryover to what's happening in the other mature democracies. But let me just start with what's happening in the United States so we have a benchmark.

So I wanted to understand in a deep way what's really happening to create an environment in America where we have the highest level of political violence since the 1960s. We have the highest level of violent protests since the 1960s, and this is on both the right and the left. And we also have the highest number of political assassinations and assassination attempts since the 1960s. I now call that violent populism, because what's underneath it is tens of millions of Americans on both sides of the aisle who support political violence for their side. That's really a dramatic thing to say, Glenn, if you just take that in for a moment. Once tens of millions of Americans support political violence for their side, then this normalizes political violence.

It creates a permission structure for political violence. And it's no surprise that we see cycles of actual political violence here on both sides of the political spectrum. Well, in the 1960s, we didn't quite see it on both sides, but we saw something quite similar, with tens of millions of Americans supporting political violence. The anti-war movement, even when it got violent, and the violent riots in American cities were supported by tens of millions of Americans. My book will go through this. I gave this a name because it's not just political violence as normal. I call it violent populism to really set it apart from the normal. You could go back all 250 years of our country, Glenn, and you'll probably find some act of political violence in each and every one of those years.

You won't find violent populism in that way. And the book goes through that. Now, what are the causes of this? This is what I spent five years of my life and millions of dollars at the University of Chicago Project on Security and Threats research center trying to really understand: 20 nationally

representative surveys, 70 focus groups, and travel to Trump and also Harris rallies, meaning spending all day with their supporters and surveying them there. So, really trying to get a deep understanding, Glenn, of what's occurring. Field research over a period of many years, big, fat reports on the CPOST Center website, January 6th—all kinds of things to really get at this.

The bottom line is this, Glenn: as we've seen in other countries around the world, when you have rapid, major social change, it can radicalize politics because it changes the political winners and losers inside the country. And that can lead to political violence. Sam Huntington—I talk about Huntington's famous work on this in the 1960s. He talked about the idea of the social-political gap that can happen. Well, he didn't really tie it that tightly to mature democracy. But nonetheless, I am explaining that that's what you're seeing here in the United States. And what are the two social changes? Number one: America is going through, for the first time in its 250-year history, a transition from a white-majority democracy to a white-minority democracy. That has not happened in our 250-year history.

In 1990, we were 76% non-Hispanic white as a population. Today, we're 57% non-Hispanic white. It'll be another 10, 15, 20 years, depending on what happens with mass deportations—you see the lightning rod of that—before we're 49% non-Hispanic white as a population. Well, that has enormous effects, Glenn. These are major changes. You're changing the composition of the political parties. Basically, as I lay out in the book, there's the traditionalist-versus-newcomer problem that would happen no matter what. And then you have politicians, of course, adding fuel to the fire with their rhetoric. And so the book lays out the whole cocktail on this.

But that's not all there is. See, there's a second issue happening at the same time, which is that over the same decades that we're making this demographic shift, we have shifted massive wealth to the top 1%. And this is in relative terms, Glenn. That means a massive loss of wealth for the bottom 90%. And that's what you're seeing in what's called the affordability crisis, where the average price of a home is way out of reach for someone earning the average income in the United States. So you have people with four, five, six homes, and you have people who think they're never going to get a home. Think about that as fundamental inequality. And that's happening on both sides of the aisle.

So you put these two phenomena together, Glenn, and you've got a really pernicious cocktail for radicalized politics and political violence. I call it a wildfire, Glenn, where we can scientifically measure the size of the dry, combustible material—the grievances. But what starts a wildfire is the unpredictable spark, the lightning strike or the power line that's down, or what I call in the book "focal point moments." Now, that's the logic in just five minutes about what's happening in the United States. Let's talk about Europe, okay? So Europe is also undergoing demographic shifts, not quite on the same timeline as the United States, and also experiencing economic issues. These are due to globalization, okay?

So this is the macro thing that's been happening. But what you see this fall in France, and then spreading to other parts of Europe, is violent populism in action. And as best we can tell from the

public opinion surveys that have been taken in France, they paint a very similar picture to what you're seeing with violent populism in the United States. We have multiple surveys, by the way, from October. I've been tracking this on the Professor Pape Substack. You can actually see the surveys there. And why now? Why is that happening this fall in particular? There are a couple of reasons in Europe. Number one is that the Iran war is pouring gasoline on the economic fires behind this.

