

Amb. Chas Freeman: Israel's Agenda Just Hit a Brick Wall, Falling Apart

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#Nima

Hi, everybody. Today is Friday, May 22nd, 2026, and our dear friend, Amb. Chas Freeman, is here with us. Welcome, Amb. Freeman.

#Chas

Glad to be with you, Nima. Lots to talk about.

#Nima

Yeah, exactly. I want to start with what has happened in Israel with the case of the people who were trying to help Gazans, Palestinian people, who were detained by Israelis. And we had a shocking video. And who published that video? Ben-Gvir. Ben-Gvir published that video showing how they're, you know, treating these people. And here is the footage that Ben-Gvir published.

#Speaker 03

...with a lot of pride, like great heroes. Look at me now. Look at me. Yeah, we have one of these people who was among those, you know, people from Philadelphia who were detained by Israelis. Here is what she said.

#Speaker 04

...by Israel, like 425 other people. We all were in detention, and they put handcuffs on my hands and on my feet. They dragged me, and when I couldn't walk anymore, they dragged me on the ground. They hit me. They hurt all of us a lot. They put the handcuffs so tight that my hands at some point lost feeling, and they laughed all the time. These people were super sadistic. They abused us. They mistreated and hit us, and they took pictures of us. They took off my shirt, and then they just kept on mistreating us all night long. My message to the world is: shame on you. Shame on all of you.

Shame on everyone who is silent about this. Shame on every government that keeps on trading with Israel, including my own government. They keep on trading with Israel. Israel is committing genocide. My government is complicit. The whole of Europe is complicit. The whole world is complicit. So my message to all governments is: shame on you, and to all people: please stand up, stand up and make noise for Palestine, for all genocides around the world, because if we don't do it, no one else will. Like, if we don't go on a flotilla, the government won't solve it. No one will solve it. Only the people can solve it.

#Nima

Ambassador, there were some repercussions in the Israeli media as well. We had Benjamin Netanyahu and the foreign minister of Israel attacking Ben-Gvir, not because of the way he was treating these people, but because he published the video. That was the main problem. Go ahead.

#Chas

That's the usual reaction. You think about the video some months ago of the Palestinian male prisoners being sodomized in prison. The repercussion of that was not that the perpetrators of the rape were punished; they were actually made into heroes. But the woman, the prosecutor who allowed the video to get out, was harassed and dismissed from office and driven to contemplate suicide. So the obsession in Israel—Israel has always regarded the manipulation of its image as a key instrument of foreign policy and a key to its survival. And that makes sense because Israel, in many ways, is in the position of the two Crusader kingdoms that were established in Palestine 800 or so years ago. And both of them depended, like Israel, on external support.

And when they lost their external support, they collapsed. So basically, Israel has an obsession with sustaining its support abroad, mainly in the United States, but also in Europe. Most of the people in the flotilla were European rather than American. There were some Americans, some Canadians also. And they report that they were tortured, basically. We've seen photographs of people arriving in Istanbul with what looked like cigarette burns all over them. We've been told that people have had broken bones. We've seen people badly beaten. The young lady who just spoke in that clip mentioned her shirt was taken off. There are reports of rapes of members of the flotilla by the Israelis. So they fully deserve the description she gave of them as utterly sadistic.

Israel now symbolizes a level of sadism that no other country can begin to match. And that is not good for Israel. So there was a huge reaction abroad from people in the countries whose citizens were mistreated. Demands were made of their governments that they intervene. Foreign ministers are called into action. So far, however, it's just words. Again, there is talk of actually cutting trade with Israel, not renewing agreements and so forth. But we'll have to wait and see whether that happens, because the record suggests that Europeans are really good at complaining and not any

good at doing anything. So I don't know how this all plays out. It certainly has greatly weakened support for Israel abroad, and it will fuel the boycott, divest, and sanction movement—the BDS movement—everywhere.

#Nima

Yeah. I think that was shown in Kentucky against Thomas Massie. They had to spend a lot altogether going against Thomas Massie to, you know, to beat him.

#Chas

That's actually, that's a terrible comment on the state of American democracy, because here we have money equated with free speech by order of the Supreme Court. Here we have money deployed not to advance a cause, but to punish people. So the people who are giving the money have no aspiration to improve things. They just want to punish someone who disagrees with them. And our politics is entirely coercive and intimidating, not uplifting, not idealistic, not aspirational. That is a break with the American past that is fundamental.

