

Chas Freeman: Middle East in Transition & a New World Order

Ambassador Freeman was a former Assistant Secretary of Defense, earning the highest public service awards of the Department of Defense for his roles in designing a NATO-centred post-Cold War European security system and in reestablishing defence and military relations with China. He served as U. S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia during operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. Ambassador Freeman discusses the need for the West to rediscover diplomacy and adjust to a very different world. Chas Freeman's substack: <https://substack.com/@chasfreeman662157> Buy Diesen merchandise: <https://diesen-shop.fourthwall.com/en-nok> Books by Prof. Glenn Diesen: <https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B09FPQ4MDL> 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>

#Glenn

Welcome back, everyone. One of the great American diplomats, Ambassador Chas Freeman, joins us today, who was also the former U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia and the former assistant secretary of defense. So thank you for coming back. I always look forward to speaking with you.

#Chas Freeman

Well, I always look forward to hearing your very complicated questions.

#Glenn

Well, let me start with an overly complicated one. We will actually want to start by asking about a crisis unfolding further in the Middle East, because it seems to be spiraling out of control and what this means for world order. But first, I want to ask a bit of a wider question. That is, I recently spoke with Professor John Mearsheimer, who asked me how I would explain the collapse of common sense and diplomacy in the West. And I do not know how to do this. I thought I would pass it over to you because in the past, you know, during your years of being a diplomat, it was considered to be complete common sense to start any analysis of conflicts by diplomacy. Thank you very much.

#Glenn

But these days, we don't seem to do this. It's not really possible. We do not talk about competing security interests. We don't consider the security concerns of opponents. In Europe, we even consider it morally problematic to even speak with Russia. So diplomacy, we see, is increasingly used on both sides of the Atlantic as mere deception. That is, in Europe we talk about, oh, we have to appease in Ukraine. What we really mean is an immediate ceasefire so we can pump weapons in. We know that, you know, military actions appear to have replaced all diplomacy. So, you know, I won't make the question any bigger, but you, as a top diplomat for so many years, how do you make sense of this development? What has happened to, well, basic diplomacy and analysis, common sense?

#Chas Freeman

Well, let me sum up what you've just accurately said. Diplomacy is dead in the West. It is alive and well in the Global South. And I confidently expect that at some point we will rediscover its merit in the West, because without it, things continue to deteriorate. People get killed, costs go up, the economy is damaged, political credibility is lost, all these things. Well, why does this happen? I think it's a manifestation of changes in the politics of democratic societies, which are influenced by the development of several developments. First, the consolidation of media, which is now in corporate hands and which in almost every country in the West now servilely serves the interests of the state, acts as scribes for narratives rather than as independent investigators of reality. That is one development. The other one is the emergence of social media as a main factor in our politics.

Social media, which is a profit-making enterprise, depends for its profits on aggregating people of like beliefs. And if those beliefs involve, for example, imagining there are trolls under bridges, which you can't prove there aren't because—you can't prove a negative. I mean, they might be there. Then everyone who also agrees there are trolls under bridges and is deeply concerned about them can be connected to you by social media. And you can have your own little club of nutcases who reinforce each other and who provide a perfect Petri dish for the cultivation of conspiracies. Both these things, I think, plus the emergence of leaders who are a product of these things and more concerned about their egos and the gratification of those egos than they are about national policy issues, all this comes together.

In the case of the United States, we famously have twice elected a malignant narcissist to the presidency. He has essentially destroyed the policy process in Washington. It has been replaced by his gut instincts. He is no longer respectful of rules, international law, and explicitly says that the only restraint on his decisions and behavior is his own sense of what should be done. So he's also guided our diplomatic service. At the moment, there is a company that has been hired by Marco Rubio's Department of State to locate potential candidates to join our foreign service who have the right ideological convictions. Not people who understand foreign realities, but people who are subservient to the domestic alternative universe of our politics. So, in this context, it's not surprising.

There are no negotiations going on anywhere with the West. You mentioned the inability of Europeans to come to grips with the repeated Russian requests for dialogue and discussion of European security matters. There's no peace effort being made with respect to Ukraine, as you mentioned. There's no international dialogue of consequence on other issues, for example, climate change. Interestingly, in the forthcoming five-year plan in China, China has for the first time asserted a willingness to lead global efforts against climate change. Why is it doing that? Because the United States, which was the leader, has defaulted—not just defaulted, but turned against the whole idea of coping with the problem.

