

John Mearsheimer. Toward All-Out War With Both Russia & Iran

Prof. John Mearsheimer discusses the West going up the escalation ladder against both Russia and Iran, with all-out war as the logical conclusion. Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: <https://glennDiesen.substack.com/> X/Twitter: https://x.com/Glenn_Diesen Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/glennDiesen> Support the research by Prof. Glenn Diesen: PayPal: <https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/glennDiesen> Buy me a Coffee: buymeacoffee.com/gdieseng Go Fund Me: <https://gofund.me/09ea012f> Books by Prof. Glenn Diesen: <https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B09FPQ4MDL>

#Glenn

Welcome back. We are joined again by Professor John Mearsheimer to discuss the events of the world. Thank you, as always, for coming back on. You're welcome, Glenn. I'm glad to be here. So it's starting to feel like we're already in a third world war here, because as you saw, the weekend attacks on Moscow were quite extensive. And I at least go with the assumption that this had some form of Western assistance, simply because, well, Ukraine's been using NATO weapons, NATO's been involved in the war planning, the intelligence, the target selection. They even have contractors operating some of the weapons and also assisting to evade Russian air defenses. But then we saw attacks coming from NATO territory.

We heard the Baltic states and Finland argue that, well, they didn't give permission for this. And, you know, they said that they did not approve, but it still happens yet again. But now we see the Europeans, they're mass-producing these weapons, or at least they're stating their intent to mass-produce long-range strike weapons for this explicit purpose of striking deep inside Russia. They make the case why the war has to be brought to Russia. And now, of course, we have this massive attack on the capital of Russia. And I was wondering, how do you see this situation developing now? What options does Russia have now? And what possible futures are there in front of us?

#John Mearsheimer

Well, it's clear that the Ukrainians are going up the escalation ladder here. They're doing more and more to strike at the Russian homeland. And it's quite clear that in the early years of the war, they relied mainly on missiles, and they had a limited number of missiles, and the Europeans and the Americans tended to put significant limits on their use of those Western missiles against Mother Russia. But what's happened now is that the Ukrainians have turned to drones, and they've developed a significant drone force that has the ability to strike into Russia. I think at this point in time, the amount of damage that those drones can do is not that great.

And it's certainly not going to affect the outcome of the war in any meaningful way. That's not going to happen. But I think the great danger moving forward here is that the Ukrainians, working with the Europeans, who remain determined to defeat Russia, will increase the number of strikes and the kind of strikes on Russia. I would imagine that the number of drone attacks will go up over time. And at some point, the Ukrainians, with help from the Europeans, will add missiles to the mix. And it'll be missile and drone attacks on Russia. And then the question you have to ask yourself is, what will the Russians do?

And you've had Sergei Karaganov on your show, and Sergei Karaganov has said very clearly that he thinks what should be done is that Russia should strike at European targets to send a very clear signal to the Europeans that this is just unacceptable and this has to stop. And his view is that you start with conventional weapons, and if that doesn't work, you turn to nuclear weapons. Now, he points out, and I think this is very important, that when he first started broaching this idea of his in the early days of the war, he was in a distinct minority. Very few people agreed with him.

But he argues now, and I take him at his word because he is an honest person, that the overwhelming majority of people he talks to agree with him. The Russians, in a sense, are fed up, and they're tired of the war in general. And the idea that Ukraine is now escalating by hitting the homeland, the Russian homeland, more and more, is just unacceptable. So something has to be done. So I think there's no question, Glenn, that if the war goes on, and if Ukraine, working with the Europeans, continues to up the ante in terms of striking at Russia, striking at cities like Moscow, the Russians will retaliate along the lines that Karaganov is talking about.

#Glenn

I'm getting the impression that, well, the retaliation will come now anyway, because the pressure was mounting so much already, and this, again, appears to be more than they can accept or absorb. But you can also imagine that there will be, before that, possibly another step on the escalation ladder — that is, to do more brutal attacks on Ukraine, and if that doesn't deter the Europeans, go with conventional weapons against a country like Germany or Estonia. But we also see other pathways to escalation, though. That is, there's talk yet again about how Ukraine could fairly easily, in their words, liberate Moldova from the government in Transnistria, which is this breakaway region. However, it happens to have thousands of Russian troops. So this would be, again, a huge escalation. And one can assume this would be green-lighted by NATO. So do you see any other pathways here? Because it looks like we're getting very close to a disaster.

#John Mearsheimer

Well, when I think about the situation between Russia on one side and Ukraine and the Europeans on the other, it's not altogether unlike the war in Iran — the war between Iran on one side, and the United States and the Israelis on the other side. Both sides in both conflicts are unwilling to make

any meaningful concessions, and they just want to continue the fight. And you get to the point where some of the participants become desperate, and they'll do whatever they think they can get away with to win the war. This is why we're worried about Trump attacking Iran this week, a subject I'm sure we'll get to in due course. We all understand that Trump is desperate. And when you're desperate, you sometimes roll the dice, even when you think you're not going to win. You think there may be a sliver of a chance, but it's worth taking a risk.

