

John Helmer: Iran Just Did the Unthinkable – China's Response to Trump

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#Nima

Hi everybody, today is Tuesday, May 12th, 2026, and our dear friend, our brother John Helmer, is here with us. Welcome back, John.

#John

Thank you for having me, Nima. Good to be back.

#Nima

John, finally Donald Trump got the response from the Iranian side, and he was waiting because they were supposed to receive it earlier. But after four days, as Donald Trump himself pointed out, we waited four days for a document from Iran that would take less than 10 minutes to prepare. And basically, he's talking about how Iran didn't change that much in this new response to the American proposal. The head of the Iranian parliament is saying that the main points on the part of the Iranians are the 14-point plan that they had handed to the American side before this.

We had a 10-point plan, if you remember, then a 14-point plan, which was the 10-point plan together with some preconditions on the part of the Iranians. And on the other hand, yesterday, the head of the Iranian parliament tweeted that we are prepared. If it is diplomacy, we're prepared for that. If it's war, we are more than prepared for that. And we have surprises for you. Donald Trump is going to be in China on Wednesday. How do you see the Iranian response and the way that Donald Trump expected the Iranian response and the way it went so far?

#John

Big question. Let's take the pieces piece by piece. It's very valuable that you should indicate what Mr. Ghalibaf has said, because it's essential that we do understand the limitations of what Trump's able to say about what he understands the Iranian side is saying. It's interesting, and I can recommend that our audience go to rollcall.com and look at the full transcript or watch it. It's easier

to cope with Trump when you read it — the May 11 press conference, which ironically was given at a mental health care event. If ever there was a case from Trump's texts of someone badly in need of mental health care, it's him. But let's just go through it. In the first place, you made a very important point, Nima.

The way he described the Iranian paper and then said he couldn't be bothered to read all the way through it indicates that he can't understand what he's shown, what he's reading. He doesn't actually read the originals. Others bring him summaries, quotes, excerpts, but he can't — his brain doesn't work on the detail. So, 14 points — he maybe understands in general two or three ideas. First point, this is a serious problem from the Iranian side, or for the Chinese side, for the Russian side. Bear in mind, President Putin will follow to China quite shortly. It's been very clear, and Yuri Ushakov indicated that the Russian visit to China is around the corner. So how does one understand how to negotiate with Trump when he can't understand the main points first?

Second, as I understand it, the Iranian side has, as it were, grouped its points into three stages. The first stage is confidence-building and stabilizing the—let's call it—the platform of the battlefield, so there is no fighting and each side is secure in understanding that there will be no resumption of fighting. And the Chinese side clearly has emphasized, as Mr. Wang Yi emphasized—foreign minister, but more importantly, Politburo member—with Abbas Araghchi last week, not only no resumption of fighting, but a stable base for negotiations. So the Chinese side is endorsing the staging, as the Iranian side seems to have put it: first, a durable ceasefire and trust in the Americans not to break the ceasefire, durable covering the Israelis as well.

But we basically already know the Americans broke the ceasefire with their provocative naval maneuvers in the Strait of Hormuz. And the Israelis have, if anything, escalated in Lebanon. So there are repeated violations of the ceasefire. So stage one, from an Iranian point of view, or from anyone else's point of view, is confidence-building and stable adherence to terms. Trump doesn't get that. And in fact, he doesn't mention it. What he does mention over and over—and we've often referred to this as a cognitive disability on the president's part—and it's getting worse. You can see from the text in rollcall.com, and I've got it in front of me, that's why I'm looking down at the paper. You can see that he can't understand more than one or two concepts of this negotiation.

And so he focuses actually in contradiction to the Iranian three stages. Iranian three stages, and correct me if I'm wrong: one, stable base, stable ceasefire, confidence-building that one side isn't violating. And the two sides who are violators are the U.S. and Israel. One. Two. Three. Hormuz regime that comprises not only the Straits regime for the future, a toll that covers reparations, but also a dismantling of U.S. and worldwide sanctions on Iran, of which the Hormuz blockade is a good example. Third stage is nuclear issues. That's, on the one hand, an Iranian undertaking not to develop a nuclear weapon.

Next, it's the issue of what's to be done with the stock of enriched nuclear material. And then associated with that is the issue of Iranian missile defense capabilities and the Israeli demand to

disarm Iran entirely. Well, let's just say the Israeli war aim here is genocidal destruction of the Iranian state, disarmament of every kind, and so forth and so on. But look at exactly what Trump had to say. He's asked what sort of plan he has in dealing with the Iranian proposal, and he repetitively goes to what he calls a very simple plan. Now, he's actually describing what's inside his head, which is very simple, and it's repeated.

I don't know why, he says, you don't say it like it is. Iran cannot have a nuclear weapon. Now, he repeats that approximately three times in about five minutes. Iran cannot have a nuclear weapon. He's otherwise going to the third stage of where Iran's proposals don't go yet. He doesn't and won't address the so-called preconditions, stage one, stage two. He can't accept as a negotiating position that the U.S. has to reassure its adversary. No. Instead, his notion of negotiation is destroy the other side, which he repeats by saying that he's destroyed the Navy, he's destroyed the Air Force. They have no anti-aircraft, he says.