So I've explained that there's an economic driver to this. Well, fuel prices in Europe are worse than in the United States. You know this, but a lot of Americans don't appreciate how much better off America is compared to Europe, even if it doesn't feel that way. And of course, Europe and America are better off compared to Asia. But that said, that's issue number one. The Iran war is already playing havoc, and the Ukraine war is playing havoc with this. But number two, there was a focal point in this, Glenn. So in Europe, the violent populism started with some relatively small protests in September about conditions in schools, as you probably know.

But then on October 5th in Lens, France, a student protester lost his hand to a police grenade. The police didn't mean to do this, but it happened nonetheless. And it was filmed. And that helped create a focal point, because that is one of the big reasons you ended up with the October 17th blaze that really hit. And that's still going on. So there was an ongoing problem starting in September. You had that focal point—the spark—and then you've had the wildfire occur. That's what occurred here in France, as best we can tell at this moment. That's my analysis. And it follows the logic of violent populism here.

And my view is this is likely going to continue for some time to come until we unwind the actual structural causes of this, Glenn. The different political leaders can also make matters worse or better, by the way. But this is what's occurring. And for the United States, we haven't seen our focal point moment yet here. You've got a lot of anger in the United States right now. The midterms show enormous anger in the country, even with the Republicans eating their own. I mean, the midterms show not just a Democratic blue wave, but a Republican rebellion here that we have not seen. This is a very, very volatile, tinderbox moment as we go forward.

And that's why I'm calling attention to the dangers here. But those are the specific issues related to violent populism. And for the United States, over the next two months, with this transition of power, President Trump is facing the unraveling of his presidency. He's facing a Nixon-like downward spiral that will go on for months and months. Hegseth is likely only the beginning. You can easily imagine that after Hegseth, it will be RFK Jr. Kristi Noem is probably going to be coming back. Pam Bondi will probably come back. I mean, this is going to go on and on, Glenn. And so what you're facing is an enormous amount of pressure that is going to build inside the White House. This isn't the end of the pressure on Trump. This is just the beginning.

#Glenn

For me, some red flags go up when I see political leaders refer to their opposition as essentially enemies of the state or the country. That is, once you refer to the political opposition as a threat, I think you've crossed a bit of a line. They're no longer part of the in-group; they're essentially the out-group. Again, in the US, it's not just the Democrats but also Republicans. Both sides tend to do this. You also see it in Europe, though, with, I think, Germany being the prime example, where they now refer to the main opposition party as essentially a dangerous party and have even criminalized it. So, again, for me, this is a concern.

#Robert Pape

Can I just, before you do that, build on your point for a moment, Glenn? Because it's an excellent point about how the elite rhetoric of demonization is a problem. I just want to add to that point what we found in our survey shortly after Charlie Kirk was assassinated a year ago. So we've been doing these surveys about every three or four months on American support for political violence. And one of the most disturbing findings was that, three weeks after Charlie Kirk was assassinated, fully 10% of the public supported that assassination and believed it was a good thing.

And another 10%, even though this had happened years before, thought it was a good thing that there was an attempt to attack Nancy Pelosi. Now, of course, the attacker missed her and almost killed her husband. People wonder, well, does that elite rhetoric matter? Well, what I'm trying to show in the book is that elite rhetoric is connecting to mass attitudes, which creates a feedback loop, by the way. And then that can actually spur volatile individuals to take action, actual action, because they have a sense of social approval.

#Glenn

Yeah. Well, I remember there was a lot of dishonesty around how politicians framed each other, because they did the same with Trump when they said, "No, he's just like Hitler." But when someone tried to kill him, then somehow they had to make the argument, "Oh, we don't support this." But you can't have it both ways. You can't say that your opponent is Hitler and at the same time oppose the violence. So it does appear that the normalization of violence is becoming a problem.