And if you look at the situation between the Ukrainians and the Europeans on one side and the Russians on the other side, there's just no room for negotiation here. There's no way that this war could be shut down diplomatically. So both sides are going to continue to fight. And the Russians are reaching a point where they're saying to themselves that this has to stop. And the idea that we're going to allow the Ukrainians and the Europeans to take us up the escalation ladder and launch massive attacks against Moscow with drones and missiles is just unacceptable. We have to stop it. And if that means we have to pursue a really risky strategy, so be it. So I think you see that logic at play very clearly with regard to the Russian-Ukrainian war. And of course, the same logic applies on the Ukraine-European side of the equation.

The Ukrainians are desperate to rescue the situation. They're desperate to keep the Europeans involved in the fight. And therefore, they want to convince the Europeans that they can do things to the Russians that will turn the tide one way or another. So the Ukrainians have very powerful incentives to up the ante. And the Russians now have very powerful incentives to up the ante. The Europeans have powerful incentives to up the ante. And there's no bargaining space here. So this just tells you we're going to go up the escalation ladder. And as you and I both know, this is not going to have a happy ending. And if we go back to Iran, which I don't want to get into in any detail at this point in time, you can tell a similar story. So we're in deep trouble, both in the Middle East and in Ukraine.

#Glenn

Like I said, another commonality, though, between the Iran war and the Ukraine war is the absence of diplomacy, I think. Well, if you look in Europe, they're still discussing whether or not they should talk to Russia. If they should talk to Russia, who should represent the Europeans? You have Politico publishing that Kaja Kallas should—well, not according to some EU diplomats, given that, well, she's highly problematic. She's not going to be able to get anywhere with the Russians. And, you know, if we decide to talk to the Russians, decide on who should represent the Europeans, then they also have to agree on a common position.

And again, we seem to be very far away from even sitting down and talking to the Russians. Meanwhile, while it's so difficult to make diplomacy work, going up the escalation ladder seems to happen without any debate or a second thought at all. And it's quite hard to believe this is actually real. But how do you make sense of this, though—the breakdown in diplomacy overall? Because it's a common theme we've seen around the world. That is, we're not able to negotiate anything

significant with the Chinese—at least that's how I see it—with the Russians, the Iranians. Is it simply too many changes happening at once? Or how do you make sense of the consistent failure of diplomacy?

#John Mearsheimer

Well, I think if you look at the Ukraine conflict, the key to understanding why there's zero bargaining space is that from Russia's point of view, the Ukrainian and European positions represent an existential threat. And obviously, from Ukraine's point of view, and I think increasingly from Europe's point of view, Russia's position, Russia's success in Ukraine represents an existential threat. So you have two sides here, the Europeans and the Ukrainians on one side, and the Russians on the other side, who see this as a war between two sides that are determined to fight to the finish. And there's no room for bargaining here with an existential threat. And the end result is there's no bargaining space. Now, if you factor in the United States—in part because of geography, but also just because the United States is so powerful—and the United States also has incentives to have good relations with the Russians.

We don't view—we meaning the Americans—don't view the Russians as an existential threat. And that, of course, is why Trump is willing to bargain with Russia. The Russians—he's not adept at diplomacy, don't misunderstand me—he's ham-fisted in the extreme when it comes to doing diplomacy. But nevertheless, he's made it clear that he's willing to cut a deal with Putin. But the problem is, Trump can't get to first base because the Europeans and the Ukrainians don't want to negotiate a deal along the lines that Trump is proposing with Russia. So there's just hardly any hope for diplomacy there. And of course, I think Trump in some ways has washed his hands of the Russia-Ukraine war because he understands that he can't get a deal, that this one has to be settled on the battlefield. So I think that's why you don't have any diplomatic space here.

#Glenn

Well, I guess the million-dollar question is, would the U.S. enter a war with Russia? Because let's say the Russians launch a conventional strike on Estonia for allowing Ukraine to send its drones through its territory that are attacking the Baltic coast of Russia. How likely do you think it would be for the United States to join in or do something significant if the Russians were to do such a limited strike, not for conquering anything, but for essentially retaliating and restoring its deterrence?

#John Mearsheimer

That's very hard to say. I mean, if we go back to what Karaganov is talking about, he is talking about attacking NATO countries. Of course, at first it's with conventional weapons. But if you attack a NATO country, at least in the past, that would almost guarantee that the United States would

come in. It's not clear what Trump would do at this point in time, given all the trouble that we face in the Middle East. And here we're talking, of course, about the Iran war, but also about if you get into a tit-for-tat with the Russians—and again, this is what Karaganov is proposing—tit-for-tat.