And I'm flipping my page. Then he goes to something that's almost indicative of his failure to understand the nuclear enrichment issue. Iran told me very strongly, I'm quoting, because they intend to give us the nuclear dust, as I call it. What he means by nuclear dust is the stock of enriched nuclear material. But he calls it dust because it's easier than talking about other terms, because it's a term—he means dust—but the nuclear dust, which is what we hit. Then he repeats the story that, in fact, the bombing raid of last June, the uncontested bombing raid on Natanz, Isfahan, and the third site, he claims we've destroyed entirely.

#Nima

Yeah, Fordow. You mean Fordow.

#John

Fordow, Natanz, and Isfahan. He claims, on the one hand, the United States must take out the dust and that Iran has agreed. That's false. Iran has, in fact, said we will retain the materials. President Putin spoke of this in some detail, interestingly, on Saturday night. I can come back to that in a minute. There's no question that Iran refuses to hand over enriched nuclear materials, either current stocks or future stocks that might be developed out of Bushehr and other nuclear facilities. Trump both says we destroyed it and says we want to take it. In other words, it exists. He can't mentally grip the contradictions between the two. So then he says—he repeats it—they guarantee, meaning Iran, no nuclear weapons for a very long period of time and a couple of other minor things. But they just can't get there.

That's about his last word on the third stage. But it indicates he's nowhere near addressing the first two stages: ceasefire, stable weapons, which also include no resumption of the U.S. bases in the area, no reinforcements, and so forth and so on. He can't grip and can't address the three stages. And he hasn't read because he says he threw it away. He stopped reading the plan. Now, what does

one have when one looks at such a negotiator? What does the Iranian side think when they look at his two delegated negotiators, Witkoff and Kushner? From the Iranian point of view, from the record they've made in Gaza, the record they've made everywhere, they are liars. They are deception operators. They are sabotage operators. They are smoke screeners. They cannot be trusted to negotiate in good faith, fundamentally.

However, Iran says, as you said, Ghalibaf says, if they want to negotiate, we're ready. Ghalibaf is not, if I'm not mistaken, explicitly criticizing Witkoff and Kushner's performance to date. The same thing with China. The same thing with President Putin's press conference last Saturday night. So... what do we have then? A U.S. president who can't mentally deal with a plan of any kind, in this case Iranian, but with Chinese and Russian additions. He can't negotiate through two negotiators who are considered absolutely untrustworthy. You can't negotiate with them. That leaves Vance... and all of the publicity that's come from Axios about what Vance achieved or didn't achieve, what pieces of paper he nearly signed, what he did—Axios is simply a totally inaccurate Israeli mouthpiece in Washington.

And the reporter who reflects that is Israeli, has served in the Israeli military, and isn't to be believed. Not only that, the record shows that whatever he reports as exclusive—and Trump is talking to him relatively regularly now, giving him exclusives. He's a deception operator, that's all. So it's near impossible to see how one would negotiate with such a combination. Vance is sidelined, Witkoff and Kushner are untrustworthy, and Trump is mentally incapable. Okay, now let's look, if you don't mind, I'll just extend it a bit to an important contribution Putin made, and then we'll come back to what you have to say about China, the China visit. On Saturday night, there's been much misunderstood in the Western press about what President Putin said.

He was speaking—I need to point out to our audience and remind—that was at the end of the Victory Day parade, and he was speaking to a group of Russian reporters, okay? So I'll sum up what he said as a policy of three or four no's. There's to be no Russian criticism of Trump. There's to be no Russian deterrence of U.S. action on the Ukraine battlefield or throughout Europe. No Russian deterrence for the remilitarization of Germany, which has its counterpart with China and the remilitarization of Japan. So no criticism of Trump, no deterrence of U.S. action, no escalation control. That's what Russia is, as it were, having difficulty gripping right now.

We can go into the details on the battlefield, at sea, and in relation to the drone war, as the Ukrainians are increasingly using their range. And finally, no hurry. This is important. Let me explain. Russia is in the U.S. equivalent of a midterm election campaign. The national parliamentary elections take place in the third week of September—pardon me, September 25—which is a very short distance away. What we have then is a significant locking in of domestic political campaign calculation. In such a time, what does a candidate do, trying to mobilize against increasing public disapproval of the president's performance, the prime minister's performance, the governor's performance, the parliamentary performance, and so on—but no disapproval of the army's performance?

That's constant and high. The correlation between approval of Putin and approval of the Russian army has been broken now. It's very important to understand how Russians begin to feel about this. In this context, Putin is not in a hurry to do anything surprising. He needs to be reassuring. He needs to be reassuring to Trump. He needs to be reassuring to the Chinese. He needs to be reassuring to Iran, to North Korea, to Cuba. He wants, in fact, a relatively stable platform as he goes into the election because he's got to combat rising disapproval. So no criticism of Trump is part of a no-hurry campaign. No deterrence for the United States is really a statement of "we're not going to escalate." Those threats to use the Iskander against the center of Kiev, they were empty to start with.