And whether you agree with Thomas Massie or not—and Thomas Massie has some really strange ideas, in addition to some very solid ones—he is a victim. And I think this will actually boomerang against the Zionist lobby that took him down. The \$37 million in a seat primary, I mean, this is unprecedented. But there have been previous illustrations of similar efforts, successful, to punish politicians who were critical of Israel. And that is clearly why Massie was taken down. Donald Trump wanted him gone, but the money came from the Zionist lobby.

#Nima

Laura Loomer tweeted after beating Thomas Massie that it's time for Rand Paul next, you know.

#Chas

Oh, sure. I mean, there's a whole agenda here of hateful actions. She is one of the most despicable characters in American politics, widely regarded as such. She has an inside relationship of some sort with Donald Trump. And she is vicious, totally inhumane, more Israeli than American. I mean, she reminds you of people like Ben-Gurion and Smotrich, who have no regard for human beings other than those who are aligned with them, religiously or otherwise.

#Nima

Ambassador, the case of the Middle East and the war between Iran and the United States basically is, according to an Axios report, that there is a difference between Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu, because Donald Trump is trying to do something else—somehow putting an end to the

war. Benjamin Netanyahu wants the continuation of the war because this is the single moment for him; if he cannot achieve it right now, there would be no other time in history for his administration, because he's at the end of his position, at the end of his career right now in Israel. That's why he wants to continue this war. And Donald Trump doesn't feel that way, it seems, in this report from Axios. What is your understanding of that?

#Chas

Well, Axios, this Barak Ravid report, who is both a Mossad agent and a journalist—the two roles are not incompatible in Israeli practice—reported that there was a three-hour angry discussion between Benjamin Netanyahu and Donald Trump, where Benjamin Netanyahu was pressing Trump to resume the war. I think there are several reasons that Donald Trump does not want to resume the war. He himself has cited alleged requests from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates not to restart the war. I don't think that has any credibility at all. I wouldn't doubt for a moment that the Saudis and Qataris have pressed Donald Trump not to start the war, but the Emirates take a very different position. And this suggests that this is another one of Donald Trump's made-up stories, and it is not the reality.

The reason he does not want to restart the war is several reasons, actually. One is that the Pentagon has apparently told him that Iran has greatly enhanced its air defenses and that going back to doing more of the same would be very costly in terms of casualties and aircraft. And so that would not be a good show. It would not enable him to declare victory. So he wants to declare victory and leave, basically. And the other reason, I think, is domestic politics. He's aware that his own position in American politics is rapidly eroding. The summer driving season is upon us. Gas prices are now well over \$4.50 nationally and well over \$6 in California. So, you know, there's backlash, political backlash. And he knows the war is unpopular. He wants to end it.

You know, I've been thinking about this, and my conclusion is that he can't get out of this war except in one way, and that is if Congress overrides his desire for the war and pulls the plug on it—which they almost did, by the way, the day before yesterday. They were about to vote in the House of Representatives against Donald Trump's war. The Speaker of the House, Mr. Johnson, then canceled the vote because he couldn't hold the Republican Party behind Donald Trump. That's serious. So there is a serious rebellion of Republicans against Donald Trump, in part on this issue, in part on the issue of what's been called the felon slush fund—meaning this \$1.8 billion giveaway to all of the cronies of Donald Trump and supporters who assaulted the Capitol and killed police on January 6th.

Anyway, there's a lot of backlash. So I think really the only way he can get out of this war with his reputation somewhat intact is to allow Congress to push him out and claim that he was betrayed by Congress, that we were on the verge of victory, which he's been claiming all along. And if Congress and the Democrats had not opposed him, we would have had a great victory. I can just hear him saying that. This is the typical stab-in-the-back approach to defeat. It's what the French did when

they were thrown out of Algeria, what they said. There's precedent for it. It's not pretty, but I can just see Donald Trump doing that as an act of desperation because he has no other way out of this war. He cannot attack Iran effectively, militarily.

Iran has the wherewithal to do huge damage to Israel and to the Gulf Arabs who assist—any Gulf Arab countries that participate in an attack on Iran. And there is no diplomacy. And that's the final point I would like to make. There's essentially a complete deadlock, and there is no discussion of any of the issues that Donald Trump keeps raising. There will be no export to another country of the uranium hexafluoride, the 60% enriched uranium. That happened under the JCPOA, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action of 2015. It's not going to happen now. The regime in Iran is not going to change to be more conciliatory; it's moving in the other direction. The blockade of the Strait is slowly eroding. The U.S. continues to blockade the Strait, not very effectively, but Chinese ships and Korean ships and other ships are getting through.