Karaganov understands that, you know, once you start attacking into Western Europe or Eastern Europe, it's likely that you'll go up the escalation ladder at least somewhat. So the question is, what does the United States think it can gain by playing tit-for-tat? And the answer is probably not much. And of course, this is why Karaganov is pushing this idea and why so many people buy into it. So it's not clear the Americans will respond, especially if the attack into Eastern Europe or Western Europe is limited. But who can say for sure? But you know what's happening here, Glenn? I think the Russians long ago concluded that the West and the Ukrainians, but especially the West, just do not respect red lines.

The West seems to have forgotten that we're dealing with great powers that have nuclear weapons. And as you and I have talked about before, it's truly amazing that the United States and Britain aided Ukraine when it invaded the Russian homeland in the summer of 2024. This is the Kursk Offensive. And of course, we then aided Ukraine when it attacked one leg of Russia's strategic nuclear triad. As you've heard me say before, this was unthinkable during the Cold War. The idea that we would help an ally invade the Soviet Union—that would never happen—or that we would help an ally, or we ourselves, would attack one leg of the strategic nuclear triad.

This is just unthinkable. It was just so dangerous. But this is what's happened in the Russia-Ukraine war. And as we've also talked about, you know, there's lots of evidence that Ukraine, with help from the United States and the British, was trying to take out Putin. And all this makes it clear that the West and the Ukrainians, of course, are willing to behave in what I would describe as reckless ways. And the problem that the Russians face is that they did not respond in any meaningful way in the past when the West did those things. This is one of the reasons I think that Karaganov's argument now gets more traction.

I think a lot of Russians understand that they would have been smarter to respond much more forcefully to these provocations that I just described early on. And by not responding, they have allowed the West and the Ukrainians to think that they can get away with striking at the Russian homeland. And of course, this is where we started. You were remarking about these large-scale attacks on Moscow. It's quite clear that the West and the Ukrainians are not deterred. And if anything, as you pointed out, it looks like we're going to go up the escalation ladder.

So if you're playing Russia's hand, whether you like the Russians or not, but if you're playing their hand and you see what's happened in the past, you see what's happened over the weekend, and you listen to the Europeans talk, you listen to the Ukrainians talk, and you think about where this is headed, it's pretty obvious to me, and I'm sure to you, that the logical conclusion is that you're going to have to put your foot down, as my mother used to say, and you're going to have to send a very clear signal that this is just unacceptable. And if the West and the Ukrainians want to go up the

escalation ladder, you'll go up the escalation ladder with them. And you'll make them pay a godawful price in the end. So this is basically what's going on here from an escalation point of view. At the same time, you have no bargaining space. And as you know better than I do, this is a remarkably dangerous situation.

#Glenn

Yeah, I think the problem is, I think in NATO they've become overly confident that Russia is deterred, because the thinking seems to be, well, Russia would never dare to retaliate. Because, well, I think the problem is twofold. On one hand, they don't see it as retaliation, because many have convinced themselves that they're not participants in this war — they're just giving weapons to Ukraine, that's it. But the second would be this overconfidence that the Russians are deterred. That is, we can bomb the Russians, attack them, kill them, but they wouldn't dare to respond, because then we would bring out the big guns, and they wouldn't. So they would be too afraid.

Now, once you become too confident in the adversary being deterred, you can do some very crazy things. And I'm just wondering if you see a different deterrence on each side, or how this might go up the escalation ladder. Because often I get the impression NATO does more incremental steps up the escalation ladder, a bit up and down, while the Russian team seems to wait and then take bigger steps. So, for example, seizing Crimea in 2014, when the West began to send weapons, they suddenly annexed these four oblasts in 2022. Do you think there's something there, that the Russians do not do these small steps but rather take huge steps up the escalation ladder? Or in general, how do you see this moving forward?

#John Mearsheimer

Well, what Karaganov is talking about is a huge step. I mean, even if you launched three missiles into Romania and three missiles into Poland and you killed hardly anyone — and here we're talking about conventional missiles — that would be a huge step, because it would be a Russian strike on two members of NATO. Right. So the Russians don't have to do much to really ratchet things up. And I think that invariably that's what they're talking about. Now, let me just come at this from a slightly different angle. I did not think we would be at this point, because I thought that the Russians would win on the battlefield, right? And the war would be pretty much settled by now on the battlefield.

In my opinion, there's no question that the Russians are winning the war. And even if the war were stopped right now, the Russians have won. They have conquered roughly 20% of eastern Ukraine, and the Ukrainians are not going to recover that territory. And furthermore, if you look at what's happening on the battlefield, the Ukrainians are losing. The Russians are moving forward, but they're doing so at an incremental pace. And it's because of drones. I mean, drones, which were not

manifestly apparent at the beginning of the war, are now manifestly apparent on the battlefield. And it makes it very difficult for the Russians to capture territory quickly and to, in effect, finish off the Ukrainians.

