

Amb. Chas Freeman: US Picks Fights w/ China, Russia, Iran – Israel is the Trigger

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#Nima

Hi, everybody. Today is Friday, May 15, 2026, and our dear friend, Ambassador Chas Freeman, is here with us. Welcome back, Ambassador.

#Chas

Very glad to be back with you, Nima.

#Nima

I want to start with the summit in Beijing between Donald Trump and Xi Jinping. You sent me a text before the summit happened, and you said this summit may be completely inconsequential and could go terribly off track. The chances that much good will come out of it are small. What is your assessment right now, and how did you find it?

#Chas

Well, I think I was right. I think both sides got what they wanted out of it, which was minimal. This was a meeting that confirmed the state of the relationship. It didn't achieve any breakthroughs in it. It didn't even attempt that. In fact, the two sides proclaimed that their objective was constructive strategic stability, meaning not going to war. And as I said, both sides got something out of it. Donald Trump got a lot of pageantry, which was very good for his ego. And it also distracted the public from the Epstein files and the war with Iran, the so-called ceasefire, which isn't a ceasefire between Iran and—I call it a ceasefire with Israeli characteristics, meaning it isn't really a ceasefire.

One side ceases fire, the other keeps firing. And anyway, he got some of that. He obviously has a lot of respect for power, and Xi Jinping is a powerful man. The two of them talked, and they agreed that they would try to keep the two sides out of trouble. Donald Trump approached Xi Jinping as an equal, not as a subordinate, which is quite different from the way he treats America's allies. There were a number of discussions of trade deals, sales of aircraft, soybeans, and so forth. And, of

course, on the war in West Asia, they agreed. China's always had the position that it's the world's largest trading power. It wants the Strait of Hormuz to be open to freedom, freely navigable by ships, and it does not want Iran to have a weapon.

It is against proliferation. Nothing new there. The two sides agreed that that was what they wanted. They didn't agree on what to do about it or how to achieve it. Xi Jinping apparently said if he could be helpful, he would be. But I suspect what he meant by that was certainly not military action, but diplomacy. So on the Chinese side, Xi Jinping got to warn Donald Trump about Taiwan in very direct terms, both publicly and privately, to remind him that that is a ticking time bomb. It is something that has not been solved. Donald Trump had nothing to say about that, apparently. There is an impending arms sale to Taiwan, a very large one—\$14 billion. He said he would decide what he wanted to do about that.

I think Xi Jinping also probably was gratified by Donald Trump's desire to see him and treat him as an equal. This is good for Chinese prestige. Xi Jinping got to play the role of statesman. His perception of Donald Trump was gracious. His statements were full of language about peace and stability and dialogue and other good things. And so I think nothing bad happened. That's good. Something bad could have happened. Nothing much came out of it. We will now see whether any of these so-called trade deals that were discussed actually happen. You know, it's one thing to say, okay, I'm willing to buy 200 Boeing 737s, and it's another thing to negotiate with Boeing on the terms of such a sale.

It's one thing to say, I'll buy more soybeans, and another thing to make that happen when you have a surplus of soybeans in storage and you have all the soybeans you want from Brazil, Argentina, and other places. So I think we can count this as satisfactory—not a great success, but not a disaster. It is good that the two sides are talking. This was the first presidential visit to Beijing in nine years. Evidently, Xi Jinping will visit Washington as he attends the UN General Assembly in September. September 24th, he's to be at the White House. I assume he will—that's the day, I think, that the General Assembly opens. So presumably he will then go to New York and address the General Assembly. There are other meetings scheduled. There's the APEC meeting, which is to be held in China.

There's a G20 meeting to be held in the United States. So there are plenty of opportunities for the leaders to get together, but I don't think they solved any problems. The American side is still full of people who are quite paranoid about China, not for particularly good reasons. And the Chinese side is still looking out for their own interests and not willing to make sacrifices for the benefit of the United States. And the war in West Asia goes on, even if no one wants it to go on anymore. Donald Trump doesn't want it. He wants to get out of it. Iran would like to have its goals achieved rather than just left hanging. But those goals haven't really been achieved. And so we still have this Israeli-style ceasefire where neither side really has ceased fire.

#Nima

Ambassador, I think you are one of the most important figures to talk about China when it comes to our hemisphere, to the Western part of the world. Because we don't have many people arguing that for China, the most important thing right now is the economy, is the trade, is the money. Everything is money, nothing more than that. They don't have a grand strategy. They don't have some sort of geopolitical mindset. And it's all about trade. It's all about money. Is that the case for China?