Non-proliferation. We just saw the United States deal with Saudi Arabia, which was immediately invalidated by Trump's addition of more conditions, namely the normalization of Saudi Arabia with Israel, and therefore is nugatory, of no consequence. But that agreement shredded the non-proliferation regime that we had spent so much time building and sustaining. International law has been torn up. The United Nations is at best irrelevant now. And we have Trump trying to put the head of FIFA in as the Secretary General of the U.N., which illustrates exactly how serious the whole thing is. So we've seen an international law breakdown. There is no comity, meaning mutual regard and deference in international relations.

Everything is unilateral. And as I've said before, we are entering an age of multinodal order in which every country has agency and acts in its own interest rather than in response to the dictates of patrons or alignments in geopolitics. That is the explanation, by the way, for the Saudi attack on Shiite militias in Iraq, which attacked Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is defending itself. It's not joining the war with Iran. And the press coverage of this would suggest that somehow this is a reaffirmation of solidarity with the United States. In that context, it's completely wrong. Anyway, there's plenty to be upset about. And so, as usual, I suppose we'll spend the next 45 minutes or so exploring that.

#Glenn

Yeah, well, on your last point on the distribution of power impacting it, this is an explanation we often hear from Russia. That is, especially the foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov. He's written many articles on this topic as well, and speeches in which he kind of makes the point that after the Cold War, something happened to diplomacy. He was arguing during the Cold War, you had diplomacy meant, you know, the art of mutual understanding to find compromise. After the Cold War, diplomacy was replaced with ultimatums and threats. And kind of this makes sense, though, because if you're in a bipolar world with two great powers and then some medium-sized powers, diplomacy would have the purpose of enhancing security between great powers.

You would need to put yourself in the shoes of the other guy. You would need to find compromise. But after the Cold War and the hegemonic era, if there's only one superpower left, what is diplomacy left? What is the purpose? What does it serve? I mean, if security is defined not as managing the security competition between the great powers, but as one side being so all-powerful that any state or group of states couldn't even aspire to challenge it, then diplomacy needs a different approach.

And then you would think that would be to pressure unilateral concessions, or as Lavrov said, ultimatums and threats.

But again, while this would be destructive, you would think you would be forced to kind of switch back, as you said, if we're entering a multipolar or entering a multinodal system. Surely, you know, we should remember what diplomacy was, what security means in such a system. But it's interesting what you said about Saudi Arabia, though, because now the Saudis are engaged in war, are attacking Iraq, they're attacking Yemen. You are the former American ambassador to Saudi Arabia. How do you make sense of this active role? Because you said it's not an indicator of unity with the United States, but it's shaped by domestic politics.

#Chas Freeman

It's good politics in Saudi Arabia. I think people in Saudi Arabia have chafed at their restraint in the face of attacks from Iran, which they've not retaliated against. And this is an opportunity for the government in Saudi Arabia to show that it is prepared to retaliate when that makes sense and has retaliated against Iraq. Of course, that has created a political crisis in Iraq and between Iraq and the United States, since the United States joined the attacks. This is also an opportunity for the Saudis, who have been distancing themselves from the United States and constraining American action from their soil against Iran, to demonstrate that they are still essential to any American position in the region and that they're prepared to cooperate in limited contexts.

Not at all. They're not a stooge. They have agency. They can do what they need to do in their own interest. They are hoping to drag the United States back into the war with Yemen. And finally, I guess this should be taken, I believe, by the Iranians as a warning that if pushed too far, Saudi Arabia does have a formidable military with which it can carry out attacks. I want to go back, however, to your comments on Sergei Lavrov's observations. I think he's someone who needs to be taken very seriously. Ironically, of course, this war in Ukraine began with Russian ultimatums and threats. And so he knows what he's talking about. And it has continued to evoke ultimatums and threats to no avail.

I think the Russians themselves have given up on diplomacy with the United States. Certainly, they don't believe there's any point in talking to Witkoff and Kushner. Witkoff and Kushner are off to Kyiv, I guess. I wonder what will come out of that. And Ukraine is adamant because the survival of Volodymyr Zelensky and his crew now depend on continued obduracy and the continuation of war. So, but I think, you know, we are entering an era, I think, in some ways, it will be like the balance of power in Europe in the 19th century, although it'll be vastly more complicated. Because there were only five powers then: UK, France, Prussia, Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Russia. Five. Now there are vastly more.