I don't think the Ukrainians have enough troops to cover the front lines absent drones. If there were no drones, the front lines would be porous enough that the Russians could rather easily pour through. But given that we have lots of drones in the sky, the Ukrainians, with small numbers of troops, can hold the front lines and make it very difficult for the Russians to make progress. So I think there's no question the Russians have won the war. And the only interesting question at this point is how much additional territory they'll end up taking. But the fact is, it's taking time. The Russians cannot count on winning a quick and decisive victory at this moment.

And the end result is that there is pressure on the Russians to do something with regard to the ongoing air war that we started talking about. So I think, given the slow progress the Russians are making on the battlefield, and given the fact that there is no bargaining space, and given the fact that the Europeans and the Ukrainians seem determined to increase the number and quality of the attacks on the Russian homeland, I think it's inevitable that you're going to get serious escalation. And as I said, it doesn't take a major step by the Russians in terms of the number of missiles launched into NATO territory to represent a gigantic leap forward.

#Glenn

I'm still wondering if that message would be, I guess, received as intended in Europe, because it sounds more likely that when Russia finally retaliates, the Europeans would essentially conclude, oh, look, we always told you that after Ukraine, Russia would also attack NATO. This is why we're helping Ukraine. So they wouldn't see it as a deterrent. They would just see it as Moscow's march towards Paris, essentially, something along those lines. I might be mistaken, of course.

#John Mearsheimer

If I could just jump in, Glenn, I think what you're missing is that in the background is the nuclear threat. We're not just talking about starting World War I or World War II, which would be absolutely horrible in its own sense, but we're talking about the fact that the Russians have nuclear weapons and that Karaganov and others are talking about using those nuclear weapons. It's very important to understand that. So once you begin to go up the escalation ladder, everybody understands that at some point up there, it's hard to figure out exactly where that point is. Your eyes are closed and you're feeling your way up the escalation ladder, right? But somewhere up that ladder is nuclear use. One of the rungs is the use of nuclear weapons.

And everybody understands, or almost everybody is going to want to avoid that. This is what Karaganov understands. The mere threat of nuclear weapons will have huge deterrent value. And I think he's correct in that regard because we don't want to get incinerated. And what Karaganov is

talking about, and others are talking about, is, you know, getting out on the slippery slope. And once you're out on the slippery slope, well, who knows how far you're going to slip, right? Again, we're on the escalation ladder. You can't see for sure where you're going. Your eyes are closed, right? You're feeling your way around in the dark, and nuclear weapons may be used. So the argument here is that once you start up the escalation ladder, the incentives for everybody to put an end to it very quickly are very great.

#Glenn

Yes, that's why I see the logic in the strike against a NATO country, not because this is low risk, but because doing nothing now seems like an even greater risk. The Europeans have already told us where they're going to take this: they want to bring the war to Russia. They're going to mass-produce long-range missiles and drones to strike deep inside Russia. This is actually what they're going to do. And they've shown now with this attack on Moscow that this is what they're planning to do. So not doing anything now seems almost more reckless than striking NATO, which shows how horrific a situation we've gotten ourselves into.

That being said, I did want to pivot a bit towards another horrible war which seems to be getting out of control, which is Iran. From what I understand, after China, there were no meaningful changes. The Iranians don't accept American proposals. The Americans don't accept Iranian proposals. And there are many now warning that a war could be mere hours away, or 24 or 48 hours away. How do you see this situation developing? The only source of relief or calm now seems to be that it doesn't make any sense. It's unclear to me what can be achieved that they didn't achieve in those 40 days. So what are we looking at here?

#John Mearsheimer

Well, if you look at the proposals that the Iranians and the Americans are making on how to settle this conflict, you see that they're light years apart. There's no bargaining space here in this conflict, just as there's no bargaining space in the Ukraine/Europe/Russia conflict. And therefore, you're not going to get a deal unless they're making concessions behind closed doors that we just don't know about. But there does not appear to be any evidence of that. Everything you see in the public record tells you there's just no agreement on any of the key issues between the two sides.

And Trump is getting desperate. There's just no question about that. We started with a bombing campaign that lasted 40 days. That didn't work. So on April 8th, we moved to a ceasefire. And then air coercive leverage was supposed to come from the blockade. The blockade was the new formula for getting Iran to surrender. The original formula was the 40-day bombing campaign. That didn't work. Well, it's quite clear that the blockade is not working either, and that if it ever is going to work, it's going to take a long time. And time is something that Trump doesn't have. He's got to deal with this quickly. He's got to get himself in because of the economic consequences of this war.

#John Mearsheimer

And that means he has really two choices. He can go back to bombing, or he can basically cut a deal on Iran's terms. And he finds it almost impossible to cut a deal on Iran's terms. I think that he hoped that when he went to Beijing, he could talk to the Chinese and the Chinese would be willing to put pressure on Iran, and the Iranians would end up making some significant concessions that would allow Trump to declare victory, even though he would have to make concessions himself. But at least the Iranians would make major concessions too. But there was no evidence the Chinese were willing. There is no evidence the Chinese were willing to do that. So China's not helping.