#Chas

No, I think the Chinese actually have a very clear idea of what they want and a strategy for achieving it. But the problem that we have is we mirror-image. We look in the mirror and see ourselves, and then we project that image onto China. And we imagine that China wants to replace the United States as the global hegemon. And I don't believe they do. I think what they want to do is be left alone to restore their wealth and power. They want international respect. They don't go around the world the way the United States does, saying you can't have a good relationship with us unless you adopt our ideological principles and you do this, that, and the other.

They are very sensitive to insults. They react to those. That is bound up with the Chinese concept of face, which is mianzi in Chinese. It means the self-respect you get from the respect of people whom you respect. So it is a self-esteem that's based on the opinion of others and their behavior toward you. And the Chinese very much want that. Why? They had a century of what they call humiliation. It was humiliating. They went in 1820 from a third of the global economy to 4% of the global economy in 1945. They're back now almost at a third in terms of purchasing power, if not exchange rates. They were not respected.

I just gave a talk at Brown on the Open Door Policy, which the United States adopted in 1902—or anyway, 1899 to 1902. This was John Hay, who was the American Secretary of State at the time, basically saying the United States wants China to be unified, to be respected, to be modernized, to make progress, because we can make money if it does. If it does those things, it's good for us. Well, our policy now is the exact opposite. We don't want China to be unified. We want the civil war division between Taiwan and the mainland to continue. We don't want China to become wealthy and powerful because that threatens our own status. And we project all kinds of things onto China.

For example, we assume that they want what the Germans call Lebensraum, meaning additional space for their population, conquering neighboring lands. But they don't. The only thing they want is for their country to return to its historic borders with the end of the Chinese Civil War and some kind of agreed relationship between Taipei and Beijing. So I think there's a great deal of misunderstanding of what they're about. Basically, they don't care much how foreigners govern ourselves. They have good relations with democracies. They have good relations with dictatorships. They have good relations with military regimes, with kings, monarchs, princes, emirs. They don't care. So they're very different from us. And I think we make a mistake by applying various European-derived concepts of global power politics to the Chinese.

They're not easy to deal with. They are different. They have a long history. They're very proud of their history. They have a great many achievements to their credit, but they're not predatory. And yet we assume they are. So I think the Chinese worry mostly about their domestic condition, and they have problems. They had a real estate bubble, which is very bad. They have had deflation—lowered prices for everything. In some ways that's good. It's not good if you have debt, because that makes the debt more burdensome. They have debt, but the debt is all domestic debt. It's not held by foreigners for the most part. And they have political challenges. They have a middle class that is restive, that probably wants more freedom than it has. They have a security apparatus that is quite brutal on occasion.

They have a very large number of minorities, some of them very big. For example, people don't think about the Bai, who they are, or the Zhuang or the Dai. There are 43, 44 million Zhuang in China. These are not Han Chinese. These are people who speak a language related to Thai. So China is full of minorities. It has many tensions as a result. You know, in Western China, Ningxia is dominated by Chinese Muslims. Ironically, it's become a great center of wine culture. But, you know, I guess Omar Khayyam, you know, I guess he had a little bit of wine once in a while too. So Xinjiang is, of course, Turkic. Tibet is Tibetan. It's a very complicated country, the descendant of an empire. And so I don't think anybody would want to be in the position of Xi Jinping having to govern 1.4 billion people who are very self-centered.

They're very good business people because they do, as you said, like to make money, and they seem to know how to do it. And I will close by quoting my Thai teacher when I ran the American embassy in Bangkok. I asked her, what is the difference between Chinese people and Thai people? She thought for four seconds and said, ah, Thai people like to buy things. Chinese people like to sell things. And so there's something in that. But I think we misconstrue them. And, you know, I agree with John Mearsheimer on many things, but not on this. I don't think he has a correct understanding of cultural differences and history in Pacific Asia that differentiate China from its neighbors and from the European experience.

#Nima

My understanding of China is that they have somehow changed since the war in Ukraine started. We had China before the war in Ukraine, and China in the aftermath of the war in Ukraine. And right now, in the Middle East, it's the same case — you see a different sort of attitude on the part of China. They're not in the background; they're coming to the forefront. Their foreign policy is getting more, you know, somehow tricky in some ways, but they're trying to do something with their foreign policy. They were not participating that much before these two conflicts.

