

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

### **QI Panel:**

## Grand Strategy Implications of Trump's Iran Debacle: Is This the End of Primacy?

April 23rd, 2026  
2:00 - 3:30 PM ET

### **Trita Parsi 0:22**

Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to the Quincy Institute's webinar titled grand strategic implications of Trump's Iran debacle Is this the end of American primacy. My name is srina Parsi. I'm the Executive Vice President of the Quincy Institute, a think tank in Washington that promotes ideas that move US foreign policy away from endless war and toward rigorous diplomacy. We believe in a US Grand Strategy, or national security strategy, that is centered on diplomacy and military restraint. For decades, US grand strategy has been defined by the pursuit of primacy and military hegemony globally, but costly wars have repeatedly raised questions as to whether this actually serves us interest and on top of that, if it even is sustainable, and the latest war with Iran that has not gone the manner that Trump thought it would, has raised those questions with even greater urgency, has this conflict dealt the blow to us power comparable to what the Iraq war did? What are the grand strategic implications, and then what are the downstream effects for us, alliances and deterrence in Europe, in Asia and elsewhere? And perhaps most importantly, does this moment create an opportunity to rethink not only US foreign policy in the Middle East, but us grand strategy as a whole?

These are the questions we will focus on in the next 60 Minutes with three of the most sharpest and most prominent scholars on us, grand strategy, Monica Tuft, Stephen Walt and Stephen Wertheim. For those of you who are joining us via zoom, please use the Q amp a function at the bottom of your screen to ask your questions. If you're watching this on Twitter, on Facebook or some of those other platforms, you can still participate in the conversation by adding your questions in the comment section, and we will try to get to those as well. But with any further ado, let me introduce our esteemed speakers. Monica Duffy Toft is a non resident Fellow at the Quincy Institute and professor of professor of international politics at Tufts University's Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. She has taught at Oxford and at Harvard as well. She's the author of seven books and edited volumes, and has published widely on international relations and US national security strategy. Before college, she spent four years in the US Army as a Russian linguist. Stephen Wertheim is a founding member of the Quincy Institute and a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He's a historian of U.S foreign policy and international order, and writes widely about contemporary problems in American grand strategy. In his book, Tomorrow the World, the birth of a US Global supreme of US Global supremacy, he reveals how US leaders made a decision early on in the Second World War to pursue global military dominance long into the future. Prospect Magazine named him one of the world's 50 top thinkers. And finally, Stephen Walt, who is a board member of the Quincy Institute

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

and Professor of International Affairs at Harvard Kennedy School. He's a contributing editor at foreign policy, and received the International Studies Association's Distinguished Senior Scholar Award in 2014 he's the author of several books very relevant to this specific topic, including taming American power, the global response to U.S. primacy.

So delighted to have you all here with us. We have a very sizable audience, so the interest in this topic is obviously very, very significant. Let me throw out a question to all of you to begin this with, and that is, please let me know your assessment of whether you think that this specific war actually may have greater implications for the direction of US foreign policy going forward and its grand strategy than even the Iraq War failure did. And part of the reason I want to ask that question is because at the end of the day, the Iraq war was won militarily by the United States. Within the first three weeks, it was later lost. It was the peace that was lost afterwards. In this specific situation, we do not have a similar scenario, because the war itself, militarily has also been lost. So let me know your assessment of that, but also the two key global implications that you believe will follow from this. And Monica, I'm going to start off with you.

### **Monica Toft 4:59**

Thank you. Trita for having me. So is this a bigger, you know, situation than following Iraq? I think the answer is yes, and I think it just comes down to credibility. The United States has shown that it's not going to consult with its allies any longer, that it's going to just go in unilaterally and start wars. That was a question mark before, and I think under this administration, first going into Venezuela, then going into Iran, that our credibility is absolutely now gone as a country, as an allied partner, as a leader of the free world, if you want to think about it in those terms. So I think that it's much graver than we can think about what this war has done. First of all, it's shown that the United States is not indomitable, that smaller powers, medium powers, can give us a run for the money. You know, asymmetric warfare is a very difficult thing for the United States. We knew that in Vietnam. We learned it again in Afghanistan and then in Iraq, even though we prevailed in Iraq, and all they need to do is show that you don't need to defeat the adversary. You don't even need to match their power. You just have to make it too costly to sustain.