So he's back to square one here. And the question is, what does he do? And I think one gets a sense that he might very well roll the dice and go back to bombing Iran. There's no question that the Israelis and the neoconservatives in the United States are pushing him in that direction. But the problem he faces is that launching another bombing campaign is not going to fix the problem. It's not going to cause the Iranians to surrender. Almost everybody understands that. You can inflict massive punishment on Iran, as we did in the first 40 days of the war, and they won't surrender. If anything, they'll become more committed than ever to, you know, hanging in there.

And then the other problem that Trump faces is that the Iranians have a second-strike capability. And, you know, if you think about restarting the bombing campaign, Glenn, it seems clear to me if it didn't work the first time, you're going to have to go even harder at them the second time. In other words, you're going to have to make the bombing campaign this time around even more intense. It makes common sense. If the bombing campaign didn't work the first time and you expect it to work the second time, it has to be because it's going to be a much more massive bombing campaign than the 40-day campaign we started the war with.

#John Mearsheimer

But if you do that, that gives the Iranians a greater incentive to just wreck the entire Gulf, to go after almost every country in the Gulf and do everything possible to destroy those countries, shut down the Red Sea, and so forth and so on. And the end result is that even greater damage will be done to the international economy, and the Iranians will still be in the fight. So I don't see why, from a strategic point of view, Trump wouldn't just accept the fact that we've lost and cut a deal. Is it a good alternative? No, but it's the least bad alternative. You know, going back to bombing and launching a more massive bombing campaign than we did last time is not going to solve the problem, just going to make it worse, as I said. But anyway, you don't have the sense, at least from what we can see on the outside, that Trump is willing to make any meaningful concessions to the Iranians and let them walk away with a victory. So it appears that he may very well roll the dice.

#Glenn

That's what I'm thinking. If it does go back into this war, it's going to have to be much higher intensity, despite there being fewer military targets they have left. But that means the Iranians have very little reason to have any restraint. As you said, they can shut down the Red Sea, they can essentially destroy a lot of the Gulf states. They can cut internet cables. They can make significant territorial conquests against Kuwait through the—well, have the Iraqis do it. I mean, there's so much that can be done.

This is why it's hard to imagine them going down this path. But let's say instead of escalating, going back into the war, Trump decides to instead strengthen the blockade. So one of the problems now is they have to have too far a distance from the Iranian coast. But what if they moved it, for example, to the Strait of Malacca or something, to cut off the Iranian ships there? Also, of course, bringing the war to some extent to China. Do you think something like this is possible, where they essentially begin to draw in more actors?

#John Mearsheimer

Well, the problem here is not where the blockade is located. The problem here is that the blockade does not inflict sufficient punishment on Iran to get it to surrender. And as long as Iran doesn't surrender and the Strait of Hormuz is closed, this has huge consequences for the international economy. And as time goes by, the situation just worsens. If you look at what's happening to inflation inside the United States and around the world, and you start thinking about the problems that various countries are having servicing their debt or their debts and how this is likely to become a more acute problem over time, what you see is that the incentives for President Trump to shut this war down sooner rather than later are very great. But again, how does he do that? And I think where the blockade is located just doesn't matter very much.

And that's why I think that continuing the blockade is not a viable alternative. And I think the Trump administration recognizes that. That's why we're talking about going back to bombing. We're talking about going back to bombing because the blockade doesn't work. And you want to remember that just as the countries in the Gulf, outside of Iran, are looking for ways to beat the blockade, the Iranians themselves are looking for ways to beat the blockade. And all of the players have some options here. So the Iranians are hard at work trying to figure out different ways to get around the blockade, and they have some cards to play here. And that's what makes it very difficult to inflict the kind of punishment on Iran that might—and I underline the word might—get the Iranians to surrender.

#Glenn

Well, I just have a hard time seeing the overall strategy or direction of the U.S. here, though. Where exactly are they going? Because we were told in the National Security Strategy of 2025 that the U.S. was likely heading in a more multipolar—well, adjusting to a multipolar distribution of power. Now

we see a lot of these wars, they seem to have an objective of restoring primacy, security. For no good reason, a lot of the relationships have been spoiled, for example, with the Europeans, the East Asians. Well, the Gulf states are probably accidentally so, but international law is falling apart. No one's trusting diplomacy anymore.

This is a key problem for the Iranian and the Russian side, is they wouldn't actually trust anything—not just the U.S. side, but the Europeans as well. So how do you... If you take a step back, looking at all these conflicts at the same time, how do you think the U.S. will adjust to this? Because, you know, at one point I thought that the U.S. could flip this to an opportunity. It could just argue, well, we wanted to get out of the Middle East anyway. We're going to pivot out. The Europeans, they didn't help us. We'll go away from Europe too. And they could, you know, essentially make this adjustment to multipolarity, but it doesn't seem this is the pathway. So... where is the U.S. going here, though?