#Chas

They've become much less passive, I agree, more active. But active about what? Here again, you and I have discussed this in brief before. The Chinese have risen to wealth and power in the

American-sponsored post-World War II order. They value that. That is an order based on the United Nations, international law, rules, comity—meaning reciprocity in diplomatic relations. And it's based ultimately on the Peace of Westphalia, which is summarized in the five principles of peaceful coexistence that China espouses, with a big emphasis on sovereignty, non-interference in internal affairs, mutual benefit, mutual respect. This is what they want. It's not what the world looks like these days, because the United States basically has torn apart the world that we created after World War II. And there are no rules.

I see this particularly clearly in the case of the Strait of Hormuz. The law of the sea was created basically by the British Navy and the American Navy over the course of 263 years. In 1763, the British achieved naval supremacy over the French. They confirmed that in 1805 at Trafalgar, the Battle of Trafalgar. In 1943, in March—the beginning of March, my birthday actually—there was a battle called the Battle of the Bismarck Sea, north of Australia in the South Pacific. That was the furthest extent of the Japanese Navy. Well, the Japanese Navy had bested the British Navy. So basically, the baton of global maritime supremacy passed from Britain to the United States Navy. And for a long time, the United States Navy has felt that one of its major purposes was to enforce the rules, which are now incorporated into the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Well, what that convention says and what international law traditionally say about straits—meaning narrow bodies of water that connect to larger international or high seas, oceans or seas—is that passage through straits must be free and unimpeded. Iran has just changed that. And I don't think it's going to go back to the Anglo-American rule set. In fact, we're hearing others—Indonesia, for example, which has three major straits either alongside it, in the Strait of Malacca, or through it in the case of the other two, Lombok and so on—that they are talking about charging fees on the Iranian model and controlling these straits. And I think we're going to see more of this. Iran has set a precedent which undoes the American maritime hegemony. It's not going to continue.

So what we're watching is the disappearance of the rules formulated over 500 years of European and American dominance of the world, or 263 years—250 plus years—of Anglo-American dominance of the oceans. And something new is coming out. Or what is coming out, we don't know. But at the moment, it's pretty anarchic. So the Chinese don't like this. One of their major objectives with regard to the war in Ukraine, where they have not recognized either Russian annexation of Crimea or Russian annexation of Donbass—of the four oblasts, that is Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson—they've not recognized these territorial changes. Why? Because they don't consider them legitimate. Now, in the end, they will accept them if both sides come to an agreement.

That is, Ukraine and Russia agree that these are not part of Ukraine. They're part of the Russian Federation, or they're independent, or something. The Chinese will accept that. Similarly, in the case of the war in West Asia, they don't accept the American idea that you can attack Iran for no reason—no stated reason. They don't accept that the United States has the right unilaterally to enforce the Non-Proliferation Treaty against Iran. They don't accept that the United States has the right to abandon the framework of the JCPOA after it was approved by the Security Council.

They don't accept American sanctions because the UN Charter requires sanctions to be approved by the Security Council. Therefore, from their point of view, the American sanctions on them and everyone else are unilateral and illegitimate. So here is the great irony. That is to say, after World War II, China underwent a revolution—a civil war between the Kuomintang, which still is the major opposition party in Taiwan and ran Taiwan for quite a while, and the Communist Party. The Communist Party won. And in 1949, the People's Republic of China was proclaimed. And in the very early 1950s, it was an outlaw internationally.

It was not represented in the United Nations. Taipei, the defeated government of Chiang Kai-shek, continued to represent China in the Security Council and in the General Assembly. The Chinese mainland was outside that framework. Here's the irony: they were the opponents of the UN system. They are now the strongest defenders of the UN system. And the United States, whose idea the UN system was, is now opposed to it. The United States has withdrawn from, I think, 60 international organizations and 32 UN specialized agencies that the United States has just walked away from. We Americans are not respecting the rule of law internationally. China is.

China is actually making a huge effort to use those international institutions—the UN and other organizations—to promote its interests. This is what the United States did in an earlier period. So we look at the World Health Organization. The United States has withdrawn. China is now increasingly active, and so on and so forth. So to go back to your earlier question, I think they have a strategy. I think they have an objective. That objective is to restore or preserve, if possible, the post-World War II international order based on international law formulated through consensus, and to do that in a way that reinforces national sovereignty and freedom from regime change operations and other things.