The Europeans treated them as empty. There was no drone attack on the parade on Saturday. There was no Russian retaliation. If you look carefully at the battlefield, you see slow preparation and a slowdown of advance westward. So no escalation control in any area, no escalation, no military escorts at sea. Why? Because, in fact, when you look at it carefully, the Russian side sees long negotiation on the Iran war, high oil price between 95 and 110. Long negotiation. Get us into the election month at that level of price, with a fleet that currently—some of these so-called alternative fleet tankers are idle. Russia doesn't need to arm-escort all the tankers that are going out, that are threatened by the Europeans and the Americans, or threatened by Ukrainian drone attacks.

Doesn't need to, because some are idle. It can sacrifice tankers because it's got plenty. At the moment, the damage Ukrainian drones have done to Russian export infrastructure has been more than offset by, let's call it, the Iran war-induced price. So we are exporting less volume but earning more revenue. And that combination is part of Putin's no-hurry till we get to the election. That's, as I understand it, the kind of line he tried to run on Saturday night, with one important point I need to reinforce. I published it yesterday. You can look at it. Readers can look at it in *Dances with Bears*. It's what President Putin said about the murder of Ali Larijani. This must be understood in Tehran to be deeply offensive. Why?

When President Putin telephoned President Trump a few days ago, he made the point—I believe it was April 29, but I've forgotten the date in my head. It was three days after the so-called assassination attempt in Washington, at the Hilton Hotel ballroom. President Trump, according to the readout from Yuri Ushakov, expressed his great sympathy for President Trump, his family, and his friends and officials that the assassination attempt was foiled. He expressed sympathy for what had happened and encouragement to the president. April 29th—and yet Saturday night, when speaking of the Russian contribution to the negotiations on nuclear issues, Putin referred to Ali Larijani, whom he's met four times and negotiated on the nuclear issue with Larijani, who was secretary or chief executive of the Supreme National Security Council in Iran.

He spoke of him, unfortunately, passing away. The Russian is "depart from life," passing away. Now, you never and can't use that Russian expression to describe bombing, assassination, or murder.

That's what happened to Larijani. Not only that, Putin knows perfectly well that Netanyahu claimed credit for it and that Trump immediately endorsed it. Why express sympathy for Trump at an attempted assassination and use euphemisms that are offensively euphemistic about murder and assassination for Larijani? That's indicative of the way in which President Putin speaks publicly in such a way as to ingratiate, appease President Trump. That's the first—no criticism of Trump. I guess I've said enough about... yeah.

#Nima

John, the other point that Putin mentioned is about the enriched uranium. He said, like in 2015, we can do something about that. And they may send, you know, the enriched uranium to Russia instead of sending it to the United States. But I don't see that happening as well, because the Iranian part said that this enriched uranium—400,000 kilograms of enriched uranium—is like Iranian soil. It's not going to leave Iran, and it's going to stay in Iran. We can find some sort of solution for that, but it's not going to go to Russia or the United States. But Putin repeated that. I don't know what his understanding of the Iranian position is.

#John

You repeated his understanding. What he said was, yes, in 2015, we reached a deal on the enriched uranium problem or issue. Everyone, said Putin, had agreed, including Israel. He mentioned Israel as having agreed then. So we're talking about the JCPOA-Obama agreement. He said, subsequently, without getting into the timeframe, Larijani came to me. And in that context, he said what I've just said about Larijani, and said, no, Iran is intending to keep the enriched uranium. And Putin said, that's fine with me, but you understand the United States and Israel will not agree. And that's all he said on the issue.

By making it clear, it was still a subject to be negotiated, but the Iranian position, he said, implied that it was not going to be acceptable to the United States and Israel. The implication is that some form of compromise has to be reached on that. And that takes us back to where Trump is. We want to take the, quote, nuclear dust. So Putin is basically saying, we made an offer. We continue to have that offer on the table—that is to say, some form of holding the enriched nuclear materials in such a way as to neutralize its threat as Israel sees it and as the United States sees it. The offer's on the table. Nobody's going to accept it—neither Iran nor the United States nor Israel. And that's the point at which he left the subject.

#Nima

John, here is what the spokesperson for Iran's parliament's Foreign Policy and National Security Committee posted just moments ago before coming to this live. He said one of Iran's options in the event of another attack could be 90% enrichment. So this is the response to Donald Trump. And it seems that they're seriously considering that in Iran, in parliament, and if they decide on it, there is

no way that the government or anybody can go against it because it's going to be in parliament, then the Guardian Council in Iran, and the government should follow what they are asking for. And I think somehow, if you look at the escalation, we're heading to that moment. I think it's going to be 60% if they go to 90%, because they're talking about nuclear dust. What does that mean? I don't know. The guy is trying to deceive himself. I don't know how that's going to help him.

#John

Well, um, we're not talking at cross purposes. We're simply explaining that the Iranian side says, if you attack, then we reserve the right to enrich to nuclear warhead status with the missile stocks we have. And if you threaten us—and behind this is something we've discussed before—it's a very serious matter. We're not talking lightly about it, that Israel has nuclear attack plans for Iran, probably concentrating on targets in the northern half of Iran, and thereby creating potential threats to the eastern countries, starting with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and then India. This is a very serious issue that those countries need to be aware of and are aware of. But let me tackle your question in a slightly different way by going back to what Trump says he thinks he's doing. He was asked, the question was, is there still a leadership in Iran that you believe you can negotiate with?