Look around the world and you can see, and particularly in the Global South, all sorts of interactions developing that contradict the unilateral, unipolar moment that existed. I think the United States

bears a great deal of responsibility for the collapse of diplomacy for the simple reason that we are historically separated from the rest of the world by two great oceans. We've seldom been attacked: once in 1812, 1814 by the British; once in 1941 by the Japanese; once in 2001 by people in the Middle East responding to our attacks on them—reprisals. But we have generally been isolated.

We've even been able to pursue policies that affirm isolationism. After the end of the Cold War, I think Americans concluded that diplomacy, foreign relations in general, were a discretionary activity. You could either have them or not. And as I'm sure I said to you before, I recall the comment of John F. Kennedy, who said, you know, if I make a mistake in domestic policy, it can embarrass me. But if I make a mistake in foreign policy, it can kill us all. And so there was a sense of consequence which disappeared with the end of the nuclear rivalry with the Soviet Union, the end of the Soviet Union itself.

And I don't think—I think the 43 years between George Kennan's invention of the strategy of containment and the end of the Cold War, that during those 43 years, we lost the capacity to reason strategically because we had an overarching strategy that applied to everything. Every country in the world defined its place in the world order by reference to one of two overlords. Was it under Soviet dominion or under American dominion? Or neither, because there were non-aligned countries aspiring to non-alignment but never really succeeding. And so now we have a situation where you don't need to align with another great power. You have freedom of action. You can change your alignments.

You can bargain as people did during the Cold War. You know, "If you give me enough, I will align with you," was a very common standard of diplomacy in the Cold War. It is back, not in the context of superpower rivalry, but in the context of the multinodal system, where you can have a strong political relationship with a country and a very weak economic relationship, or a strong economic relationship and a bad military relationship. And you can be culturally close and yet alienated, as the Canadians and Americans have become. So, you know, I think of, for example, what sort of political relationship does the United States now have with Denmark, as opposed to its economic and military relations?

Anyway, I think we're in a world that is vastly more complex, and we don't really know how to deal with it. And it is interesting in this context that if you look for who is really skilled at diplomacy, recognizing that diplomacy is skilled work, which requires skilled workers, people with training, experience, mentoring, and a background who can practice the arts of dealing with other countries. And who do you see who is out there? Sergei Lavrov, Wang Yi, Jaishankar, the Indian foreign minister, Araghchi, the Iranian foreign minister, and others. I mean, I wouldn't go through the whole list, but you don't see anybody in that list who lives in London, Paris, Washington, or Berlin.

So this is a strange time. It's a time of transition. I'm guessing the transition is going to be to one in which there is a renaissance of diplomacy, because dealing with balances of power that are more complex than a function of five powers is going to require a level of skill for national survival that is

really important. And here, Glenn Diesen, if I may, just to close, I have a friend in Guangzhou in southern China who has spent 35 years translating into English a classic of Chinese statecraft called the Mirror of History. It's the Zizhi Tongjian in Chinese, and it's 35 volumes in English. It's not a minor collection of insights.

The author, Sima Guang, presented it to the Northern Song emperor in 1084 AD, and it has not really been translated ever. And when you look at it—I've just written a preface for the translation—when you look at this thing, it covers 1,362 years of Chinese history in gruesome detail. And every incident it mentions, every anecdote, is directed at instruction. If you do this, your dynasty will prosper. If you do that, the record shows your dynasty will collapse. If you do this, you have a chance of success. And much of it is about flexibility, a diplomacy of maneuver, which was lost during the Cold War. In the Cold War, diplomacy was essentially trench warfare.

Once in a while, you'd send somebody over the top and hope they survived to report back. But generally speaking, you were holding the line. And that's gone. That's gone. We're now in a world of great confusion, disorder, no fixed lines. And as I said, middle-ranking countries, small countries, large countries all have freedom of choice to some extent. So I'm watching what's happening with BRICS and what's happening with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, what's happening with the Belt and Road Initiative. These are all Chinese-connected, of course, but they are much more than that. And they are creating a new world, a new order of some sort, the exact nature of which remains to be determined.