So this is all very ironic. And I don't know that we have an answer to the rise of Chinese power in this regard. When they have been frustrated, as they have been, for example, the World Bank, which is supposed to be an agency to promote the development of less developed countries, has not been reformed. It still has the old voting rights pattern of previous years. China is now in some ways the biggest economy in the world. It's underrepresented. The United States has not appropriated money to increase funding for development. So what do we get? We get the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank led by China, headquartered in Beijing, and with almost universal membership, a new institution which follows the same rules as the World Bank.

What do we get? We get the New Development Bank. Your own country is a prominent member of that. We get the BRICS. We get the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. So if China is not allowed to use existing institutions because they are dominated by the United States and the United States is hostile to China, then it finds ways to create new institutions to get the job done. And that is what is happening. So I just end up by saying China now has the ability to defend itself. Apparently, the ability of China to defend itself is regarded as aggression by the United States. Why? That's a really strange inversion.

So China does not have naval forces or an air force stationed along U.S. borders or in South America. The U.S. does along China's borders. And yet somehow China's a threat. Well, what is it a threat to? It is a threat to American amour-propre, self-esteem, prestige, primacy. It's not a threat to the United States. And to his credit, Donald Trump seems to have recognized that, you know, maybe the United States to some extent can withdraw from the world, but it cannot afford to alienate and fail to work with China. There are too many problems that cannot be solved or even addressed without cooperation between these two great countries.

And so there he is in China. Of course, he doesn't believe in climate change. He's not interested in promoting green energy. He wants fossil fuels to remain dominant. He leads a country which has banned electric vehicles when they are taking off everywhere else. And yet he has apparently recognized that we need to work with China if we are going to solve any problems, including the ones with Iran. China will have to be part of whatever package deal is eventually reached to accommodate Iranian interests and those of the Gulf Arabs and those of the international community at large with regard to the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz.

#Nima

Here is what Donald Trump's ambassador said about the conversation between him and Xi Jinping about Chinese support for Iran in this ongoing war between Iran and the United States.

#Speaker 03

And you've been asked about it, and you've spoken about it, and that is China's support for Iran. How big a discussion was that today? We discussed it.

#Speaker 04

I mean, when you say support, they're not fighting a war with us or anything. No. He said he's not going to give military equipment. That's a big statement. He said that today. That's a big statement. He said that strongly. But at the same time, he said, you know, they buy a lot of their oil there, and they'd like to keep doing that.

#Nima

I think we can say one of the main objectives of Donald Trump with this visit was the case of the war in the Middle East. He wanted something from China. What was that, and how can China cooperate with the situation in the Middle East?

#Chas

Well, I think what he wants is help to get out of this war. And he thought China might be able to do that. Of course, there are lots of mischaracterizations of the Chinese relationship with Iran. Iran is not a client state of China. Iran is an independent country with its own ideas, and it has some kinds of partnership with China. Those partnerships do not include the Chinese providing offensive weapons to Iran. They do include China supplying defensive equipment and technology to Iran. China does not want to get involved in this war or any other war. And so I don't think—I think President Trump, at least for the time being, because he has a way of forgetting what he's learned, has learned that the Chinese relationship with Iran is very self-interested. It's very purposive. China wants Iranian oil. China wants a good relationship with Iran.

It also wants a good relationship with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Arabs. And it does not want to see Iran overwhelmed by an illegal aggression from the United States. It will do what it can to help Iran short of getting involved militarily. This distinguishes China from Russia. Russia has no limitation on supplying weapons to Iran. The Chinese clearly are limiting whatever they do. And this is not unusual. China has no allies. China has partnerships. So you look at the neighbor of Iran, Pakistan. There's no alliance. There's no defense commitment from China. And yet there is what is called an all-weather relationship. That means China finds the existence of Pakistan, the independence of Pakistan, the sovereignty of Pakistan useful. Why? Because it checks India. It balances India. And the relationship is good.

Pakistan is a market for Chinese weaponry. Iran is not. Now, that was not always the case. In the early 1980s, during the Iran-Iraq war and the threats to shipping in the Persian Gulf, China did supply cruise missiles to Iran—so-called Silkworm missiles. I remember I was then the chargé, the American chargé, or the number two at the embassy in Beijing. And I remember having many discussions with my Chinese counterparts, objecting to the Chinese supplying these weapons to Iran. I went back in 1986, when my youngest son was studying Chinese in Beijing, and I was in charge of Africa. I was consulting with the Chinese on Africa, also seeing my son.