#Robert Pape

And also, just to show you again, because of your scholarly background, we can talk a little bit deeper. So in our surveys, Glenn, we use a five-point Likert scale. And what that means is you have a question, a prompt, where you can agree or disagree on a five-point scale, where three is the midpoint, or ambivalence. That's where you see some of the growth as well. So I'm reporting in the book mostly the fours and the fives. These are the people who agree. But if you see the full Likert scale, you would see that the ambivalence here is really quite worrisome as well. We should not have tens of millions of people ambivalent about the assassination of anybody. I very much agree.

#Glenn

But in this context, you mentioned globalization, and you also threw in Samuel Huntington there. And I thought that was interesting because he had this excellent piece. I absolutely love it. Back in 2004, he wrote about "Dead Souls." And he was essentially making the point that the future political dividing lines, as a result of globalization, would be between the cosmopolitans or globalists and the nationalists or patriots. He argued that the political elites would be shaped more by the globalization of economic events, while the public would be more tilted towards traditional national identities.

This was his prediction, at least. And I was wondering, how do you see any of this development, this kind of polarization, impacting international affairs? Because after the Cold War, when we essentially reorganized the world, we said, okay, the world consists of liberal democracies and authoritarian states. It kind of became natural for us to then designate Russia yet again as an enemy. However, now you see the rise of a new brand of conservatives who are saying, no, actually, building a little bit on Huntington's view, the world is divided between this excessive liberalism and conservatism.

And suddenly they say, actually, the Russians are one of us. They're like conservative Christians. And not just the Russians, but you also see it with, you know, the Germans and Hungarians. If you have a lot of immigration, the Germans say, "Oh, being European means human rights. We have to take them all in." If you're Hungarian, you say, "No, being European is a certain cultural history. If we have too many people from different cultures, we dilute the Christian European traditions, so it's anti-European." So we no longer agree on who we are. And if we don't know who the in-group is, we don't know who the out-group is. Do you see international affairs also being reorganized?

#Robert Pape

In the book, I go to great lengths to compliment and applaud a lot of what Huntington did. And I got to meet Huntington and know him a bit toward the end of his life. Starting in 1997, I was invited to his Wianno conferences here, and I was very lucky. I was the only one there, I think, who hadn't been a fellow at his center or a professor in his orbit. I was kind of brought in as somebody he had not met before, and he was a very meritocratic person. He just was. It was really quite an honor for me. But I also got a few chances to get to know some of these ideas as they were forming.

And then with the book, I've read, of course, everything, and I quote a lot of it in the book. What I think, Glenn, is a couple of things. Number one, I think that what Sam did was lay out some of the precursor elements of this up until about 2004. He died just before he could really polish that book. But he did see a lot of things coming. He had a great instinct for following not just data, but understanding how it created new paradigms here. And it's really quite a talent he had. But he stopped short of really thinking this was going to become a violent issue. And I think that, if you read his work, he stops short in a number of places.

It's only in a few places in the "Who We Are" book, but he stops short of really going down the road of what this could possibly mean. Well, I'm coming in 20 years later, essentially, Glenn. You see what I mean? And I'm coming in to analyze this because I'm watching things unfold on the left in the United States in the summer of 2020, and then on January 6th. I've been studying terrorism for a long time, including some domestic terrorism. So I've been studying these issues, and I see right away that something is different. But I also wanted to know: would this carry forward? Was this just a COVID exception? Well, it's not just a COVID exception. COVID may have accelerated it, but it didn't end when COVID ended.

So I think Sam was brilliant, really, and a forerunner, but he doesn't carry it all the way through. So my book is kind of coming in where he leaves off, so to speak. The second point I would make is that I think one of the big things that you are seeing in our country is what I call two competing nationalisms. That's why it's great to speak with you, because you're a scholar, so we can talk about nationalism in academic terms. A lot of times, when you're in the podcast world, you're talking to such a mass audience that the word "nationalism" is difficult. But in the academic world, I come from the school that thinks nationalism is very constructed.

I think Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities, while maybe not perfect, has done a lot to help us understand how nationalism can be constructed given a certain objective situation or structure of events. And I think what you're seeing is competing nationalisms, competing ideas of what the nation means. And they each believe that theirs is the genuine nation. They don't see the nationalism of the other as legitimate. They see it as illegitimate. And so that's why my book talks about the fracture of legitimacy in the United States. We're facing a fractured legitimacy. This is not simply a matter of some minor fringe elements here.