#Glenn

Well, history often preserves or provides us with important lessons. But again, the assumption often that we're going back to this multipolar or multimodal system, it's also not entirely correct, because this multipolar system, if we think of it from the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, it was a European system, though, of sovereign equality. That is, the Europeans were sovereign because they were considered to be the civilized ones. But for the rest of the world, the Westphalian system did not apply. And I'm thinking, what is unique this time?

If we go back to the way the world was before 1945, it was one of Western multipolarity, including Russia, of course, in this group of great powers. But now this is the first time you really have a globally interconnected world with all these different centers of power trying to work together. So it's going to be very different than what we saw in '45, as you said, much more complicated. And I think often it's difficult to appreciate for politicians, because I often hear whenever the Saudis are reaching out to China, or Turkey is reaching out to China or Russia, the assumption always is, "Oh, are they joining a Chinese-led bloc or a Russian-led bloc? Are they leaving us?"

But, you know, as you suggest, their objective is often, well, we just have to diversify, because if you have good relations with all the major powers, then you're not beholden to any of them. Once you wed one and divorce another one, now you're owned essentially by one. So I think how you

assess the interests of these powers seems to be confused by maybe the Cold War assumption that they have to ally themselves under another bloc. But again, as soon as they do this, they essentially lose their value to all the major powers, which is why I was wondering what you see, essentially, in this era of transition, as you call it. What does the new world order look like? Yeah.

#Chas Freeman

Well, I would say that our perception of what is happening is distorted by several factors. In 1492, an Italian adventurer looking for India crossed the Atlantic Ocean and brought together the Western and Eastern Hemispheres. And that created the first single global order, which was dictated by an explosion of European military and mercantile power upon the world, and created a colonial era, an imperial era. Well, that's over. But we continue to be greatly influenced by our memories of a world dominated by the West. I think you're very right to talk about the Westphalian order. In effect, the Indians and Chinese agreed at Bandung, I think in 1954, on the five principles of peaceful coexistence.

Panchsheel in Hindi. And these are essentially a summation of the Westphalian principles. So basically, the gift of the West to the world in terms of world order has been the acceptance by the world of those Westphalian principles. But those principles emphasize the individual sovereignty of the participants in that order. And that is what we are now seeing. So the question is, you know, can we see that this is what is happening? We in the West, I think, if we do not correctly perceive what is happening and understand it as both a repudiation of our power and a reaffirmation of our principles, then we will make mistakes that can hurt us.

Here, there's another analogy, and I hate to keep coming back to Chinese examples, but I know them well. The question is, China became Marxist-Leninist. Marxism is one thing; Leninism is another thing. Marxism is essentially a Christian heresy. It says the kingdom of God is about to arrive as Hegel's dynamic unfolds, and there is the end of alienation, and everyone recognizes everyone else as a sentient individual human being who deserves respect. And the apotheosis of this is the preface to Engels' German Ideology, where, you know, you're a fisherman in the morning and a university professor in the afternoon and run a podcast at night.

Well, maybe you are the perfect example of this kind of thing. Anyway, Marx has a linear view of history, which is very Christian. History will end in, as Fukuyama claimed it did, history will end in some great new order, the kingdom of God. Well, it turns out if you're Chinese and you're looking for a way to Westernize while pouring moral repudiation on the West, this is perfect because you can accept Marxism, which is a Westernizing philosophy, and at the same time you're condemning the West for not living up to its own ideals, which is what Marx was doing. Now, Leninism is a different matter. Leninism basically was modeled on the Jesuits.

And it created a magnificently efficient way of implementing totalitarian rule. And in its ideals, it corresponds to the Confucian tradition of meritocracy, that is, bureaucratic government. And so it

perfectly fits China. And of course, the Chinese have now gone beyond Marx and actually proclaim that he is a social scientist, the first serious social scientist. And as a scientist, the hypotheses he stated need to be adjusted as more accurate perceptions of reality correct them. So anyway, we have a very interesting transfer of Western knowledge to a different context. And, you know, so I think the rule of law was another thing that we transferred. Look at Japan, for example.