The man that I used to spend a lot of time castigating, protesting at, on the Silkworm missile supply, had a good laugh at me because of the Iran-Contra affair. And he said, you know, you accused us of doing this, but you did worse things. And I didn't really have an answer for that. But, and here I'll just say, you know, the relationship between China and Iran goes back to the time of the Shah. It did not change when the Shah was overthrown. The Chinese did not—again, they really don't care how foreigners choose to govern themselves. I had something to do with starting the relationship between China and Iran. Why? Because we had a common concern about Soviet expansionism. Iran had that concern. The traditional enemy of Iran was the Russians.

And so I helped the Chinese get in touch with the Iranians, and that led to a relationship between them. And of course, as I said, that survived. The United States lost its relationship with Iran in 1979–1980. And the listening stations, the spy stations that had been in Iran looking at the Soviet Union, moved to China. The Chinese helped because we had a common concern. China will help if

there's a challenge to common interests that Iran and China have; then they will cooperate. But there are limits. It's not an alliance. It's not a client-state relationship. And I find it really kind of weird because the United States has a sort of relationship with Israel that it accuses China of having with Iran. But China's relationship with Iran is nothing like the U.S. relationship with Israel.

#Nima

Ambassador, do you think that we had Iran's foreign minister going to China, and then Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin going to China? Yeah, he's going to go next Wednesday to China. Yeah. We know that China, Iran, and Russia have something in common when it comes to the pressure they're feeling from Washington. Yeah, and in the case of, as you mentioned, the case of Taiwan.

#Chas

This is natural. You know, if you lump everyone together, you come up with a concept like the axis of evil, which doesn't exist, but you impute this to other people. And if you treat everybody as though they're an enemy, you know, then you get enemies. So we have pushed these three countries together, and North Korea as well. Don't forget that. And Iran and North Korea have a relationship of some standing. I think I told you the story years ago of the Iranian assassination team that came into Beijing from Pyongyang. My counterpart in the Iranian embassy called me to wish me Merry Christmas and told me I had nothing personally to worry about. He didn't say my ambassador would be safe.

And this relationship between North Korea and Iran goes on. A lot of the Iranian missile technology derives from North Korea. So these relationships are not entirely new, but they have been made much stronger by, as you say, common resistance to American dictation. I want to make a basic point here, and that is, what is the definition of a world power? A world power is a country whose interests have to be taken into account all over the world. China is not a world power. It's not a world power in the same sense as the United States. It does not have 800 military bases abroad. It's not engaged in foreign wars. It does not threaten the annexation of Canada or Greenland or the Panama Canal.

But it is a world power. So if you're Argentine and you want to talk about the Islas Malvinas, or the Falkland Islands as they're called in English, you have to take China into account. If you are South African, you need to take China into account in your political, economic, and military policies. If you're Brazilian, you have to do the same. So this China is now a world power. It is not a particularly strong world power. But you ask, why are all these people going to Beijing? It's because they have interests that the Chinese affect, which they want to take care of. And it's particularly the case with both Iran and Russia, because both are involved in wars with the United States.

And the United States has started a proxy war in Ukraine, and until recently, when it handed that war off to the Europeans, was very actively engaged in that. Still is, I think, in an intelligence

framework rather than a military one. And of course, the United States and Israel wantonly attacked Iran. And we are engaged in a war. That war has not ended. There is no real ceasefire. There is no meeting of the minds. There is no understanding. There are no negotiations worthy of the name. And here, I would say, going back to something we've discussed before, the United States has proven particularly inept diplomatically.

We have, you know, there are 192 countries or something in the world. I think we have 182 embassies. 115 of them don't have an ambassador. I mean, the United States is not taking diplomacy seriously. These discussions in Beijing or with Iran had no professional diplomats included. None. So in Beijing, you saw the American ambassador, who's a political appointee, a former senator. And Witkoff and Kushner, and what everyone says about them, are not skilled diplomats. I have shown that repeatedly. The vice president is not a skilled diplomat. So, you know, someone like Araghchi or Lavrov or Wang Yi doesn't have an American counterpart. Marco Rubio is not a skilled diplomat.

#Nima

Ambassador, when it comes to the Middle East, you see GCC countries somehow are trying. Today I was talking with Larry Johnson and Carl Wilkerson. Larry said something that it seems China and Russia, behind the scenes, are trying to bring these countries in the Persian Gulf together—Iran on one side, and Saudi Arabia and Qatar on the other. Is that the case? What is your understanding? What do you make of it?