Trump quotes, I think so. Well, you have two. You have the moderates and you have the lunatics. And I think the moderates are more respected. The lunatics want to fight till the end. You know, there will be a very—it'll be a very quick fight. But you, I call them—you have, just like our country, we have lunatics too. We have—I call them lunatics. I call them stupid people too. But in Iran, they have the moderates. They're dying to make a deal. And then you have the lunatics. And I guess they're a little bit afraid of the lunatics. But why not? The level of ferocity for protests—you know, the people are watching it. They want to go out in the streets. You can hear there is a disordered mind. Let's not be in any misunderstanding here. That man, his mind is disordered.

You can't negotiate with such a cognitively disabled individual. But you can hear what he's being briefed on. We know he doesn't read. He's being briefed by the CIA and others that the Iranian people are ready to go back into the streets to protest. We know that to be false. And we also believe that John Ratcliffe, the director of the CIA, is likely to have told Trump that that attempt at regime change in January has failed. First. Second, you can hear the analysis of the intelligence services that there are two factions in Iran. You don't hear them say, by decapitating the moderates, you've left what he calls the lunatics. You don't hear them telling Trump, and you don't hear him understanding, that the Israeli policy of decapitation has in fact radicalized the leadership and preserved it on a different basis.

No, no, that's beyond his ability to understand because he thinks he's decapitated everybody and everything. So you have the capacity to understand: we'd like to talk to the moderates, but we can't deal with the lunatics, so we'll have to kill them. So we come back, exactly as you said, Nima, to a standoff in which, if Trump is to continue along this line, this is not an individual who's looking for an exit. This is not an individual showing that he regards negotiation with Iran as necessary to protect

his political position in the midterm elections come November 3rd. He's not showing—if we just look back at this disordered mind—you can at least say what there isn't. There's no reference here to the price of oil. There's no reference to the Strait of Hormuz.

There's no reference to using force to achieve a domestic value that would help him and the Republicans retain a majority in Congress. So you'd have to conclude, is it possible? No, it's not possible for Trump to negotiate directly with Iran in the way we've expressed it. So then the question you raised at the beginning, Nima, and we're here on Tuesday, and tomorrow Trump arrives in the evening in Beijing, what can the meeting with China do to benefit the goals for the Strait of Hormuz, the ceasefire, the terms of peace that China says, according to President Xi's four propositions, that China endorses? Can China either pressure or induce or persuade Trump on any form of negotiated outcome that isn't fighting? Can he do that? Can Xi do that with Trump? Is Trump even looking for that as he gets to Beijing? I think that was the question you began with, wasn't it, Nima?

#Nima

Yeah, yeah. I think many people are somehow arguing, or they want to know—people want to know—what does Donald Trump want from China with this trip? Is he going to do some sort of business together with China? Is he going to ask something about Russia and Iran? And what would be the response from the Chinese part? And it doesn't seem that China would, or anybody—I don't see Russia or Iran—helping Donald Trump with his timeline. That's why Iran, as I've mentioned before, is not giving any sort of sign that they're giving something to Donald Trump before going to China. And that was the main point on the part of the Iranians.

#John

You're not going to get anything from us to help you with this visit to China.

#Nima

And nobody seems to be interested in helping Donald Trump. But how is that going to help him? How is that going to shape the atmosphere in China? How do you see that happening?

#John

Well, that's a very difficult question for me to answer as a Russia correspondent first. So I've got to disclaim any special knowledge, any sources, or any Russian insight into the behavior of President Xi, who also has his factional conflicts over Taiwan, over the remilitarization of Japan, over domestic issues, and so forth. We've talked a bit about that in the past. We also talked about the unwillingness of China to confirm that Trump's visit was on all of last week from the Araghchi visit and the readout from Wang Yi. After Araghchi's meeting, right through the week, through Friday,

the Chinese side refused to confirm that the summit meeting was on. Instead, they seemed to be creating preconditions relating to the Strait of Hormuz. I can just read you, because they've been repeating it all the way through the week, and they repeated it on May 12th.

That's today in Beijing. The Foreign Ministry briefing was asked about what China's view will be as the visit begins. Guo Jiakun, who's the principal spokesman at the Foreign Ministry, said on the Iran conflict, the pressing priority now is to prevent by all means a relapse in fighting. Now, the term "relapse in fighting" they'd used all the way through last week. And they appeared to make it a precondition to Trump's visit. Trump did resume fighting with performative naval operations in the Strait of Hormuz, with the triggering of action by both sides in and around the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Oman. The U.S. escalated with sanctions against China.

The most recent sanction was on Friday, when the State Department and the Treasury, the OFAC—the Office of the sanctions agency—announced that it was sanctioning several Chinese companies for having supplied satellite information to the Iranians to improve their targeting. That followed sanctions against Chinese refinery companies for accepting Russian and Iranian oil, principally Iranian oil, in the so-called independent refinery teapot trade. So what happened during the week, when China seemed to be conditioning the visit on Trump's avoiding a relapse of fighting and avoidance of escalation into higher sanctions, was that the U.S. simply ignored China and provoked them. This is typical, one might say, of Trump's behavior as a negotiator.