I may not have described Japan's modernization fascinatingly. The West came to Japan and did the same thing to the Japanese that we did to the Chinese. We set up treaty ports in which we exercised extraterritorial control. And the Chinese rebelled against this and kept trying to chuck us out, the Boxer Rebellion being the most famous example of that. The Japanese, however, being Japanese, did something quite different. They went to the West and said, "Well, why are you doing this?" And our answer was, "Well, you don't have a decent judicial system. You're not under the rule of law, and we are merchants, and we need to have certainty and predictability to do our business."

And so we have to have our own courts because yours are corrupt and unpredictable. And they said, "Ah, so." And they went off to Germany. Ten thousand students were sent to Germany, where they studied the law, translated the German Civil Code into Japanese word for word, and then all came back to Japan. And there was one day when the courts opened, judges sat on the bench, lawyers appeared before them, having hung out their shingles, clerks trained in the German system of the administration of justice took their places. And then the Japanese said, "Okay," to the Europeans and the Americans, "now what's your excuse?" And everyone but the Belgians didn't have one.

The Belgians, of course, hung on long after everyone else, being Belgian. But the interesting thing is one section is an illustration of what was really going on. One section of the German Civil Code deals with family relationships. And what happened? How do you get divorced? Well, in Germany, if you want to get divorced, you must undergo a 30-day court-supervised mediation. So in Japan, the same thing. You want to get divorced, you have to go through a 30-day court-administered mediation. And in Germany, the mediator tries very hard to reconcile the two parties in the interest of their children and having a family.

But in Japan, the job of the mediator is to encourage their amicable separation and to finalize the divorce. So the same provision of law in two different cultures has exactly opposite effects. And I think we're seeing now that the Third World, the non-Western world, having absorbed many Western ideas, is applying them in very original ways. And we need to get used to this. We're no longer in charge. And, you know, we need to understand civilizational concepts like those in Iran. One of the most pathetic elements of our policies toward Iran—I'm speaking now of the United States—is the utter absence of any expertise or insight into Iranian culture.

Iranian culture has survived for as long as it has because Iranians understand that the supreme interest of their nation is its national identity, both Shiite and Persian, going back to pre-Islamic days. And they will fight and die to preserve that national identity. And so, when Donald Trump says, "I'm going to destroy your civilization," he doesn't know quite what he's done. He has just waved the

red flag in front of the bull and not cowed the bull at all, but in fact encouraged it to lunge forth. So I'll stop here, but I think you're quite right. We're in a very different era in terms of relationships between Western and non-Western cultures.

#Glenn

Yeah, but it doesn't have to... Well, it seems like it's still possible to speak the same language, though, because, again, you see a lot of examples from China. But when they talk about this global civilizational partnership, all of these things, that is... Again, for me, it sounds very Westphalian. That is, the whole idea is that their civilization is distinctive. But in Westphalia, we also agreed that all the European cultures and states were culturally distinctive, and that cultural distinctiveness essentially strengthened the concept of sovereignty. That is, we will rule over this. And that's what the Chinese are saying: we are a distinct civilization. No one will tell us how to develop it because we have to do it according to our own values.

That's essentially what the Iranians are saying as well. So, and that's a pushback against the universalism, whether it's liberal democracy, this humanitarianism, whatever it would be. This is like the new, you know, Holy Roman Empire, the new Catholicism, you know, something that gives you the right to rule over other people. So often we see it as them rejecting, well, what are universal values? But by doing so, they're also standing up for the Westphalian principle of distinct civilizations and sovereign equality. So it's, yeah, one would still have disagreements, but there's a starting point here, though. At least something—we don't have to start world order all over again. There are things we can build on, it seems.

#Chas Freeman

Well, that's correct. And I think you nicely capture the duality: on the one hand, the emphasis on sovereign autonomy, and on the other hand, the willingness to recognize the sovereign autonomy of others as an idea imported from the West. I mean, when the West first went to China at the end of the 18th century, the British Macartney mission, for example, they attempted to apply the Westphalian principles to relations with China, and the Chinese rejected that. Now, ironically, they are the strongest proponents of those principles.

And I find it very ironic, as an American who can claim that my country had a great role in creating the United Nations and before that the League of Nations, even if we didn't join it, that I find it ironic that now we are against that organization, and the people who are outside it, namely the Chinese, are now its strongest proponents. And I find it ironic, too, that one has to take Russian citations of international law seriously, whereas one cannot do so in the case of my own country at the moment. So, yes, a very confusing situation, but one in which, as I said, we inadvertently did things.