And Iran is in active discussion with Oman about how to implement the tollgate that it has imposed to mutual advantage. The UAE is left out of that because the UAE remains wedded to the Israeli position and supportive of American action against Iran. So, Iran is suffering. Yes, it has suffered terribly in this war, but it seems to be prepared to accept more suffering. And it certainly can inflict a great deal more suffering on the Gulf Arabs and the Israelis if the war resumes. So for all these reasons, I don't know whether Donald Trump has come up with the idea of just letting Congress force him out of the war, as I mentioned, but for all these reasons, he does not want to resume the war. And Benjamin Netanyahu is determined to do that for the reasons you mentioned.

That is, he has nowhere to go. His objective was to destroy the Iranian state, if possible, fracture Iran into smaller countries, if not, at least subjugate it, intimidate it to the level where it could not pose a threat, eliminate its nuclear deterrent option, and so forth and so on. None of that's going to happen. So Netanyahu faces jail time for his corruption, the end of his political career, and terrible damage to the state of Israel by his mistaken policy. It's not clear that Israel can survive. It certainly cannot survive if American and European support go away, which Ben-Gvir seems to be working very hard to achieve. And it can't survive if it's unable to defend itself and unwilling to practice diplomacy. There is no such thing as Israeli diplomacy.

There is a Ministry of Strategic Affairs, which manipulates public opinion in the United States and elsewhere to Israel's advantage. There are ferocious defenders of Israel in lobbies in other countries like France, the UK, and the United States. There is German guilt about the Holocaust, which paralyzes Germany in this regard. But beneath the surface, publics everywhere, including Jewish publics, have turned against Israel. So Netanyahu has taken Israel down a dead-end street. There's no way out. And Donald Trump is stuck in a dead end as well. So nothing's happening. That means that unless the Congress acts to end the war, we're probably going to have another round of fighting, which will be even more disastrous for the United States and Israel than the first round, and very damaging to Iran.

#Nima

From what we've seen so far, they're not even capable of defending themselves against FPV drones from Hezbollah. Hezbollah is hitting these Iron Dome batteries right and left, and that's the problem right now for them. I don't know how long they can continue this, because it's not easy to reproduce or increase the stockpile of these batteries in Israel because of what's going on in the war.

#Chas

No, I feel Hezbollah is using fiber-optic guided drones, which is something that the Ukrainians pioneered, and the Russians. And they're very effective. You can't deflect them, and they're taking quite a toll on the Israeli forces in southern Lebanon. But Hezbollah is also firing, as you said, into Israel and striking military installations there. So again, we come back to the fact that the alleged ceasefires that have been declared really don't exist. There is no ceasefire in Lebanon. There's no ceasefire in Gaza. The Israelis continue to conduct genocide there. They do it more slowly.

The sadism that was evident in the treatment of the people in the flotilla is typical. So you can single out Ben-Gvir, but Ben-Gvir really represents Israeli society as a whole. It is very sadistic. It is a psychotic mentality that really the world should not tolerate. You know, it has very little to do with Judaism. If anything, I don't think it has any real religious backing, although there are rabbis in Israel who back it. But this is not the Judaism that we observe in your country or mine. You know, these are indecent people hiding behind the banner of Judaism.

#Nima

Is your understanding of Israel and Lebanon going to be the same? Because they're talking about Israel and Lebanon being part of this, but we know that there are talks between the two governments in Israel and in Lebanon, which don't consider the position of Hezbollah. They don't consider all these attacks that Israel is carrying out in the southern part of Lebanon. And not only in Lebanon — we saw yesterday Israel bombing Syria. Who's going to— because after all, if Israel is going to stop here and then attack other countries, who's going to decide about it?

Is there any sort of understanding in the United States to put pressure? We know that the differences are coming to the surface with the case of the war against Iran. But how about other fronts that Israel is talking about, but nobody knows why they are attacking Syria? Are they bombing the southern part of Lebanon? It seems that they want to create some sort of dead zone in the southern part of Lebanon. I would say that from what we've seen so far, Hezbollah is trying to do the same in the case of the northern part of Israel.

#Chas

Exactly. Well, that's a very complicated question. The sad answer is I don't see any real movement in the United States to defend either Lebanon or Syria. I don't think people quite understand that the Israeli agenda is territorial expansion. This is a so-called state with no borders. The normal requirement for a country to be called a state is that it has borders that are established, or recognized, or asserted. Israel has never defined its borders. It clearly intends to annex parts of Syria beyond the Golan Heights, which it already annexed in 1967. It clearly intends to annex southern Lebanon. And in this context, the discussions between the Lebanese government and the Israeli government are a farce. They are a charade, they are a deception.