Provoke, make uncertain, and test your, quote, adversary. Well, the Chinese announced on Monday, 9 o'clock, a one-line announcement from the Foreign Ministry, Wang Yi's ministry, that the visit was on. And it appears then that they go on repeating last week's conditions. Now, what exactly the Chinese are doing is difficult to say. They also appear to have a policy of several no's. On the one hand, they wrap this up and call it the four propositions of President Xi. I'll just read them out, and I invite the audience to understand what meaning these four propositions have. First, the principle of peaceful coexistence in the Middle East. Second, the principle of national sovereignty in the Middle East.

Third, the principle of international rule of law. And fourth principle—I'm flipping the page so I can read it out—a balanced approach to development and security. Security is a prerequisite for development, and China is ready to share the opportunities of Chinese modernization with the Gulf countries and work with them to foster favorable conditions for development and security. Those are the four propositions. They either mean something, or they mean absolutely nothing, because they are so vague; they are not applied to the current negotiation. They are the Chinese equivalent of what Putin is calling—Putin only—and his emissary to the United States, Kirill Dmitriev, the Anchorage Formula. What is this?

It's no criticism of Trump, no action to deter the Americans from doing what they're doing, no escalation control on the Chinese side, and no hurry on Xi's side. He wasn't in a hurry to, as it were, postpone the visit and put more pressure than the Chinese side had done last year when they did

postpone the previous summit date on Trump. You asked, what do they hope to gain? Well, they say—and there's an interesting account by Kurt Campbell, who was responsible during the Biden administration for China policy—it's just appeared in **Foreign Affairs**, May 11, so that's yesterday, on how the summit could change the course of U.S.-China competition. If I took what Campbell has to say and answered your question, he'd be saying, I don't know either.

He calls the U.S. position strategic ambiguity. He doesn't know how China will respond to these mixed signals from Trump. What he does emphasize, pardon me, is that Trump is escalating on Taiwan. He's preparing one of the largest arms deals with Taiwan that include upgraded, modernized drones and other warfare means drawn out of the experience of fighting Russia on the Ukraine battlefield. China replies, Taiwan's the core interest to be discussed with Trump. So Campbell, speaking with the experience of the Biden administration, doesn't know what Trump will do. He calls that strategic ambiguity. He's ambiguous. He doesn't know. Trump, he thinks, is ambiguous. He doesn't know what kind of deal Trump can make on the Taiwan issue. It's not the only one that China's made very clear.

As another military priority, it's the remilitarization of Japan. This is the mirror image of Russia's concern at the remilitarization of Germany, of Poland, of Finland, as part of NATO's further expansion of military threat towards Russia as NATO continues to move east. China's been very clear that the behavior of Japan, its increasing exercises with new U.S. missile capabilities, which are dual-capable, nuclear-capable missile firings, are unacceptable evidence of a return by Japan to the Second World War. So, in a brief answer to your question, how do the four propositions, so-called, of President Xi represent any form of negotiating framework with Trump, given what we've already described as Trump's incapability to understand a piece of paper with 14 points or three stages on it?

Answer: Trump can't comprehend the four propositions, even if we could—and we can't. Can President Xi be counted on to be clear to Trump? Yes, he can. And according to the U.S. versions I see, China will be very clear on Taiwan, on Japan, on the remilitarization of the entire region from Canada down to Australia, all aimed at China. Yes, China will be clear about that. Will it be so clear as Wang Yi tried to say to Abbas Araqchi last week in support of Iran's sovereignty, Iran's self-determination, Iran's security? Answer: unlikely, unlikely it will be so clear. Does that mean, from an Iranian point of view, less Chinese support, more readiness of China to cut a separate deal with Trump?

Does it mean China puts coexistence with the hegemon ahead of resolution on peaceful terms between Iran and the Arab states? All of that's unclear and uncertain. But the interesting part that I'd like to emphasize for our audience is the Chinese position, the so-called four propositions, and the Russian position, Putin's position with the so-called Anchorage formula, are mirror images of the same problem. What's the problem? Well, it can't be spoken of, can it? If it's the first no, you can't criticize Trump. What is the problem for us? We are very clear about it. The United States threatens everyone. The Trump regime threatens everyone with violence, genocide, and destruction of state. First. Second, you can't negotiate in good faith with any of

#Nima

John, I think the outcome of what is going on, what has happened so far in the Middle East, is going to be beneficial for the Chinese position or the Russian position. Because when you don't have the United States that much—the presence of the United States—basically, I'm talking about the U.S. bases in GCC countries. So what would be the alternatives? And is this war bringing or opening up new opportunities for China and Russia to be more involved in the Middle East?

#John

It's a good question. My instinct is to say Iran is demonstrating what a small country can do against the empire on its own, self-sufficient. Yes, with some help, some assistance, satellite assistance, resupply. Let's not minimize what we don't know—that is to say, Russian assistance, military assistance, Chinese assistance, military assistance. We don't know exactly what it is. We can see, however, that Iran is doing what no Arab state has been capable of doing as each of the secular Arab leaders were destroyed—Gaddafi, Assad, Saddam Hussein, and so on.

Iran is showing the capacity to fight and establish peace, a level of balance of force deterrence, which on the other hand triggers an Israeli determination to destroy Iran with nuclear weapons if necessary, and a U.S. determination to destroy Iran by conventional munitions to avoid using nuclear weapons if possible. And yet Iran, in a certain sense, retains escalation control because it can deter. How does it deter? Well, you and other colleagues go into this in great detail, and I don't need to repeat it. My own view is Iran is succeeding on its own terms, and it's succeeding on its own terms because without our allies—yes, there are strategic partnerships between Iran and Russia.