#John Mearsheimer

Well, with regard to Europe, what the United States is doing is shifting the burden of dealing with the Ukraine conflict onto the shoulders of the Europeans. And the United States is doing everything it can to wean itself off that conflict. Let the Europeans handle it. With regard to East Asia, it's quite clear from Trump's recent trip to Beijing that what he's doing is going to great lengths to make sure that there's no crisis in East Asia, and certainly no war in East Asia involving the United States. That would be a total disaster for the United States, certainly at this point in time. And that brings us to the Middle East. This is where we are deeply involved in fighting a war. Again, we're not fighting the war in Ukraine. The Ukrainians are fighting the war, and we've been helping them for sure, but we're not doing the actual fighting.

And certainly we're not doing any fighting in East Asia, thankfully. But the place where we are doing the fighting is in the Middle East. This is the Iran war. And the question is, what can we do to get out of that? And, you know, it's funny, but I often sort of think about the Vietnam War when I think about the Iran War. And you want to remember, in 1968, after President Johnson says that he's not going to run again because he's effectively been killed, destroyed by the Vietnam War, Richard Nixon runs against Hubert Humphrey, and Richard Nixon wins the election in November of '68, and he takes over in January of '69. And Nixon made it clear when he was campaigning that he had a secret plan to end the war, and he was going to end the war quickly.

Well, if you look at what happened after Nixon came into office, he was not interested in ending the war. He wanted to stay in the fight. He did not want to concede defeat. And we actually thought by 1972, by using American air power and Vietnamese ground forces, that combination would allow us to hold off the North Vietnamese and forestall defeat. The Nixon administration did not want to lose in Vietnam. They were constantly searching for a clever strategy to make sure that we could win the

war, or at least not lose the war. And, of course, what happened in the end is that Congress forced Nixon's hand. Congress told them, told the Nixon administration, you cannot use air power to rescue the situation.

May '72, when we stopped the North Vietnamese offensive with tactical air power, was the last time. And after that, Congress made it impossible for the Nixon administration to prop up the government in Saigon with air power. And, of course, what happened is that Saigon fell, the North Vietnamese won. But Nixon and, of course, Henry Kissinger, who was his national security advisor and then his secretary of state, they did not want to lose. It's not the American way. And just to go to Afghanistan, as you well know, we were there for 20 years fighting the Taliban there. We did not want to lose that war. So what this tells you is, when the United States gets into a war, even when it's losing, it is very difficult to accept defeat.

Very difficult. The United States is a very powerful country, and it's constantly looking for a way to win. And this is, I think, the basic logic that you see at play in the case of Iran. You know, you and I can point out to them that this war is lost. And in a certain sense, they recognize that. But they just won't accept it. And the belief is there's just got to be a magic formula out there. After all, this is the United States of America, the greatest country in the world, the most powerful country in the world. How can you tell me, how can you tell us that we can't defeat a small country like Iran? This just can't be the case. It's that kind of logic that kicks in.

And so what you see is Trump thrashing around, and his advisors thrashing around, looking for a solution. And there's very little evidence, at least in the public record, that anybody on the inside is saying, this one's over. We lost. Let's recognize that, cut a deal, and minimize our losses. Which is what they should do, because the fact is that we lost this war, and there's no way we can rescue the situation. But anyway, all of this is a long-winded way of saying, Glenn, it's going to be very hard to get the United States to accept the fact that it has been defeated by the Iranians. And we will do everything we can to figure out a way to win the war.

#Glenn

Well, I can see it's always been difficult for the U.S. to accept defeat. But the situation now looks even worse because the U.S. is now, well, represented by the Trump administration. And he kind of built his whole persona or image on being the strong, you know, great leader, making America great again. And then to be stopped in Iran, it's something that's very difficult to swallow. I mean, if you were defeated by the Chinese or Russians, you know, that would be one thing. But by Iran, as you said, this is something very difficult to accept. And furthermore, Trump bet everything on this war, it seems. That is, you know, he was going to be a peace president, and then he went all in on this Iran war, assuming that it would be, you know, peace through strength. But now all of this is gone. So do you worry about, like, a personal meltdown or the willingness to take desperate actions to, yeah, again, reverse the situation?

#John Mearsheimer

But I do worry about him taking desperate steps. This is why I think there is a reasonable chance that he will go back to a massive bombing campaign, and that that will be a massive bombing campaign. We will end up destroying a huge amount of infrastructure in Iran and killing many people. And this is what happens when countries become desperate. But my point to you is that it won't work. With regard to a meltdown, I think that may be overstating it. That may happen. But I think it's—again, I hate to keep going back to the Vietnam analogy—but I watched what happened to President Johnson.