You have a fundamental legitimacy fracture that's emerging. That is really the taproot, at a conceptual level. You could describe what's happening in America as a domestic clash of civilizations. I don't happen to use this language that much, though I do occasionally. But it's really a domestic clash of nationalisms that is occurring. And it's not going to end anytime soon because, as I've been saying, these structural factors are going to go on for some time. Now, I do think you could slow them down. I even think, with the wealth shift, you could reverse it. And I think that would be much to our good.

I think the reason this is boiling over into hot culture wars, as opposed to a cold culture war, is that we're in the tipping-point generation of the demographic shift. And this is happening fast. And under Joe Biden, we really did have, effectively, borders as open as you could imagine in a country. Well, that's going to terrify the traditionalist side of this. This is just going to happen. And that's exactly what happened. So we need to have more moderate policies. And the book talks about what that would look like. But the fact is, these dynamics are not unique to the United States. This is also happening in other mature democracies. That's why those governments—the German, the Canadian, and the British governments—were interested in these issues.

In fact, the Canadian government, with Carney, his group is running national surveys paralleling the CIPO surveys. That's one of the reasons I meet with them: they want to, you know, basically—and you'd appreciate this as a scholar—actually talk about the language of a survey. You see, we love that, you know, because we get into the exact language. And are your words skewing the outcome or not? And how do you deal with that? I mean, we love that. But, you know, it's rare, actually, I think, that you find governments getting into that. But that's what's happening in Canada.

#Glenn

I feel we've seen some of this language about us and them, the elites and the people, before, though, because we had globalization in the 19th century as well, with the railroads, people, finance, ideas—everything moving across borders. And you saw, after the economic crisis of the 1870s, when globalization essentially started coming to an end, that there was a split as well. That is, you had all these globalist elites who just cared about international capital and foreign labor. And then, over here, you had the people who were seen as being more xenophobic. They just wanted their national identities back. And you kind of have this split between the elite and the public, which is kind of the whole populist discourse.

#Robert Pape

And we did something about it. So, I teach at the University of Chicago. John Rockefeller was one of the robber barons in the 1870s that you're referring to. And what happened after the 1870s is that Carnegie, Frick, and Rockefeller saw the problems that were about to come with this massive inequality. One of the things they did to head it off—and they didn't head it off for long, but it did matter for a few decades—was pour a whole lot of money into community benefits. So Carnegie, for example, who was big in steel, started 1,500 libraries in the United States. That was his way of trying to give something back. A guy by the name of Frick, also one of the robber barons, started these art museums in the United States.

And John Rockefeller started the University of Chicago. Basically, he was a little bit younger, and all the other good charities had been taken. So that's how he ended up starting this. And it's great, and it's a wonderful institution. But what they were trying to head off, Glenn, was income tax. See, we didn't have income tax at the time. That comes in 1913 in the United States, and that is a great leveler. Now, there are all kinds of issues with what's happened with income tax since, to be sure. But the fact of the matter is, once income tax came in, it did a lot to bring about economic leveling in the United States as the Industrial Revolution was spreading, et cetera, et cetera, until the mid-1980s, when it went the other way.

So the problem we face is that there has been an ebb and flow in the Gini coefficient, to the extent we can measure that and so forth—an ebb and flow in income inequality and wealth inequality in the United States. But since the mid-1980s, there's been a lot of powerful evidence from multiple

different sources that inequality has been going up here. And that means things are going down for a vast portion of society. I call it a negative-sum society. That's what we now live in. So think about that. It's not a positive-sum society. It's not a zero-sum society. It's a negative-sum society. And this is why you're getting quite a bit of anger here. These gas prices and diesel prices that are going up—they're going up in a negative-sum society. How much lower down are people going to go?

#Glenn

Things aren't that different in Europe, I was going to say. Yeah, there are no good answers. And in the absence of any real discussion, we just see all nuance disappear. Everything is, you know, which side is right and good, and which side is bad and wrong.