#Chas

Well, there's circumstantial evidence that Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar are all quietly discussing a post-war order with Tehran. I'd say circumstantial evidence—the strongest evidence is their banning of the use of American air bases on their territory or overflight. In other words, doing what Iran has demanded, namely eliminating American military power from their homelands. So I think there's something going on there, but beyond that, Iran, China, and Russia each separately have put forward proposals for a common security architecture, a cooperative security arrangement in the Persian Gulf, in which the Arab side of the Gulf would cooperate with Iran, and there would be no foreign military presence, including China's and Russia's.

So Turkey is also part of this in a sense. And yet, it's entirely true that they want to create a new order in the Persian Gulf. It would be an order based on local powers, particularly, as you suggest, Saudi Arabia and Iran. The UAE is an odd man out in this for the time being because it's vengeful. It's doubled down on its relationship with Israel. It's now been revealed—and denied, of course, by Abu Dhabi—but nonetheless confirmed by Tel Aviv that Benjamin Netanyahu, the Prime Minister of Israel, visited the UAE during the war. We know that the Iron Dome, which is against short-range missiles or drones—Israeli, actually it was funded by the United States. When I was at the Defense Department, I used to approve the checks that funded this. We paid for it.

But anyway, Israel has this system, and it has installed it in the UAE. It's not really proven very effective, but that's another issue. The UAE is still very much part of the Abraham Accords, tied to Israel and the United States, which is why Iran is attacking it—because it has been an active participant in the aggression against Iran. And there's even some indication that it was the UAE that attacked Iranian gas fields, gas facilities, not the United States or Israel. Anyway, we don't know. There's a great deal we don't know, although we are slowly finding out a good deal. The Defense Department, now called the War Department in the United States, persuaded satellite reconnaissance companies not to take photographs of the region—the battle damage in the Gulf Arab states and in Israel.

But Chinese companies have been willing to provide those photographs and the interpretation of them. This is somehow seen as aiding, you know, siding with Iran, but it is actually not siding with anyone because you can buy the same photos from these companies of anything else. You could buy photos of Iran, for example. China is a neutral state in this conflict. It is not a belligerent. As a neutral state and a non-belligerent, it trades with all sides. It is supplying weaponry to the Gulf Arabs. It is apparently not doing that for Iran, but it has an interest in military sales, arms sales, as well as in civilian commerce with every country in the Persian Gulf, with Israel, where it's had a technological relationship for now, whatever, 45 or more years.

#Nima

Actually, after denying—because, as you mentioned, the UAE denied that secret visit of Benjamin Netanyahu to the UAE—then Benjamin Netanyahu and the Israelis doubled down. They said not only Benjamin Netanyahu, but the head of Mossad, the head of Yemeni intelligence, together with the IDF chief of staff, they were all...

#Chas

They're all there. And, you know, I think this is, for the UAE, an unpleasant revelation, perhaps, but anyone who has dealt with the Israelis knows that they are very bad about revealing secrets when those secrets seem to boost their prestige. They're politicians in competition with each other, and they like to show how influential, how much influence they have abroad, how many connections they have, and so forth. I can remember a discussion with a very senior Saudi when I was ambassador.

And there were efforts being made to build a relationship between Saudi Arabia and Israel even then. That was 50 years ago. No, not 50, 40 years ago. And he said to me, you know, the reason we can't do this is that they're blabbermouths. We do something with them that has to stay confidential, and they put it in the press. And so how can you deal with these people? Well, the UAE has just discovered the indiscreet nature of Israeli politicians. And all of these visits, which were never meant to be publicized, have now been publicized.

#Nima

Donald Trump talked about the Iranian nuclear program. As you know, they announced that neither of these two countries, as the statement from the White House mentioned, want Iran to have nuclear bombs. After all, we know that the main objective of those talks before this happened was to negotiate with the United States concerning Iran's nuclear program. But here is what Donald Trump said about the conversation he had with Xi Jinping.

#Nima

Okay, here we are.

#Speaker 04

Just don't go crazy. You don't need them having nuclear weapons either.

#Speaker 03

What did he say?

#Speaker 04

Well, he's not going to respond to much. He's a pretty cool guy. He's not going to say, "Oh, gee, that's a good point." What's he going to do?

#Speaker 03

What a wonderful point. Do you think he agreed?

#Speaker 04

Yeah, I think that was the impression. I don't think he wants him to. No, he would like to see it end.