Because the Lebanese government wants to use Israel to get rid of Hezbollah and restore the power of the Sunnis and Christians, which the Lebanese constitution favors, despite the fact that the demography of Lebanon has changed and the vast majority now are Shia. So the discussions between Lebanon and Syria have two effects. One is they have no effect at all on the fighting because the Lebanese government is not defending Lebanon. Hezbollah is defending Lebanon. And second, they delegitimize the government because Lebanese can see that their government is conducting a charade. It is not defending Lebanon. It is trying to collaborate with Israel against Hezbollah.

So, you know, I don't hold any great grief for Hezbollah or for the Lebanese government, certainly not for Israel. But this is a transparent deception operation by the United States and Israel to hold talks, essentially meaningless and can't accomplish anything. But they have accomplished the one thing they're intended to do, apparently, which is to fool enough people so that Israel can go on murdering people in Lebanon and destroying their houses. Again, sadism in force. So this could be totally unacceptable. The young lady who spoke in the clip you showed earlier, who was on the flotilla and mistreated, has it exactly right. This should not be tolerable to anyone, anywhere.

#Nima

Yesterday I was talking with Laith Maroof. He's a reporter in Beirut, Ambassador. And the situation in Lebanon is somehow critical because the people who are fleeing from Syria, they're going to Lebanon. Palestinian people are going to Lebanon. The people from the southern part of Lebanon are going to the northern part and to the central part of Lebanon. This is a huge crisis when it comes to the people who are moving from one part to another part of the country. And putting all of them together, it brings a huge problem for the country. And mostly the government is incapable of managing that. That's why Hezbollah has a very important role in that. And basically, they're doing everything right now.

#Chas

Well, Hezbollah has shown its capability to protect its own people, the members of Hezbollah, the Shiite community generally, and Lebanon in general. It's well organized, it's efficient, it's very

competent on the battlefield, which the Lebanese army is not. And so, yes, but you know, you remind us that Syria and Lebanon were once one country, and they were divided by French imperialism. The French carved out what is now Lebanon from Syria in order to create a Christian enclave in West Asia, which would be beholden to them. This was all part of the Sykes-Picot discussions and so on. Because originally, Syria and Lebanon were part of the Ottoman regime. And so now you're quite right.

It still is one area, really, and people, populations are moving back and forth. Syrians trying to take refuge in what is now Lebanon, Lebanese moving in Lebanon or to Syria. The ultimate issue is going to be the same as it was in the Syrian civil strife fomented by the Gulf Arabs, the United States, Israel, and Turkey. Namely, these refugees are going to have to go somewhere. When the Syrian crisis sent a huge number of refugees to Europe, that created a backlash against refugees, which moved European politics to the populist right. European xenophobia kicked in. Where are these refugees going to go? No, these are competent peoples. They should be desirable immigrants. They work hard. They're honest. They have knowledge.

There are Lebanese all over the world. There are Syrians all over the world. And they are good citizens. But nobody is going to take them. So basically, what Israel has done to this population is what was done to the Jews of Europe by the Nazis — that is, left them with nowhere to go. And so, you know, we hear stories on the eve of the Holocaust of various Jewish groups trying to get to the United States or other countries and being denied entry. And now the West is again turning its back on people while it is supporting the Israeli genocide, ethnic cleansing, murder, mass rape, massacres. We are supporting that in the West, and yet we're not prepared to deal with the consequences. So, there's no answer to this, apparently, at present.

#Nima

Do you think that a war between Iran and Israel would do something to the GCC countries to get more support for the Palestinian people?

#Chas

I don't know. I don't know. I do know that, with the exception of the UAE and Bahrain, which are part of the so-called Abraham Accords, the other GCC countries now are concerned about the threat from Israel much more than they have been about the threat from Iran. Of course, they have had a threat from Iran because of their complicity in the attack on Iran. And it's coming out now that indeed they are not as innocent as they claim to be. They really were cooperating with the United States and therefore indirectly with Israel. The UAE directly cooperated—conspired—with Israel on this.

#Chas

Anyway, I don't see any evidence that this increases support for the Palestinians. I think you have to distinguish opposition to Israel from support for the Palestinians. Many people in the Gulf Arab countries are horrified by what's being done to the Palestinians, but that doesn't mean they're going to do anything for the Palestinians. They're horrified by Israel and its behavior, like everyone else in the world is. And so Israel's really managed to create a situation where more and more people are anti-Israel. They're not necessarily pro-Palestine. Well, I don't know the answer to that.