#Robert Pape

Yeah, let me just put two policies on the table. I'm not telling you they're perfect, but we've got to start somewhere. My book, Chapter 9, puts a couple of policies on the table. One is on immigration. I think the Obama-era standards from his eight years are really quite a place to start because, see, Obama brought in the Dreamers, as they're called in our country, but he also deported—physically deported—the worst of the worst. You committed a felony here, you were out of here. And in fact, he was criticized from the left as being the deporter in chief because a lot of people on the far left didn't want to throw out people with felonies.

Well, this was a decent policy, and it's something I think you could get a lot of Republicans around. Now, you wouldn't call it the Obama policy, but Jeh Johnson, Obama's secretary of DHS, goes on Fox News all the time. Well, he did before the midterm elections, but for years he's been going on Fox News because he can articulate this very well. The second thing I would say on the economic front, Glenn, is that I think we need to have a simple idea called the flat tax. The flat tax would be a powerful tool. It wouldn't solve all the problems. I'm definitely aware it's not going to solve the capital gains problem. But you need to do something here that's going to send a message and actually have some real teeth to it.

And so what I would say is, if you make $30,000 a year or less in our country, no income tax whatsoever. If you make $30,000 or more, you should pay a flat rate—15%, 17%, 18%—with zero deductions. Zero deductions. So that means I lose all my home mortgage interest deduction. Okay, you got it. You've got to actually have something with some real teeth here. And that way, you are really sending a message. I'm saying this is a down payment because I understand there's a capital gains problem in our country as well. But I think we need to actually talk to the middle class, the working class, and even the upper middle class and say, "Your future is not all downhill from here," because that's the way things are looking right now.

#Glenn

I do want to pivot a bit to the topic of these next eight weeks. Besides the political violence at home, there's also this very unstable war now with Iran. You said before, we're not at war. We're not at peace. We're in between. Iran has had enough of this as well. And at the same time, we see plans for war. We hear about these three-day strike plans. There's some talk about the risk of nuclear weapons being used and also, of course, the regional balance of power shifting. What is it that you expect to see there in Iran over the next eight years? You mean the next eight weeks?

#Robert Pape

Yeah. So what I'm nervous about is that this dangerous cocktail that you've done a nice job of laying out is going to start to unfold. And it could unfold in a variety of ways, Glenn. So, number one—and this happened in the summer as well—people got so focused on what Trump would do, they ignored what Iran would do. One of the big points I made in my Escalation Trap Substack—I have a piece from June 15th about how Iran's period of maximum leverage is starting—is where I really lay out what's going to happen. And this was June 15th, during the MOU period. Okay.

Which is that the MOU wasn't going to hold. Iran was going to gain leverage as the strategic petroleum reserves were going to plateau, and Iran would start to want not just peace, but power. And it would start to exert that power more and more as the summer went on. And it would exert that by wanting, number one, to drive up prices so that we would head into the U.S. midterms with a real chance of wrecking the Trump presidency. Number two, Iran would escalate its strategic goals. So it's not just its tactical goals—what it's asking for in the MOU or in the seven points more recently—but it would want to kick American forces out of the region, which nobody was talking about at the time.

Now, the IRGC, to be fair, was talking about it. I was basing this on some of their videos that had come out in May that weren't getting much attention. Everybody was so focused on Trump. You see what I mean? And then I said that this would also lead to a key step where the second front, the Red Sea front, would open at the end of July or in August. Now, it took until really the end of August, so I was off by a couple of weeks. But that's exactly what happened. The sequence happened as I was laying it out, explaining that Iran would take the initiative. They aren't just playing retaliation or tit for tat. And I think that Iran wants power. They want to become the region's hegemon here.

And I think that with the midterms, they see that they won the midterms. They see they can gain some power here going forward. And I think that it's going to be very difficult for there to be an actual deal. Even if Trump were to sign a deal again, signed, sealed, and delivered, I think he's going to have a hard time sticking with it, Glenn, because Iran isn't going to accept less than becoming the regional hegemon. They're on the road to becoming the regional hegemon. And I mean regional hegemony not in the entire Middle East, but narrowly in the Persian Gulf, just to be super clear about what I'm talking about here. And I think that they think they should get a sphere of influence.