#Chas

Yeah, that's true. And let us remember that China voted for the JCPOA in the Security Council. China supports the Non-Proliferation Treaty. China does not want proliferation. It is very unhappy about the fact that North Korea has nuclear weapons. And so, you know, Chinese policy once was different, and that helped Pakistan go nuclear. But it has come to the conclusion that the proliferation of nuclear weapons is not in its interest. And China understands very well the implications of Iran going nuclear, which are that Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey will also go nuclear, and maybe Iraq. And it will then, you know, there will be pressure.

Taiwan twice tried to make nuclear weapons. There will be pressure on it to do that again. South Korea would certainly go nuclear. Japan might. So China has a real interest, I should think, like everyone else, but probably more than most, in not having Iran go nuclear. Unfortunately, as you and I have discussed before, I think one of the main effects of this attack on Iran has been to destroy the arguments of those in Iran who were opposed to nuclear weapons. Now Iran almost certainly will go nuclear if it hasn't done it already. It may already have gone nuclear, built a warhead underground somewhere with the enriched uranium that it has.

There's been enough time that's gone by. And as people have repeatedly pointed out, you can destroy the physical facilities that enable the manufacture of nuclear weapons, but you cannot destroy the human brains that design that equipment and know how to build a bomb. And building a bomb is not all that complicated. Years ago, as part of my job in the State Department, I was sent to New Mexico to learn how to build a bomb. I went through a two-week course on how to build a nuclear weapon. Why? Because the theory was only if you knew what was required to build a nuclear weapon could you detect others doing that.

So in other words, this was an effort to give me and others the ability to detect violations of the nonproliferation arrangements. Very sensible, but it's not that hard to build a nuclear weapon. And in fact, one of the weapons that the United States dropped on Japan in 1945 had never been tested. It was pure creation of engineering. So you don't need to test in order to have a bomb. And I mean, I think no doubt testing improves the yield and lets you learn all sorts of useful things about how to improve bombs, but you don't need to test them. So I think Iran may already have a bomb. If it doesn't, it will. And nobody should welcome that, because it means the cork is out of the bottle, the genie is loose.

#Nima

Yeah. So the history between Iran and the United States is a pretty complicated history. And many people, as you've mentioned, in Iran are arguing, so if Israel decides to attack us in six months, in two months, in five months, in one year, two years, what are we going to do against Israel if they attack us with nuclear bombs? These are serious discussions, as we know right now in Iran. In higher ranks, people are talking about these things. That's right.

#Chas

Well, that is why Iran has demanded credible guarantees against further attack. I would say Iran actually has achieved guarantees against renewed American attack because the relationship between Israel and the United States has become so difficult that I don't think any future American president is going to follow Donald Trump in attacking Iran with Israel. So Israel will be on its own. But that actually is quite dangerous because Israel does have nuclear weapons. And so the discussions in Iran are entirely understandable, and they are exactly why I predict that Iran will go nuclear. The reluctance to do so has been overcome. The Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who was the principal

opponent of this, the author of the fatwa against it, is dead. His successors, his son and others, do not share his opposition to weapons of mass destruction.

#Nima

Here is what Ambassador Senator Tim Kaine said about the situation between Iran and the United States, and the history between Iran and the United States.

#Speaker 05

History didn't begin in 1979. Iran and the United States were allies in World War II. One of the pivotal events in World War II was the Tehran Conference, where President Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Joseph Stalin met in Tehran to guarantee Iran's independence, stable borders, and sovereignty. Iran loved the United States. The United States led a coup to topple the democratically elected government of Iran in 1953 during the Eisenhower administration. The United States propped up a dictatorship, the Shah of Iran, and trained the secret police, the SAVAK, that tortured, exiled, imprisoned, and killed Iranians by the thousands.

And 26 years after that, there was a revolution in 1979. And yes, then it was "death to America." The U.S. funding a dictatorship and toppling a democratically elected government led to an Iran that has been very hostile. And all the events my colleagues have talked about since then are accurate. But just as Iran seized our embassy in violation of international law, then the United States funded Saddam Hussein for Iraq to wage war against Iran in the 1980s, killing hundreds of thousands of Iranians. And just as Iran funded proxies that bombed a Marine barracks and our embassy in Beirut, the U.S. Navy shot down an Iranian civilian aircraft in 1988, killing 290 civilians.