I was young at the time, but nevertheless remember very well when we entered the war full bore in March of 1965, and then what happened to President Johnson over the next, let's say, three years. By March 1968, it was all over for him. He said he was not going to run for another term. He was a defeated man. The war had worn him down. You could see it in his face. You could hear it in his voice. It was a devastating personal defeat for him as well as a defeat for the country. And one can imagine a similar situation with regard to President Trump. You know, he's not going to win this war. It's turned out to be the kind of war that he promised us he would never enter into.

And of course, when he entered the war, he didn't think this was going to happen. And by the way, this is one of the big differences between Vietnam and this war. In the Vietnam War, Johnson understood full well that he was, in effect, entering a war where we had no formula for winning that war. He thought it was essential that we enter the war anyway and try to figure out how we could win it as we moved along. But he was very pessimistic from the get-go. This is different. Trump was optimistic. This one is like the Iraq War in 2003. You remember that, where the Bush administration was wildly optimistic about how the invasion of Iraq was going to turn out.

And then, of course, President Bush landed on the aircraft carrier and declared that the mission had been accomplished. Of course, it all went to hell in a handbasket shortly after that. But in the case of Iraq, 2003, just like the case here in Iran on February 28th, we thought we were going to win a quick and decisive victory and live happily ever after. Very different from the Vietnam War. Johnson and his advisors did not have any illusions. But it, in this case, didn't work out very well. And the question is, what does Trump do now? And as you and I have said on a number of occasions on the show, he has no good option.

#Glenn

Well, at least in Iraq, the United States did, well, win in terms of winning the war, but it couldn't consolidate that victory. That is, the insurgency came and, well, it could be defeated for a short period of time in Bush's defense. But with Iran, there was never a victory at all, though, which makes it very difficult—or, sorry, a different victory. But there seems, I guess, the new branding now of the wars, it gives me a reason to be pessimistic. That is, that the wars are going to be escalated. For example, if you look in the European media now, they have reverted back to saying that Ukraine

has turned the tide, Ukraine is winning again. This is... and the propaganda has dialed up to 100 again. So now suddenly victory is going to— we're going to defeat the Russians again. They're going back to all of this nonsense. And on the U.S. side, I thought it was a very interesting rebranding.

That is, you see more and more references to, well, the Iran war is essentially over, which, you know, the war that the United States started with a surprise attack. This is over. But now there's a new conflict, which is that Iran is blocking the Strait of Hormuz, and America has to liberate this international waterway. I'm not sure if this is, again, to resell the war as, you know, this time we didn't attack, you know, we're going to open it or, you know, liberate it, or if this is just to sell it to Congress that this is a completely different war than the previous war. I'm not sure. How are you seeing this? Because there's so much focus on the information war, the war of narratives these days. But still, it's how the actors are seeking to shape the narrative. It is a good indication of where they're going to go with this, though.

#John Mearsheimer

Yeah, just to start with Ukraine, there's no question that if you look at the narrative in the West at this point in time, it's that the Ukrainians are winning. They've turned the tide. The Russians are on their back feet and so forth and so on. The great danger there, Glenn, is that that gives the Europeans and the Ukrainians an incentive to increase the attacks on the Russian homeland. The argument that people are making is that we finally have the Russians on the run, that these attacks are devastatingly effective, and let's just ramp up the attacks and quality of the attacks, and we'll do even better on the battlefield. If you believe that rhetoric, as we discussed before, you're asking for really big trouble. To go to the case of Iran, I think there is some rebranding. I don't think it matters very much.

The question is, what is the United States going to do to defeat Iran and to get our way? Is it going to involve opening the straits? I don't think anybody really believes that we can do that and achieve victory. I think that's why they're talking about the bombing campaign. It really seems to me that you're now at a point with regard to the Iran conflict or the Iran war where you have two choices. You can, well, maybe you have three choices. One is to continue the status quo. Two is to accept defeat, cut a deal. And number three is to restart the bombing campaign. Those are the options. But I don't think there's much serious talk about taking the strait. And if they even took the strait, that wouldn't be the end of it because the Iranians have all sorts of counters that they can turn to. So I think, you know, we are where we are with the Iran war.

#Glenn

Just my last question. Is there any other card the U.S. can play here? I mean, do you see anything? Regional actors, Kurds, Azerbaijanis, I mean, anyone that could use Pakistan, anyone who can essentially take the role of the, I guess, the Ukrainians of the Middle East, someone they can, or the Europeans for that sake, someone they can outsource the war to. I... I don't see anyone with the

capabilities that is the same as in Europe. I think Ukraine was kind of the last chance to defeat the Russians, but there's no other large proxy army you can build in that part of the world.