It would be the Gulf Arabs, frankly, who have had their serious problems with the Palestinians, beginning with the Palestine Liberation Organization, which is a secular organization, not religious, and therefore not acceptable to the Salafi branch of Sunni Islam. Yasser Arafat was an atheist, and that did not sit well with ordinary Saudis and Qataris and other people in the Gulf. The Kuwaitis, when they were occupied by Iraq, were well aware that Yasser Arafat and the PLO were in league with Iraq. They were cooperating with Iraq and Jordan and Yemen under Ali Abdullah Saleh. And therefore, the Kuwaitis, who had been the most friendly of all the Gulf Arabs and helpful to the Palestinians, withdrew their support to a great extent.

So the Palestinians have made a whole series of mistakes in terms of how they deal with the Gulf Arabs. And by the way, the PLO never really had any support from Iran. So, you know, I mean, it's ironic. The one Palestinian group that Iran has effectively supported is Hamas, which is a Sunni democratic movement, and Iran is not Sunni. And although there are many Sunnis in Iran, and Iran is aggressively pro-Shia, usually the Sunnis and Shias haven't gotten along. But Hamas has become dependent on Iran for support. So this is an incredibly complicated cauldron of competing interests and sentiments. And at the heart of all of it is the sadism of Israel.

#Speaker 04

Yeah.

#Nima

We had news just moments ago. In a joint statement, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE condemned and rejected Iran's control over the Strait of Hormuz and urged ships not to contact the Persian Gulf Strait Authority. How do you see them coming together to talk about, I don't know, some sort of formal thing to do?

#Chas

Of course they're against Iran being in control of the Strait of Hormuz. I don't think Oman was listed in that group, was it? So I think what we have is the five other members of the GCC trying to create a common front. Now that, Iran ought to be pleased by that, because if they create a common front, then you can do a settlement with all five together. And Iran has to do a settlement with the Gulf Arabs. After Iran gets rid of the American blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, and it operates not a

blockade but a toll gate in the Strait, then the new Persian Gulf Strait Authority manages this. They're going to have to have a relationship with the Gulf Arabs for many reasons.

Uh, first of all, they're neighbors. They need to be, uh, friendly, not enemies. And, um, Iran has always wanted to reach out to them. Second, um, uh, they need the money. You know, who's going to go through the Strait if they can't take oil from, uh, Al-Jubail or, uh, you know, gas from Qatar? So, you know, Iran has many reasons to want to do a deal with the Gulf Arabs, not the least of which is that one of the purposes they've announced in this war is to get rid of the American military bases. So, you know, I mean, if the five of them are getting together, and I were in Tehran, I'd say, okay, this is, you know, too bad for, in the short run, this is a problem. In the long run, this is an advantage.

Again, you have to think this war is not going to be solved on the battlefield. It's not going to be solved by warships going through the Strait of Hormuz. It's not going to get solved by anything other than diplomacy. And diplomacy means finding some kind of common ground. And the common ground is Iran has an interest in letting these countries ship through the Strait of Hormuz, and they have an interest in doing that. They probably would prefer not to pay a fee to do it. They probably would prefer not to have to deal with Iran to do it, but they have to. So in the end, this war, among the many pernicious effects it will leave behind, is going to leave Iran in control of the Strait of Hormuz.

It's going to set a precedent for the control of other straits by the littoral countries. I mean, we're hearing such discussion in Indonesia about the Strait of Malacca, soundly opposed by Singapore, less soundly by Malaysia. And Iran will have changed international law to allow it to profit from its geographical situation. And Iran is not going to give up its control of the Strait of Hormuz any more than it's going to give up its uranium, because the lesson of history, since the establishment of the State of Israel at least, is if you don't have a deterrent, you're dead. So Iran does not want to sacrifice itself on the altar of some kind of principles established by the British Navy in the 18th century. It's going to insist on controlling the strait. It's going to insist on the right of enrichment of uranium.

If it doesn't build a bomb, it will retain the ability to do so on short notice. So this war has accomplished nothing except the humiliation of the United States and Israel. And basically, Netanyahu and Trump are cornered. So Netanyahu basically is now saying Israel has to divorce the United States. It can't remain dependent on the United States. Well, that tells you that he's got his own version of the, you know, "Trump, I was winning and they betrayed me" kind of thing. The Americans betrayed Israel. That's the new line. The Americans did not support Israel when they needed to. If we had just supported Israel, Israel would exist from the Euphrates to the Nile, maybe. You know, I think this is the line. And both Trump and Netanyahu are very good at playing the victim. So I'm guessing that's where this is gonna end up, with Israel blaming the United States and Trump blaming the Congress.

#Nima

Yesterday, the IRGC, in an official statement, announced that if the war starts again, it's not going to be a regional war. It's going to go beyond the region. They're going to target American bases outside of the Middle East, outside of West Asia. And I have no reason not to believe what they're saying, because they said the same thing before this war started. They said it's going to be a regional war, which was a regional war when it started. And right now, they're saying it's going to go beyond the region.