We transferred the idea of sovereignty applying to maps, cartography, rather than the control of peoples, which was the traditional non-European system. We transferred the ideology of our religion,

both theocratic and secular Marxism. We transferred our idea of international law. We transferred our idea of an order based on sovereign dignity and equality. And we transferred the idea that everyone's entitled to their own ideological complexion. Now, of course, we have a messianic impulse, quite comparable to that of the Soviet communist era, that, you know, if you want to have a good relationship with us, you've got to be like us. This is not going to work. So here we are. Well, anyway, if you want to talk about current events, we can do that. Yeah.

#Glenn

Yeah, I do. Well, I wanted to also ask: how do you see the Middle East especially shifting because of this? Because just to, I guess, yeah, pivot from the former topic, you know, the whole world over the past 500 years has largely been built up around the West. That is, from the 16th century, we had the trading post empires. They developed into full-scale empires. Then we have the 20th century, you know, transforming into the alliance systems, but still with some neo-colonial traits. But what happens now in the Middle East? Do you see the developments there in terms of a post-Western world forming? Because, again, Iraq, the way—I mean, it wouldn't surprise me if Iraq tries to absorb Kuwait tomorrow.

Jordan—you saw, I saw this, it was, well, two days ago perhaps—these hundreds of Jordanian politicians and others were signing an open letter that America should get its bases out. Again, the role of Israel in the region, everything seems it could be challenged now, because as the foundation of the international system is being shaken, again, this is also deeply problematic, because once you have rapid change in the distribution of power, there's going to be violence, usually. But again, it's not whether we like it or not. This is just reality. The Western hegemonic era is over. So how do you see the Middle East shaping forward from here on?

#Chas Freeman

Well, the West conquered the world, including the Middle East. There's only one country in the world that was never penetrated by Western soldiers, merchants, or missionaries, and that is Saudi Arabia. It is the only blank spot on the global map, the first to cast off the colonial hangover, if you will, which I think drives much of the world's politics now. But if you look at India, look at China, look at other countries, not so much in the New World but in the Old World, you'll find a great many of them have their politics driven by reactions, belated reactions to the humiliation of Western dominance. The first to cast that off in the Middle East, in West Asia, was Iran. But others are now doing the same.

And in the case of Jordan, of course, that is a constitutional democracy, so people do feel able to express themselves differently. In open letters, you try to do that in other Arab societies, which are not democracies, you'd probably find yourself in prison. But yes, this is a major driving factor. And what is happening at the moment is extremely complicated. There's a war between Israel and the United States on the one hand, and Iran, with Israel dormant at the moment, trying to let the United

States sort of—you know, "let's you and him fight" is their motto. And, you know, they don't want to get involved anymore. Having started this, they want us to finish it, which I don't think we're capable of doing.

But anyway, that's going on, and we can get into the details of that. You have a renewal of the Saudi conflict with Shiism in Iraq, that is, with pro-Iranian, Iranian-aligned—people say Iranian-backed, that's not quite correct—Iranian-aligned movements, including Ansar Allah, the Houthis in Yemen. You have the Israelis on the rampage in Gaza. Donald Trump has just announced an agreement by Hamas to disarm, which is nothing new at all. Hamas has always been willing to disarm if Israel withdraws from Gaza and allows it to experience self-determination. And that remains the Hamas position. So this is, I'm sorry to say, very much like the real estate mogul that Donald Trump claims to be.

In New York, when you go bankrupt, what you do is you find a bridge you can sell to some gullible person and distract attention from your bankruptcy. And Donald Trump is politically bankrupt in foreign policy terms and increasingly in domestic policy terms as well. So he has come up with this diversion. In the meantime, Israel is conducting a really vicious campaign of ethnic cleansing in the West Bank, and much the same in southern Lebanon, with a view to annexing it. It continues to attack Syria, and it continues to speak openly about putting Turkey in its sights if it can knock off Iran first. So this is very disruptive.

Back to the immediate situation, we have Ukraine attacking an Iranian vessel in the Caspian Sea, and that's extending the Ukraine-Russia war into a domain that had been free of it, and arguably connecting the two conflicts, the Iran war and the Ukraine war. And presumably, when the Ukrainians attacked that ship in the Caspian Sea, they had the support of Western intelligence. So this is not an accident, I believe. Anyway, in the case of the actual situation in Iran, Iran has escalation dominance. And it just demonstrated that by striking a couple of gas carriers off the Mediterranean coast of Egypt, which was a warning to Egypt and to the United States that, look, we can extend this war beyond its current confines, and we reserve the right to attack any country that provides assistance to the United States or Israel in attacking us.