But just as we heard Putin say about Larijani's murder and Trump's assassination attempt, he favors Trump. He did everything in the same speech in a matter of 10 minutes on Saturday night. We also know that he will, if pushed, personally favor Israel. Notwithstanding, there are solid Russian relations at the military level, intelligence level, to assist Iran to do what it must do and what it's capable of doing on its own terms. And Russia is not criticizing Iran's terms. Is China going as far as Russia in that way? I don't think so. I think that President Xi's four propositions go much less in the direction of supporting Iran than Wang Yi was prepared to go with Araghchi last week.

But what Araghchi and Wang Yi agreed was a level of support for Iran's current negotiating position, which hasn't been reinforced by anything said since. So let's see, to give the Chinese side the benefit of the doubt, how they can accommodate the priorities we've spelled out. But I do want to emphasize, since you asked what my hunch is, Iran learned by paying a terrible price. It must be able to do the job of defending itself and deterring more violence—American violence or Israeli violence. It must be able to do this on its own, self-sufficiently. And its mastery of drone warfare, at sea and in the air, is an example of how it's done. But so are its ballistic missile capabilities and its cruise missile capabilities, all of which have survived what the empire has thrown at it.

#Nima

John, Joe Biden, before leaving his position in the United States, said that NATO is getting better, is getting stronger because Finland and Sweden joined NATO, and NATO is somehow expanding itself because of these two countries. I think they were so important because they survived the Cold War without picking sides, you know, without taking sides and being part of the Soviet bloc or part of the West. And that achievement convinced the Biden administration that NATO is getting better. What has happened to NATO? I would say, considering the war in Ukraine and the Middle East, it's showing some sort of new divisions happening within NATO that we haven't seen with the war in Ukraine. How do you see NATO today? Where is NATO? And what would be the future of NATO in your eyes?

#John

Well, this is obviously a controversial question on which each of the colleagues that you invite on have different views. Clearly, the differences, however, are focused on different kinds of evidence. So it's, in a way, to indicate, for example, that at the level of balance of particular weapons—anti-aircraft or anti-missile defense versus Russian missile attack—NATO has been defeated. You could go through one weapon system after another and come out with a balance sheet that shows NATO has been defeated on the Ukrainian battlefield. Yes. Does that mean, however, in answer to your strategic question, is NATO breaking up on account of these operational or tactical or campaign losses?

That's more difficult to say. I know that many people in our audience want to see the U.S. empire collapsing. They want to see NATO breaking up. It's almost an obsession on the part of Kirill Dmitriev, Putin's emissary for the United States. Every day, several times an hour even, he emphasizes what he calls the breakup of the European Union, the weakness inside the UK. He spent the last 48 hours producing about 12 tweets against Keir Starmer, who's about to be booted out as a result of the failure of the Labour Party in the municipal elections a couple of days back.

There is a view that NATO has been terminally damaged by the failures on the Ukraine battlefield and also the failures in the Middle East. I'm not disputing the failures. I'm simply disputing the conclusions that one comes to when one looks at the whole evidence. What's the whole evidence? Just as you said, the neutral states—Austria, Finland, Switzerland, and Ireland—have all become either NATO members or have entirely given up their neutrality. Switzerland too. This is a gain for the—let's leave aside the NATO alliance as such—for the doctrine of permanent war against Russia and, correlatively, Russia's comparably permanent war against China.

Those are the two dominating strategies, if you like, geopolitical commitments. And I don't see a weakening of the weak NATO states or their commitment to permanent war against Russia. No. On the other hand, you could say that when Alexander Stubb, the leader of Finland, says it's time to start talking to Russia, which he said in the last few hours, and Macron says it's time to approach

Russia, and President Putin said on Saturday that increasingly he sees these signs as indicating that the line of permanent conflict, which he associated with, for example, Boris Johnson, is coming to an end, he thought, hopefully. He meant that's coming to an end. It was his wish, it's his hope.

It wasn't a prediction. My own view is that no matter how weak these regimes are—Germany is—Scholz couldn't be weaker as a chancellor. Putin rubbed it in by saying he would prefer to negotiate with a German, but that would be the ex-chancellor—suddenly his name has dropped out of my head—but it was a Social Democratic chancellor who's been on the Russian payroll for years and is no longer credible in Germany. But he was rubbing it in to Chancellor Scholz by saying, we're not against Germany, we're against Scholz. What am I trying to say here? The answer is no. Even if Scholz falls, there's no assurance that the AfD, the Greens, the Social Democratic Party, the SPD, and what remains of the CDU won't continue committing to permanent war against Russia.

Equally, if Starmer is replaced as prime minister, if he retires in the next few hours or days, he's going to be replaced by Labour leaders or Tory leaders, figures, or the Greens, all of whom are equally committed. And as for the Reform Party, it's going to attract protest votes. It's not going to capture the prime ministry. And in any event, in English politics or British politics, we're not going to see an end to that permanent commitment to war with Russia. Nor do we see, in a country like Greece, where the population is deeply opposed to the permanent war against Russia, the regime, Prime Minister Mitsotakis, fully committed in a way that Greece hasn't been for a generation. Fully committed. So, long-winded way of me saying, you can match NATO's losses with NATO's gains. On balance, I think the test is both ideological and structural.