That sphere of influence should include influence on how the Gulf states buy their oil, what currencies they use. I think that they probably have their eye on those sovereign wealth funds as well. So I think that what you're going to see is that Iran is going to continue to want to be a regional hegemon. And I don't think they're going to suddenly become, you know, Mr. Nice Guy and give Trump a face-saving way out. And even if Trump were to sign something, I just think that Iran is not giving up power. We've rarely seen states give up power. And the times we have, like when Ukraine gave up its nuclear weapons, a lot of people look at that as a negative example.

#Glenn

I heard something similar from Iranians, which is that ceding control over escalation to the United States is seen as having been a mistake. They allowed the U.S. to decide when the bombing begins and when it should end, putting Iran between war and peace, not really in either. Essentially, accepting that and not taking the initiative was sending the wrong signal, because if the U.S. could decide when to end the bombing, then what's the cost of starting it, you know, if you could just turn it off when you want? So the idea is that this control over escalation shouldn't be handed over.

#Robert Pape

Because it weakens their prospects of survival. I think Iran is behaving as a very classic realist here. I think before June 2025, they were under-responding. I think since June 2025, they have stopped under-responding.

#Robert Pape

And I think once they discovered they could survive in March and April, they've moved from survival to ambition, to the pursuit of power. And I mean relative power. And I believe that they're on the road to becoming the regional hegemon. I think within a year or two, they're very likely to have nuclear weapons. And I think they'll become the fourth center of world power. And the only real chance to stop it right now that Trump is looking at is escalation. I've been talking about this, Glenn, for some time, softly, but I'm going to talk about it more loudly. There is a third approach, Glenn, a way out of the escalation trap.

And I posted on my Escalation Trap Substack yesterday what that is. It's called regional balancing. Regional balancing. And by regional balancing, I don't mean that America just walks away, marches out. I don't mean that America goes for regime change. Think of it as containment. It's not rollback. It's not appeasement. It's containment. Okay, so that's the idea here. Basically, your standard containment policy, except not with U.S. troops on the front lines. Instead, you would transition to the Gulf states carrying more of the real heavy weight over the next six months, the next year, the next year or two. And I think that this is a real alternative to where we are today.

And there are challenges with it. I'm not expecting everybody to say, "Oh, sure, that's a piece of cake." But at the same time, I think it's a true third alternative, Glenn, to where we are today, which is just going round and round, rearranging the same deck chairs—the ideas that we've had before. They didn't work before. I don't think they're likely to work much better in the future. And so we need a truly new idea, and that idea is regional balancing. And I think now that the midterms are over, we can start to think about this. See, I didn't put this out earlier, but I told my Substack subscribers about this. I do these weekly and biweekly videos, and so they've known about it for some time.

But I also explained that I thought, "I'm not going to make a big deal about it until after the midterms," because I didn't believe anybody could hear me before the midterms. And I think I was right. I mean, just look at what happened. Now, I think there's a possibility people are looking for a real way out, an actual real way out, as opposed to just talking about a way out. And I think the way out here is regional balancing. And it doesn't mean America has no role to play. But if you think about the relative balance of power that I'm imagining here, Iran would be 40% of the power in the Gulf, the Gulf states would be 40%, and America would be somewhere around 20%, something like that. We haven't completely abandoned this.

But at the same time, what we're trying to do is produce regional stability, not go back to American preeminence or American hegemony, and also not American isolationism. And the reason is that the Gulf is not a vital interest of the United States where it's worth fighting a ground war. But it is a strategic interest because what happens in the Gulf is going to dramatically impact America's economy and the world's economy. This is just a fact. And to count on Iran never wanting to wreck America's economy again? Oh, man, this is not realism. I don't know what that counts as, but it's not realism. Realism is you've got to have balances of power. So what's the balance of power? I'm saying the balance should be a regional balance of power.

#Glenn

What you described, though, used to be the traditional policy of the U.S., that of an offshore balancer: only entering conflicts towards the end to make sure that a balance of power is restored, so the U.S. can pull back and the regional powers can balance each other. Because if the U.S. has a strong presence, seeking preeminence, as you said, then the regional powers will begin to coalesce.