#Chas

Well, it's not clear what it means. You know, I think extra-regional probably, inevitably in the case of Iran, given the limitations on Iranian capabilities, means—it does not mean, you know, missile attacks on bases in Europe or Diego Garcia or whatever. But it could very well mean irregular warfare, otherwise known as terrorism, because Iran has the ability to strike abroad through proxies, through Iranians who are loyal to the Islamic Republic but citizens of other countries or resident in other countries. So you could have—I don't know what the IRGC is planning. I do know that the IRGC is not the Supreme Leader and doesn't seem to be quite as concerned about religious matters as the Supreme Leader is.

Mojtaba Khamenei, who knows where he is—he's hiding. This seems to be the way everybody's... you know, Netanyahu is hiding, Khamenei is hiding, Trump is trying to build a place to hide under the new ballroom. This seems to be the way things are going. Erdoğan so far is not hiding, as far as I know, but that could happen too. And so... but I don't know what that means. I do take your point that Iran has a habit of following through on what it says seriously. If Iran says they will go beyond the region, it will go beyond the region. But how Iran will do that—Iran has many options, including missile strikes, including irregular warfare, including terrorism, including all sorts of things. You know, I mean, basically the definition of a terrorist is somebody with a grudge and no air force.

So if you have a grudge and you need to have revenge on somebody, but you don't have an air force, you create—well, you make one, you know, you turn a passenger plane into a cruise missile, 9/11. People know how to do these things. The smartest bombs of all are suicide bombs because they're guided by the human brain, which is still a little better than AI, I guess. So who knows where this is gonna go, but it's been, frankly, a miracle that the Palestine issue has not once again exploded into global terrorism, which it did in the 1960s. Iran is capable of retaliating, and it probably doesn't want to get involved in terrorism, but it may have to in its own judgment. So I think that's a serious warning.

#Nima

I think they have something, Ambassador, when it comes to military capabilities, because there are a lot of parts in Iran that say, "We have a lot of surprises militarily." They're not talking about—I don't

know what that means, but it seems that they didn't show their capabilities during the war they had for 40 days.

#Chas

Well, I would say I'm skeptical. I think eventually Iran will develop an intercontinental ballistic missile to deter the United States, just as North Korea has done. Whether that's nuclear or not is an open question. I expect it will be, but maybe I'm wrong about that. But I have to say, Nima, that the issue of military transparency is something I'm very familiar with from many discussions with the Chinese on that subject. And it's clear if you're weak, you want to claim that you have hidden capabilities because that deters people.

If you're strong, you show those capabilities. So I don't see those capabilities, but maybe they're there. And more likely they are part of a deterrent strategy that may be aspirational, that is to say, maybe Iran is developing weapons that in the future could do things that it can't do now. I don't doubt that it is. Iran is a very capable society with good engineers. And I'm sure they miss you—you left them without practicing engineering. But they have other people, and they're very confident. And so, yeah, that's very likely. But for now, I'm skeptical.

#Nima

Shoigu said that as well, Ambassador—sorry for interrupting. Shoigu said Iran has capabilities they didn't show, and they have. Yeah, I think that's right.

#Chas

I think that's right. What those capabilities are, I don't know. And by the way, I was reminded in the Gulf War, when I was in Riyadh in the Gulf War to liberate Kuwait. We had this obsession with the possible delivery of biological weapons from Iraq by Iraqi aircraft. And in fact, there were two aircraft that reportedly had biological weapons on them, which were shot down over the Gulf. But, you know, the fact was you could deliver a biological weapon on a camel. You don't need a jet plane. You can deliver a bomb in a car. You don't need a fancy aircraft.

You can deliver a problem to somebody with a bullet, you know. I mean, capabilities could include assassination capabilities, because Iran has not been doing that—not for a long time. And when it did conduct assassinations, it was only against other Iranians who were in opposition to the Islamic Republic. It hasn't been assassinating foreigners as far as I know. But it could. So there are lots of capabilities. But whether they're technological or not, I'm not sure. I think Shoigu has to be taken seriously, but I'm not sure that he's talking about technology either.

#Nima

The point right now is that Saudi Arabia is talking about a non-aggression pact with Iran because they want, as you just mentioned, the case of the Strait of Hormuz is somehow bringing all these countries together, in my opinion. They have no other choice, no other option on the table to go with. And they have to talk, they have to manage, they have to coordinate. And the other point is Russia and China. Go ahead.