And Egypt is therefore a legitimate target because it claims an alliance with the United States, even if that alliance has not been active against us. So this is a warning. Iran controls the Strait of Hormuz. The United States has foolishly decided to reinforce the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz at a time when we are running out of sour crude for the production of diesel and jet fuel, and when global energy prices are about to skyrocket due to scarcities. We are complicit in producing those scarcities, which could be politically disastrous for Donald Trump and his administration in the midterm elections.

And so what is happening, I would say, in the broad context, is that when the West dismantled the Ottoman Empire and began to carve up West Asia into chunks that it couldn't control, settling Israel with European Jews, creating Lebanon by hiving it off from Syria, creating Jordan as a buffer state,

creating Iraq as an independent state when it had formerly been a set of Ottoman provinces, creating Kuwait as a separate state, eventually, in 1967, turning over the crucial states in the Persian Gulf to independence and transferring responsibility for the sustenance of that independence from Britain to the United States. All these things have created a condition of constant turbulence in West Asia. There's scarcely been a year without a mass murder, a genocide, a war, a rebellion. Think of the poor Kurds who have been involved in multiple failed rebellions. And so the normal post-Ottoman condition of this region is a state of anarchy. And that is back where we are, back there. So the war is not ending.

Nobody has any diplomatic idea of how to end it. And it's just going to go on. And the Iranians have now adopted the Israeli doctrine of preemptive attack. If you see the possibility you may be attacked, even if that likelihood is very low, you do what the Israelis did in 1967. You respond with a surprise attack on your potential enemies. If you are attacked, you do not respond proportionately, as international law requires. You do so with great disproportion in order to drive home the lesson that you can't attack me, for deterrent purposes. Borders are not respected because, after all, they were crafted by Messrs. Sykes and Picot, and who are they now? And so ideological issues have been replaced by theocratic issues.

So we have a form of Zionism which resembles nothing so much as the Islamic State in its relationship to Islam. Zionism in relation to Judaism is very similar to the Islamic State's ideology in relation to Islam. And so this is where we are, and it's not going away. You know, nobody will talk to Kushner and Witkoff in the region. I mean, they will be polite, because they're always polite. But the Iranians have no interest in resuming a diplomatic dialogue because they've learned the hard way that it is either a deception or a detour from reality. And they have said explicitly they will not talk unless and until the United States actually implements the elements of the so-called memorandum of understanding that it agreed to. That includes removing the Israelis from Lebanon.

It includes ceasing verbal and physical attacks on Iran. It includes allowing Iran to manage traffic in the Strait of Hormuz in cooperation with Oman. The Omanis and Iranians are in an active dialogue about that, but have not reached agreement. And that includes the removal of U.S. bases from the region. That is happening. And whether the Jordanians want the U.S. bases out or not, I think my final comment would be that I believe Iran's strategy is to try to concentrate U.S. forces conveniently in one location, namely Israel, which is a legitimate target for them, and take advantage of the concentration of forces to deal a knockout blow to them. So they're basically herding us like sheep out of Jordan and looking to loose the wolves on us in Israel.

#Glenn

Just a last question, because if I would put myself in the shoes of Trump, it's a very difficult situation. Yes, created by himself, but it's a difficult position nonetheless. That is, there's no convincing pathway to victory or even going back to the former status quo. Indeed, if he would eventually then pull out or accept something like a new MOU, it would entail the Strait of Hormuz

under Iran's administrative control. It would challenge, if not put a complete end to, the U.S. regional security architecture and the alliance system. As you said, the U.S. bases are being destroyed. The future of the petrodollar could go away with that security architecture.

Countries like Bahrain and Jordan could have revolutions, cut their ties with the U.S. Kuwait, again, could disappear from the map by being absorbed into Iraq. It's not just regional anymore. It's challenging the entire role of the United States in the international system. So while I don't agree with Trump's policy, I can understand how much is at stake, where the frustrations are coming from, why it's difficult to cut and run, essentially. But how do you see this? What are the options of Trump now? Because, again, not condoning his policies, but I can appreciate the difficult situation he has put himself in, though.