#John Mearsheimer

No, I mean, if the United States and Israel together could not defeat Iran, I mean, who else could? I mean, it looks like the UAE, the United Arab Emirates, are spoiling for a fight with Iran. And in fact, it appears that the UAE participated with the United States and Israel during the 40-day bombing campaign. But the UAE by itself is no match for Iran. And in fact, if the UAE were to get into a fight with Iran, I think the Iranians would destroy the UAE as a country. They'd go after the desalination plants. They'd go after their energy infrastructure.

It would be a total disaster for the UAE. In fact, I don't understand why the UAE is not trying to work out some sort of modus vivendi with the Iranians. But of course, they're not. They're not in a position to take on the Iranians. No, I mean, this is, I think, very simple. If we can't do it militarily — we meaning the United States can't do it militarily with the Israelis — that means it can't be done. And we've failed. And therefore, we have to cut a deal. And that deal is going to reflect the fact that we lost and Iran won. And that is, at this point in time, unacceptable to the United States.

And as you can imagine, Glenn, that is categorically unacceptable to the Israelis because the Israelis view Iran as an existential threat, rightly or wrongly. And so if Trump were inclined to cut a deal that reflected the fact that we lost, the Israelis and their supporters in the United States would fight that mightily. And that, of course, makes you wonder, where is this train headed, right? Maybe what I'm saying here is that even if Trump is inclined to cut a deal, the pressure on him not to cut that deal from Israel and its supporters in the United States, who are enormously influential, could prevent him from sitting down with the Iranians. And then you say to yourself, where does this all lead?

#Glenn

Well, the media suggests we could be only a day or so away from returning to war with Iran. And I'm hearing that the Russians are going to unveil some new weapons in Ukraine. So it looks like it's going to be a very troubling week ahead. Let's check back again later. Do you have any final thoughts before we wrap up? No, I agree with you.

#John Mearsheimer

I think we could title this talk "Up the Escalation Ladder." It's just very depressing to think where we are. And it's also very depressing to think that two individuals like us, who have spent a lot of time thinking about these issues, really can't come up with stories to tell about either one of these two conflicts that have even a quasi-happy ending. It's just very depressing.

#Glenn

I keep wondering if there's a—it feels like there's a wider problem we have now across the West, that is the inability to objectively look at a situation. For years, at least between 2015 and 2022, I was always warning that we should do everything we can to implement the Minsk Agreement. We should be happy we have this. This could prevent a major war. If we ignore this, we're going to invite a major war. And it was impossible to even have that discussion. Every time I tried to make this point, the argument more or less was, well, that's pro-Russian. If you're pro-Western or pro-Ukrainian, then you won't implement this because this would be a capitulation. So everything's dumbed down to pro this or pro that, and no one ever explained how they imagined this playing out.

If you ignore this peace deal, you build up the Ukrainian army to the point where the Russians see, okay, now we can't accept this existential threat. I mean, even now, we know what has happened by ignoring this peace, by escalating at every turn. This was not good for Ukraine. It's being destroyed. This is not good for the West. We're being weakened, being fragmented. No one can explain a convincing story of how this was going to play out. And even after it all becomes a mess, they use it as evidence for, well, look, we always told you that Russia was bad. But there's no serious discussion, and it's just, you know, if you have to be pro this, and if you are, then you have to repeat these slogans. If you contest it, well, then you're with the enemy, essentially. I miss common sense. I miss actual discussions and debate. We definitely don't have it in this country, and it's a big problem across Europe, so... anyways...

#John Mearsheimer

Yep. Hard to disagree with you. You know, just one final point, Glenn, just going back to Vietnam. One thing I learned in those days, and it's been proven true over time, is that it's very easy for the United States to get involved in wars, but it's very difficult to get out. You get into these conflicts thinking you're going to win a quick and decisive victory, or you pursue a policy that looks like there's going to be big trouble ahead, but you say to yourself, I can deal with it. I can fix the problem as I move forward. But that is invariably not the case. You rarely win quick and decisive victories when you go to war. Sometimes you do.

And, you know, when the United States picks a fight with a country like Iran, I say to myself when it starts that this one is going to be very difficult to get out of. Same thing is true when we invade Afghanistan and when we invade Iraq. I mean, we go into Iraq in 2003. We finally get out in 2011. Then we have to go back in in 2014. And we still have troops on the ground in Iraq. We're still interfering in the politics of Iraq. It's really quite amazing. It took us 20 years to get out of Afghanistan. And the Vietnam War was another disaster. But anyway, you know, getting into these conflicts is much easier than getting out of them. That's one lesson I learned a long time ago. And I think these conflicts prove that to be true.

#Glenn

Yeah, well, definitely. Yeah, that's been a lesson over the past 30 years as well — these forever wars. Easy to start, hard to finish. And that will definitely be the lesson of the Iran war as well, as the Strait of Hormuz now seems to be lost. Anyway, thank you so much for taking the time, and I hope to see you again soon.

#John Mearsheimer

You're welcome, Glenn.