#Chas

It isn't just they who have to talk to Iran. You know, Korea and South Korea sent an envoy to Iran. Japan has sent an envoy to Iran. Everybody has to talk to Iran because 20% of the world's oil and gas trade goes through the Strait of Hormuz. And the Strait of Hormuz is now under effective Iranian control. So you've got to talk to Iran. And the Arabs need to talk to Iran more than anyone. And they are talking to Iran. I'm sure they're talking to Iran. I mean, we know there have been phone calls back and forth, but I suspect there's a lot more than that.

And I see every sign that they are trying to come up with a post-war security architecture that reduces the threat from Iran to them. And in order to do that, they have to reduce or eliminate the American presence on their territory. So I think when you talk about a non-aggression pact, what does that mean? Did Saudi Arabia ever attack Iran? I don't think so. Did the United States use bases in Saudi Arabia to attack Iran? Yes. So if you're talking about a non-aggression pact, whose aggression are you talking about? You're talking about Iran on the one hand, and you're talking about the United States and Israel on the other. How do you do a non-aggression pact?

You neutralize yourself. You say, no, I'm not taking sides. Between Israel and Iran, I'm not taking sides. I'm not taking sides between the United States and Iran. I'm neutral. That is how you do a non-aggression pact. If you can come up with another way to do that, to do a non-aggression pact, please tell me. I don't see another way. So when they talk about a non-aggression pact, I think they're talking about crafting a deal with Iran. And the management of the Strait of Hormuz has to be part of that. Has to be part of that. And so, anyway, I think there's going to be a lot of diplomacy once the U.S. flotilla blockading the Strait is gone.

#Nima

We had the summit in Beijing, and after Donald Trump went to Beijing and met with Xi Jinping, we had Vladimir Putin go there and talk with him. Do you think they have their own sort of relationship with the new pipeline going from Russia to China? But the other point is the Middle East. How do you see the policies of these two countries, which are so important for the Middle East?

#Chas

Well, I'll make a number of comments. First, um, Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin are not the only visitors to Beijing these days. There are many, including Aramco and others from the Gulf,

Europeans of one sort or another. Basically, Beijing is emerging as the center of global diplomacy, the center of gravity of global diplomacy. It is playing the role that Washington used to play. You have to go to Beijing to talk to the Chinese people because they're now a world power. That is to say, their interests have to be taken into account everywhere in the world. Now, with regard to the Sino-Russian relationship, I don't think they agreed actually on the terms of the Power of Siberia gas pipeline. They may have come close.

They both have a reason to want to reach agreement on that. The Chinese would like to have less reliance on shipping on the ocean for their energy supplies. The Russians would welcome the investment and the jobs that would create, and both of them are prepared to rely—each of them is prepared to rely—more on the other. With regard to the Gulf, Iran, and the Arabs, they both want stability in the region for their own reasons. And they both want the United States gone as part of the creation of such stability. Both of them have put forward suggestions, as has Iran, for a cooperative security structure in the Gulf, which would mean there would be no foreign forces—not Chinese, not Russian, not American in the region, not French perhaps either.

I know the French have a base in the Emirates, so they seem to be thinking along the same lines. And they do share an interest, as we've discussed before—an ironic interest—in restoring the world order that the United States is pulling down. The United States created a world order that was very good for China, and it could have been good for Russia if we had not gotten into a proxy war in Ukraine over NATO enlargement. They want that order back, and that means respect for the UN Charter, for international law, and diplomacy. The United States has completely abandoned diplomacy.

We're not talking to Iran in a diplomatic manner. We're demanding Iranian surrender without any basis for doing so because we haven't won the war. We don't have professional diplomats. There was nobody with Witkoff and Kushner when they met in Moscow or in Rome or Vienna or wherever they met. So, no professional support. There's no policy process in Washington, which is why, you know, one day Pete Hegseth orders 4,000 troops to leave Poland, and the next day Donald Trump says he's sending 5,000 troops to Poland. There's no coordination at all.

So basically, if you negotiate with the United States, you're not sure whether the United States will keep its word, whether it's capable of reaching an agreement, whether it knows what it's doing. And so, you know, I mean, why would Russia and China not understand that? They both do. So I think a final point is, you know, the Chinese role in the region includes having brokered a relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran—a rapprochement. That is the precedent. The Chinese are now using Pakistan as the emissary to accomplish some kind of rearrangement of things in the Gulf. That distresses India, to be sure.

But from the Chinese point of view, it's very good because Pakistan has connections. It has a defense treaty with Saudi Arabia now. It has a relationship with Iran. The Pakistani military leader, Asim Munir, is in Tehran. And Pakistan is part of the region. Pakistan is part of an incipient military-

industrial combination between Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and itself. It's very advantageous to the Chinese to work with Pakistan. They don't thereby expose their own prestige. They don't complicate their relationship with the United States, but they have a chance of achieving a diplomatic success. So that's what's going on.