There is no change in the commitment to permanent war with Russia in Europe. If anything, Russia has to assume, as ex-President Dmitry Medvedev keeps saying, that this long-term permanent war will spread, will intensify in the Baltic states, in Poland, in Finland, in Sweden, in Norway, up to Greenland, across to Canada. I'm afraid I don't see any significant loss of confidence in the permanent war against Russia on the part of the current Canadian government. So, on balance, no. The U.S. empire may be weakening, but it is not losing its grip on NATO. It's increasing the pressure on NATO to spend more, to put more of that money into the U.S. military-industrial complex. But I don't see NATO losing or revising its commitment to permanent war with Russia. So the empire is not changing. It's losing a battle, but not the war.

#Nima

John, my understanding of NATO as an alliance is as a sort of defensive force, because they were created to defend these NATO countries against the Soviet Union, because there was a Warsaw Pact and it was... you know, they put an end to the Warsaw Pact, the decision on the part of the Russians and the Soviet Union put an end to the Warsaw Pact. And they continued with the NATO alliance. To this day, considering what was the outcome of NATO, basically there were no attacks on

NATO countries. And basically what we've seen from NATO is the attack—NATO attacking other countries. I'm not talking about NATO countries, I'm talking about the United States as the main member of NATO, attacking other countries and Europeans paying for the empire's sort of wars.

And which, in my opinion, after all, are not American wars or Israeli wars. You know, Israel putting the United States in a position to attack other countries in the Middle East. You call it Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, name it. And these are all Israeli wars that the United States has decided to go to war in, paid for by Europeans. And Donald Trump is asking from 2% to 5%. I think this is the time for Europeans to understand what was the outcome so far for Europeans. They got more immigrants from these endless wars of the United States in the Middle East.

#John

I think the history can be read a different way. It's been US strategy to destroy the left in every European country, including the UK, and it has succeeded. The NATO alliance, the European Union, these were all US-supported schemes to make sure that communism or socialism, or some combination, whether it was in Greece, Italy, the UK, France, wherever, could never dominate policymaking, could never lead in those countries. That was a wartime policy of the United States. It was one of the reasons that there was, let's say, tacit support for Hitler's so-called anti-left, anti-communist campaigns inside Germany and elsewhere in Europe. And NATO and the European Union have to be understood as allied collective organizations dominated by the United States to destroy the alternative vision of, call it left, call it communist.

The names don't matter very much if one understands conceptually. They were the sources of national independence after the end of World War II, and that campaign has largely succeeded. And you can see in the political histories of each of these countries that success. The NATO expansion eastward was a natural corollary of U.S. strategy to destroy the Soviet Union, the source of communism, so-called. And it too has succeeded. Now, how one would interpret the relationship between Israel and the United States, that's something we could talk about for much longer than we have time. My own view is, if you look at U.S. strategy before Israel existed—and I wrote a book about the history of U.S. strategy in the Arab world from 1943 on—looking at Morocco, Libya, Algeria, Syria, Iraq, and so on.

I don't believe that Israel motivated the United States. I see it the opposite, the other way around. For example, just to take the Libyan example, the Libyan example was that Wheelus Air Force Base was a strategic, nuclear-armed bomber base for the United States to prepare to attack the Soviet Union. The bases the U.S. set up in Saudi Arabia, the relationships between each of the Arab states and the United States, were all based on—let's call it—a hegemonic doctrine dressed up as weaken the Soviet Union, prepare to attack the Soviet Union, deploy military force to attack the Soviet Union. All of that has been aided immeasurably by Israel. Israel was a platform for some of that.

Israel has its own imperial ambitions, its own goals. Jewish empire, Chabad doctrine, ambitions—no doubt about that. And so we can then discuss, over the years in particular cases, what was the dog, what was the tail, which was the agent, which was the fighting force, how well did the Israelis capture the American state to bring the U.S. government around to doing what the Jewish community, the Israel lobby, and Israel itself wanted. Those are big questions. We don't have the time for them, but I would put the sequence historically: the U.S. came first, the U.S. empire came first, Israel came second. And that's the way I see the Middle East. We can tell another story in Asia. But I don't want to minimize the role of the U.S. empire.

And I don't want to, how to say, exaggerate the level of weakness that these wars have inflicted on the U.S. The U.S. recovered from the Vietnam War, and it learned its lessons in the Vietnam War to use its proxies in a different way. You could argue that the way in which the Carter–Brzezinski attempt to draw the Soviet Union into Afghanistan and then fight to weaken the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, prevent the Soviet Union withdrawing from Afghanistan—a story told in Selig Harrison's books about the negotiations for the end of the Afghan war—you might want to see the same process now, the way in which the U.S. provoked the Soviet Politburo into Afghanistan and then began to bleed them and wouldn't let them out by negotiation. You might see that as a pattern for the way in which the United States and Israel are using all their resources to bleed Iran to death.