#Robert Pape

That's right. That's right. So in my books, Dying to Win—that's my first book on suicide terrorism—and Cutting the Fuse, in those conclusions there, I talk about offshore balancing. And then, in more operational terms, I've also talked about it as an over-the-horizon strategy as well, Glenn. But

there's a difference between my term "offshore balancing" and John and Steve's term "offshore balancing." So the difference is I believe it's important to have a regional stability policy. I mean, an actual regional stability policy. And I don't think they do now. If they disagree, they can say so.

But this has been going on for 20 years. And John's office is right over there, so I'm pretty sure I have an idea of what this is. And so what John and Steve are focusing on is shifting over to Asia. You see what I mean? I'm focusing on how you produce some stability in one of the key regions of the world that's been so unstable since the end of the Cold War. I mean, now, of course, Eastern Europe has been unstable too. So I'm not saying it's the only place you've had some instability, please. But I am saying that the Gulf has been a pretty remarkably unstable area of the world.

So the idea that we're just going to somehow not have a policy for stability, I think, is not very good. And we haven't had much of a policy for stability. It's kind of been more of a light switch, Glenn. We've either been all in, in terms of heavy combat, and that's been a mess, or we've tried to just completely walk away, and I think that's been a mess. So I'm saying there's a third approach, which is regional balancing. And yes, it is my concept of offshore balancing. But I think that term became a big tent. And so there are different sub-concepts of offshore balancing in our field now.

#Glenn

I just wanted to finish off by applying that idea to Europe, because, again, the idea of primacy or global hegemony in Europe, you know, manifested itself as NATO expansion, in which the Russians were essentially pushed out. And as we see now in the war in Ukraine, the Russians are at the heart of it, demanding a new European security architecture. And the U.S. has already signaled, to some extent, that Europe is no longer a priority.

#Robert Pape

That is, not to the same extent as in the past.

#Glenn

What does this mean for Europe?

#Robert Pape

Not NATO, meaning the U.S. plus Europe. So on September 9th, Glenn, I was invited to the European Parliament—a big honor—and I had a two-hour session with some of its members. That's online; you'll be able to find the video of this. And you'll see it started out talking about Iran, but very quickly it was all about Ukraine, because they wanted to talk about Ukraine more than Iran.

And so I explained that I believe America is not going to come back to bail out Ukraine or Europe. But it's not an issue of will anymore. It's an issue of capability. And I believe that Europeans shouldn't count on much.

Before the Iran war, it was an issue of whether the United States had the will to help Europe, you know? Now it's an issue of capability. And what I said is that it's got to be about Europe pursuing regional stability in the Russia-Ukraine war. More specifically, what that means is that Europe should not simply go for a Ukrainian victory, meaning kicking Russian troops out of every inch of Ukrainian soil. Zelensky or any Ukrainian leader may still want that, but this should not be Europe's policy. Nor should Europe's policy be to side with Russia and help Russia conquer more Ukrainian territory. Russian leaders may want that, but that shouldn't be Europe's policy.

I said that what Europe should want is something that looks like the armistice agreement in the Korean War in 1953, which is not even a formal end to the war. They should not offer Ukraine membership in the EU. They should not be offering Ukraine membership in a thing called NATO, because, for me, NATO is effectively dead. What NATO means is the United States plus Europe having a joint policy, and I just don't think that's there anymore, right? So I think it should be Europe. And I think, by the way, at least since the coming of Trump here in 2026, in a lumpy way, a slow way, Europe is in fact pushing in this direction. But I don't think they should be just siding with Ukraine and helping Ukraine drive Russia out of Ukrainian soil.

I think it should be an armistice. But I want to say it again: I don't think Europe should offer Ukraine membership in the EU or NATO. These are just daggers in the eyes of Putin and Lavrov. They're never going to go for that. They're going to see that, as they should, as a threat. And by the way, Europe doesn't have to admit that the expansion of NATO caused the war. I believe it did. I think John's right about that here. But I disagree about how to go forward. I think that this is not about handing Putin more territory or so forth. I think the bottom line should be an armistice at the line of contact today, and Europe should be supporting Ukraine as long as they stick to that. And if they depart from that, punish Ukraine, pull support back.