#Nima

Yeah. Ambassador, the next country in line, it seems, is going to be Cuba. Marco Rubio said Cuba not only has weapons they've acquired from Russia and China, but also that they host Russian and Chinese intelligence presence. And the Cuban foreign minister said that he's telling these sorts of lies because he's preparing for a new war against Cuba. And the president of Cuba said it's going to be a bloodbath if they go that far, if they attack us. How do you see the situation? Is that going to be some sort of winning card for Donald Trump to start a new attack? Because he felt in the Middle East, that's why he may do something against Cuba. He feels that it would be the same outcome as it was in Venezuela. I don't see that happening because Cuba is totally different from Venezuela. Your understanding of that?

#Chas

Well, I know something about Cuba. I've been there. I negotiated with the Cubans on the removal of their armed forces from Angola and the independence of Namibia from South Africa. They're very competent. It's a very institutionalized control of the country. So I take the warnings of the Cuban government that this would be a bloodbath very seriously. I think that's correct. Having said that, what Marco Rubio is talking about is utter nonsense. This is the exact analog to the slanders against Venezuela, which justified the attack on Venezuela. There is an intelligence presence by both Russia and China in Cuba. That's true. Cuba is no threat to the United States at all.

And let me go back here. When Fidel Castro had his revolution around 1960, I was a young man. I followed that closely. I speak Spanish. I like Cubans. And so I followed that closely. And the American decision to ostracize, isolate, boycott, sanction Cuba was aimed at four things. First, Cuba became an outpost of Soviet power next to the United States. The United States put Jupiter missiles into Turkey that could strike the Soviet Union from close by. The Soviet Union put missiles in Cuba to do the same thing to the United States. This was not acceptable to the United States. And in 1962, we confronted the Soviet Union on this subject — 13 days of the Cuban Missile Crisis, which were resolved by John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev very effectively. Second...

So that problem — no more Soviet outpost — as a result of the Angolan-Namibia negotiations in 1989, the Soviet Union basically had no military presence in Cuba. So that issue went away. The second issue was the export of the Cuban Revolution to other countries in Latin America. And when Cuba agreed to withdraw from Angola, and it had been also in Ethiopia and Mozambique and so on in southern Africa and east in the Horn of Africa, it replaced its ideological export of the revolution with the export of doctors. Cuban doctors are everywhere. Cuba has an excellent medical system,

very competent medical personnel. And they were the backbone, for example, of the Venezuelan public health service.

So instead of exporting revolution, Cuba went to exporting doctors. So that problem went away. And then we had two other issues, both of them related to the revolution. One was Cuba mismanaged its economy and its society so that many people felt incentivized to flee. And they would risk their lives to cross the Florida Strait. And we would have people coming ashore on our beaches, in the Everglades, everywhere, who were desperate to get out of Cuba. And we had a Cuban refugee problem, and we couldn't solve it. You know, there are millions of Cubans, Cuban Americans now, as a result of that avalanche of people coming out of Cuba.

So we had an interest in improving the quality of Cuba's society and its economy, but we didn't follow that. We kept putting pressure on Cuba, with the result that we get more Cuban refugees. Now they come through Mexico over the border. The fourth problem is another issue of the revolution. There were Americans, many Americans, there were Cuban Americans who owned a lot of property in Cuba that was taken over by the government—sugar plantations, villas, office buildings, ports, so on and so forth. And we had a claims commission which tried to prepare to solve that, but we didn't solve that. So here's the difference.

The first two objectives had to do with the Soviet presence, meaning an external power threatening the United States from Cuba, and the issue of exporting the revolution required ostracism. That is, you had to punish Cuba to stop these things. The last two, the question of whether Cubans feel obliged to flee Cuba to the United States or whether property claims are settled or not, require engagement. And the Obama administration began that engagement. The Trump administration ended it. So we have a policy toward Cuba that is totally irrational and counterproductive because with no engagement, we cannot address either of the issues that are of concern to us—the Cuban refugee problem and property claims.

So there we are. This business of alleging that Cuba somehow threatens the United States, first of all, has no credibility at all. And second, it's irrelevant. It's an excuse for what Marco Rubio and other Cuban Americans would like to see happen, which is that they move back to Cuba and take it over, and they displace the current government there. I have no great affection for any of them, but I think we need to be clear. Our Cuba policy has been irrational, and it is irrational, and attacking Cuba would be both irrational and probably, as the Cubans say, a bloodbath.

#Nima

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

#Chas

Nasty subjects, but good to talk with you.

#Nima

Thank you.