Now, we know that Afghanistan eventually, through the Taliban, defeated the United States. How many years do we describe that Afghan war since Carter and Brzezinski launched it in December 1979? It's a very long time, but it's a war that was lost and won by the Taliban, not by the Afghan Communist Party, not by Babrak Karmal and the others, right? If we see U.S. and Israeli policy following the Brzezinski–Afghanistan model, you can see them slowly or rapidly bleeding Iran to death. Use negotiations but never allow them to conclude. That's what Carter, that's what Reagan did with the changing leadership in Moscow. Gorbachev, from 1985, when he came to power, wanted to get out of Afghanistan, but the Republicans in power in Washington wouldn't let him. Between 1985 until the final withdrawal of 1989, four years later,

#John

If we view the current situation with Iran as a U.S.-Israeli attempt to destroy Iran—destroy it much as the U.S. aimed to do in Afghanistan—then we can see negotiations forever bleeding Iran to death.

#John

It's not very nice. It's not hopeful. But if we understand that behind Trump's cognitive disability, behind his madness, there is something comparable to the Carter–Brzezinski plan for Afghanistan, then you could call that the U.S. deep state, if you like. You could call that the U.S. imperial strategy

or the Israeli/U.S. strategy. And then you look at all that you very valuably put together. But I would suggest we look at the fate of Afghanistan in a war that was aimed also at the Soviet Union, also at Moscow. That was Brzezinski's and Carter's objective strategically. And they succeeded, they think.

#Nima

I think, by the way, before wrapping up, John, the war with Iran is totally different from what we've seen with the American wars before. You know, when we talk about the war in Vietnam and the war in Iraq, Afghanistan, it's all about the political defeat of the United States. They gained some sort of military, you know, leverage over these countries. We know that in Iraq and Afghanistan, they changed the regime in Iraq, for example. But this time around, it's the day the United States was militarily defeated in this war.

This is the difference, in my opinion. They're physically defeated. It's not something political, in my opinion. That's why I think if they had the means, if they had the bombs, the cruise missiles, interceptors, they would continue this war. They don't want to stop this war because that's the problem for Donald Trump himself. This is not a political sort of leverage that Iran has right now. It's about Iran defeating, militarily, physically, the United States for the first time, in my opinion.

#John

Well, two points. One is Vietnam defeated the United States on the ground, inflicting almost 60,000 U.S. casualties. I don't think one would or should, and I don't think you mean to, minimize the Vietnamese achievement. In the book I began my career with, called **Bringing Home the War**, I tried to show how the U.S. Army broke up under the pressure of military defeat on the battlefield. That can't happen again. At the same time, you're right, the U.S. suffered a major political defeat at home as a result of its military defeat in Vietnam. And that political defeat seemed to promise a significant re-evaluation of imperial strategy. Yes, but we're long beyond that. I agree entirely with you that Iran has shown the capabilities to defeat and deter the U.S. and Israel.

And as Ted Postol, your guest, has very usefully shown and documented, the capabilities of Iran to penetrate all the air defenses of both the U.S. bases and Israel itself—this is an extraordinary military achievement. Do we describe it as a deterrent for continuing the war? I don't think we're there yet, are we? There was a clear deterrent for the U.S. out of its battlefield defeat and the domestic political dissent in the United States at the time of the Vietnam War. What we can't say now, sadly—and everyone in our audience understands—is that there is no anti-war movement comparable in the United States now. Who's the anti-war movement? It's you, Nima. It's the podcast universe that represents anti-war movement, anti-war information, anti-war, how to say, mobilization.

But it's not—we're a medium, we're a message, we're not a movement. And the achievement of Americans, Americans in changing the political lineup between '68 and '69, and Nixon, is to be

respected and remembered. We don't have that now. We're not here to discuss why it's not domestically viable now, but we are, oddly enough, podcasting as investigative journalism is doing for the anti-war goals what the Pentagon Papers and all the so-called mainstream investigative journalism did before, back in the day. So I'm not saying we're Ellsberg and Woodward and Bernstein. I'm not saying that, but I'm trying to make the comparison. Podcast investigative journalism is the only available source of anti-war consciousness now. Yes, there's a significant Black community anti-war consciousness.

I don't see it in the Latin community. Do you? I don't see it in the other minorities in the United States. Indigenous people in Canada, yes, but not in the United States, not yet. So we don't have the kind of anti-war consciousness. Trump is generating massive opposition, and he may pay for it, let's say, on November the 3rd. But it isn't anti-war. It's anti-petrol price or gas price. It's anti-inflation. It's many, many things, including anti-immigration, something that a lot of voters share with some of Trump's doctrine. But we don't have what we had in Vietnam. And we don't, but what we have is Iran as an example of resistance. And that's, how to say, that's an example of resistance from weakness. You can learn how to defend yourself from oppression. This is an important lesson, isn't it?

#Nima

Exactly. And that's the whole point with the acts of resistance, by the way. Thank you. Thank you, John. Thank you so much for being with us today. Please go, if you want to follow John, right below his name you can see johnhelmer.net. You can go there and find his articles he publishes every day talking about geopolitical issues, basically about Russia, the Middle East, China, and these big pictures of what's going on. Thank you, John, for being with us today. Great pleasure.

#John

Let's see how the world will be next week.

#Nima

Exactly, exactly. See you soon.

#John

Goodbye.

#Nima

Bye-bye.