And the U.S. invaded Iran's next-door neighbors to topple their government. And then, yes, Iranians attacked U.S. troops arrayed near their border, and we've attacked and killed their leadership. I'm not saying that Iran is good. Iran is horrible—horrible to its neighbors, horrible to people outside its borders, and even worse to its own people. But if you ignore the history of the back and forth between the U.S. and Iran, you will not get this right. If more war between the U.S. and Iran were the answer, we would have found the answer sometime between 1953 and now. Here's something I think.

#Chas

Well, he's right about the history. I would just add that, strangely, notwithstanding the opposition of the Islamic Republic to the United States, ordinary Iranians remained remarkably pro-American until recently. I don't think they're pro-American now that the United States has killed a lot of them, blown up their houses, and murdered their leaders, and shown no respect for them as a people, as a country. But Senator Kaine basically has the history right.

#Nima

Do you think, Ambassador, before wrapping up, do you think that—because right now we know these people, these neocons who are basically running the foreign policy of the United States—Robert Kagan wrote an article in *The Atlantic*, said the only solution, we know who he is, and he's the husband of Victoria Nuland, the architect of the conflict in Ukraine. And he's arguing that the only solution for Donald Trump is leaving the scene, leaving the region. And the other people are arguing that we have to stay in the region, we have to send arms to the Iranian people to overthrow the so-called regime in Iran.

And what is the solution for Donald Trump? He's talking about, I need some sort of cleanup. It means that he's going to attack Iran again. And understanding on the part of Iranians—two days ago I was listening to one of the Iranian commanders who was talking to a large audience. He said that we know that the United States is going to attack. The only question on our side is, are they going to attack Iran? Why assassination and starting with assassination? Are they going to start with some sort of invasion of these islands close to the Strait of Hormuz? Or is it going to be something else? These are the two sides somehow assessing or reassessing each other.

#Chas

Well, I've not been an admirer of Robert Kagan, but I think he is very realistic. I think he has come through with a remarkably cogent, candid, and honest observation of what has happened. And he's right. The only answer is to recognize defeat. I think the consequences of defeat are also much greater, as he points out, than previously. For example, the United States was defeated in Vietnam, but it didn't really make any difference to our global position, because faced with the choice between the United States and the Soviet Union, most people chose the United States. And our allies, even if they were shaken by our defeat, had not been enthusiastic about that war or really part of it. The same is true, of course, now—they're not part of our war with Iran.

But the fact is that we have no rival internationally. And if we are defeated, there will not be the pressure to rally behind us that there was in the Cold War, you know, with the Soviet Union. So people did not like to see the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. They did not like to see the establishment of Soviet satellite regimes in Africa, and so on and so forth. This is all—none of that's going to happen now. Uh, so, um, so this defeat, and it is a defeat, um, and the only real question is how to minimize the defeat. Uh, and I've made a point, you know, at the very outset of this, that, um, in the end, there's no answer to this other than diplomacy. Uh, and part of diplomacy is being realistic and knowing when you have no military options.

#Speaker 04

We have no military options.

#Chas

So they may, in Tehran, be worried about, you know, is the United States going to invade, going to assassinate people, or whatever? None of that would do any good. And I think the U.S. military undoubtedly understands that. Does Donald Trump understand it?

#Speaker 04

I think he probably does now.

#Chas

But he doesn't know what to do. And I don't think China is the answer for him. He's not in a position to call on anyone else. Meanwhile, the American client states among the Gulf Arabs, as I indicated—I think Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar in particular—are all trying to find their own path out of this mess. And inevitably, that is going to involve minimizing their military relationships with the United States. There will be some kind of bargaining process, and I don't know what the outcome will be, but I don't think the continued American military presence—which is, after all, something new; we never had a military presence in the Persian Gulf until our invasion of Iraq in the first Gulf War, when we promised we would leave and we didn't leave for all sorts of reasons.

We stayed. And part of the consequence of our staying was the September 11 attack on the United States by people who didn't want us there, and because of supporting Israel rather than Islamic or Arab causes. So Kagan has a point. You know, he's being argued with by people like John Bolton who are saying, no, no, double down, do more militarily. But I don't think any serious military analyst—I doubt very much that Larry Wilkerson or Larry Johnson think that a military escalation would do anything useful. It would just result in Iran firing more missiles at its regional enemies, especially Israel, and the UAE, associated with Israel, and now clearly associated with Israel. So, yeah, Kagan is, you know, he is proving to be a realist, more of a realist than I imagined.

#Nima

Yeah. Thank you so much, Ambassador, for being with us today. A great pleasure, as always.

#Chas

It's always a pleasure to speak with you, Nima. Keep up the good work.