Don't just simply pick your team. Are you on Team Ukraine or Team Zelensky, or are you on Team Putin? I told them they should be on Team Europe. And that's what I think for America. I don't think we should be on the teams of other countries, whoever they are. I think we should be on Team America. And if you're on Team America, you've got to do the hard work of figuring out what your interest is. And I believe regional stability is the United States' dominant interest in key regions of the world. And I think for Europe, it's also the key interest here in Russia and Ukraine. It's not in anybody's interest to have this war escalate because you're trying to get another, what, 200 square kilometers of territory by Christmas? This isn't worth anything.

#Glenn

One of the weird situations we see today, with the Americans, the Russians, and the Ukrainians meeting in Abu Dhabi, is that the Russians, based on how they see the source of this conflict, want a new European security architecture. But they don't want the Europeans at the table because they think the Europeans would most likely sabotage the talks, which, in all honesty, sounds reasonable. They probably would. However, a new European security architecture requires the involvement of the Europeans.

And, of course, on the other side, you have the Europeans—not actually at the table, because they're not allowed in. They want to sit at the table, but they don't really want to talk to the Russians. So, if we identify the European security architecture as being the problem—that is, we built European security after the Cold War around NATO because it was facilitating this collective hegemony—now it's gone. As you said, NATO is dead. How do we refer to it?

#Robert Pape

Yeah, here's what I think the mistake is, Glenn. People think the sequence should be deal first, stability second. They've got the sequence backwards. You've got to have stability first. Then a deal could come or not. And by the way, once you have stability, people are going to start to lose interest in these details of a deal. That's what happened with Korea. Notice that we haven't had people come back and ring the bell, saying, "Hey, we'd better get a real peace agreement," since 1953. Now, that's not to say there haven't been things since 1953. I understand. But at the same time, this is, I think, the dilemma here: people think it's deal first, stability second. This is a big mistake. I believe that you have balances of power.

You assert that balance of power, and that is what produces stability. And what I was telling the members of the EU Parliament is that they need to define their objectives, not as, "Well, let's get a deal and see what we can get." No, this is not a real estate deal. This is great power politics of the first order. You establish what your goal is, and I'm saying what their goal should be—not very humbly, I should say. I'm saying it should be regional stability, not simply victory for Ukraine or victory for Russia. But I think that this is the way you go forward, and then you enforce it. If it turns out that Ukraine starts bombing Moscow, you punish Ukraine for bombing Moscow.

If it turns out that Putin is going to turn off all of the electricity in Kiev on February 1st, well, then you're siding more with Ukraine. But you're making it clear that what you're doing is calibrating things to stability, right? Not to who's right or who's wrong in this—you know, what's the ultimate existential right or wrong here? In great power politics, that's not a good idea. I think a better idea is going for a balance of power and then making clear you're going to enforce your policy. You're just going to enforce that policy, and you're not going to sit around trying to get people to come to some table where you're just wasting everybody's time, and it's probably undermining stability.

#Glenn

Yeah, I think the problem here in Europe is that Manichaeism is so strong. Everything is seen as good versus bad, which means that the balance of power and neutrality are considered immoral concepts now.

#Robert Pape

This is where the realists have always had the moral high ground. And it's so ironic because realists, myself included, say we don't go for the moral high ground. But then it turns out, who's got the most moral policy? Who are the people always arguing not to kill civilians? It's always the realists. Who are the ones who have policies that actually do lead to not killing civilians? It is the realists, because if you don't have a balance of power, those civilians are the first ones to get it in the neck. And so I hear what you're saying, Glenn, but I think we still need to talk in terms of the balance of power. And I did this at the EU Parliament, where I'm pretty sure I was talking to a bunch of liberals. And they didn't throw me out on my ear, even if they weren't super thrilled with the way I put it. But they needed to hear it so they could see, well, what are they concretely going to go for? What is it?

#Glenn

Professor Pape, thank you so much for your time. I know you have a class to teach. I've got to go teach preventive war.

#Robert Pape

I'm going into preventive war right now. Best of luck. Thank you, Clark. It's really been a pleasure. Bye-bye.