#Chas Freeman

He has turned the Strait of Hormuz into a straitjacket. He cannot move. There are no options other than a repeat of the option he employed against the Houthis, namely, after a year of bombast, sound and fury and bombing, he just sailed away, proclaiming victory. I don't think he can do anything else at this point. One thing that is happening at the moment that I did not mention, and this is obviously very much part of the Iranian strategy, is the attrition of American ammunition and defense equipment. This has come to the point where the American military are counseling the president that he has to stop this war because it is weakening the American posture on a global level. I would add that it has weakened American influence on a global level politically as well as economically.

And so it's a disaster on every level for the United States. And I don't think there's any repairing this. It is a good example of what strategy-free military action produces, what diplomacy-free foreign policy produces, what amateur military diplomacy conducted by untrustworthy people produces. And so there's an impasse, and the impasse favors Iran. And I think that is a very bad situation in many ways. There are many countries that have a great stake, including your own, Norway, but others—major trading powers. The greatest trading power in the world is China now. The European Union is a great trading power, Brazil and so forth. These countries, all these countries, the entire world has a stake in managing the damage to freedom of navigation that this war has created in the Strait of Hormuz.

We do not want to see the precedent that's been established by the Iranians to manage tolls and prevent passage through the Strait applied to the Straits of Malacca, applied to the Baltic Sea or, you know, anywhere where there are narrow passageways between major bodies of water. And so this should be a challenge to the global community. Forget the United States for a moment. The international community really has a need to come together and propose a negotiation with Iran, which is in charge of the Strait, to minimize the damage to freedom of navigation, to minimize the fees that will be charged, to ensure that those fees have some relationship to actual costs rather than simply a kind of outrageous theft of funds.

And so this is a challenge. And here we come back to the question you first raised: where is diplomacy? It is not there. If the Europeans can't talk to the Russians and apparently don't know how to talk to the Chinese, we're looking at the breakdown of European-Chinese economic relations. If they can't do that, then obviously we can't look to them to do anything about the Strait of Hormuz. And, yeah, I think this is something that would really, you know, could really bring the world together because it's a common interest. And yet it is not being seen that way and not being pursued. What is instead happening is bluster and bombing, which don't work.

#Glenn

Yeah, the same now. Well, lack of diplomacy appears to be extended to China. That is, instead of diplomacy, even the Europeans, who don't really have many cards to play with the Chinese, still come with ultimatums and threats. It's a bit strange to watch because the Chinese are holding a lot of cards, and still the formula doesn't seem to change. It's still the same condescending language. It's still efforts to dictate terms.

#Chas Freeman

No, it's always, I'm sorry to say, in the West, in the United States, and in Europe, it's always, "You're nasty people who are doing evil things, and we are righteous people who are doing correct things." And, you know, the righteous and unrighteous can't coexist, so you should eat fecal matter and die.

#Glenn

Well, I think you summarized my thoughts on diplomacy perfectly there. Meanwhile, I think this war of attrition you mentioned with Iran, or the attrition of American weapons, is probably being welcomed by Russia and China because in Russia, those weapons were supposed to go to fight the Russians, and some of those weapons would ideally be used in a future war with China.

#Chas Freeman

Let me make an ancillary point. We've just witnessed a really strange meeting. The defense ministers of the Americas—you know, there's something called the Rio Treaty, by which the United States and the countries of the Western Hemisphere, the republics of the Western Hemisphere, have a common defense commitment. And every couple of years, they have a meeting of the defense ministers. We were represented—the United States was represented—by Elbridge Colby, who urged everybody in South and Latin America to greatly increase their defense budgets and buy more weapons to defend themselves. But the irony here is, the only country that threatens them is the United States. So he's urging them to arm themselves against America by spending more money on American armaments. I think they may very well take the message but direct their business elsewhere. So, you know, you can't make this stuff up. It's really just bizarre.

#Glenn

Was it Stalin who said that the capitalists will sell us the rope we'll hang them with, or something along those lines?

#Chas Freeman

No, that was Lenin. Lenin, sorry. Anyway, keep doing what you do, Len. Will do.

#Glenn

Well, thank you so much for your time and your analysis.

#Chas Freeman

Thank you.