And I think President Trump, we're in day 54, of this war, has learned this, that that the Iranians are not really going anywhere, and that they're surviving, that civilization is very old. They're very patient, and the cost what they're trying to do is make them politically unbearable for Washington, which I think we're seeing that. And then economically, you know, oil has already gone over \$100 a barrel right now. It's under that. And decapitation didn't work. That was the administration's strategy here, and it didn't work. We still have a functioning government in Iran, and so it's outlasting the American and it may outlast the American political will and military might here. And so I do think that we are facing a different situation again, for the credibility issue, and secondarily, I think it's showing that that you the use of force, which maybe with the great powers, the major powers will wake up. Russia still hasn't learned this is really difficult in the modern era, with innovation and technology that really sort of shifts the balance on the battlefield.

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

### **Trita Parsi 7:15**

Thank you. Monica, Stephen and Stephen Wertheim, not Walt, what is your take?

### **Stephen Wertheim 7:21**

All right, the the first Steve Wertheim, so first of all, like, Thanks, Trita. It's always a treat to be with friends at Quincy and to have this conversation with people like Monica and and the aforementioned other Steve W, I just at the outset, like I have to have an enormous amount of epistemic humility here. I mean, two months into the Iraq War, how could one have predicted how that war would ramify in the region, in the world, and in American politics? Probably American politics would have been the hardest call of all. We don't know how long this war with Iran will last. So far, it is far shorter and less costly than the entire Iraq War. If you want to consider the Iraq war to be over. But you know, I think we're like grasping at an elephant here trying to understand something that is just inherently hard to predict.

So, let me just say this at the outset, like the the Iran War certainly creates conditions to produce significant change in American foreign policy, politically, we know already, I think, in a way, we did not know in the Iraq war that this war is destined to be a political failure. This war was unpopular from the beginning. It's only going down. I mean, the latest NBC poll that I saw showed two thirds of Americans disapproving of Trump's handling of Iran That's enormous. And not only that, the age cohorts break down almost perfectly. Where the younger you go, the less support there is. But that's not to say that the oldest age cohort is even that supportive of this war. In fact, in some polls, it's net unpopular there too. So I think this war creates a condition to reach a tipping point where, you know, the war has illustrated some of the perils of the United States maintaining such a militarized role in the Middle East, if not beyond, and it could be an important catalyzing event.

That's especially in terms of US relations with Israel, where, you know, we've had kind of a double whammy of us support for Gaza and now us support for Israel's mowing the grass strategy toward Iran. On has become not just a kind of moral failing in the eyes of so many Americans, especially young people, but also a strategic failing, and one that affects the interests of Americans directly. I mean, good God, if you had said, you know what's something significant that could happen in American domestic politics, gas prices at the pump going way up like that's at the top of the list, and it happened very quickly. But of course, that story isn't over.

But now I want to just express some concern about the extent to which these conditions will actually bear fruit to produce policy change. I mean, we've seen previous Middle East wars fail strategically, fail politically, and still get us exactly where we are today. So I will want to see going forward, the attitude of many Americans shift from where it is now, which is, I don't like this war, but how soon can we get back to pre war normality? Can't this thing go away? It has to shift to this is a real crisis. How do we prevent such a terrible thing from happening again? And

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

that means engaging in an intellectual and political search for the conditions that allow something like this to happen. And yeah, that probably means, you know, more people marching in the streets and showing a salience of this issue that currently, I'm afraid, it doesn't have.

And so even if the war ends tomorrow, which it will not, it is possible that we'll still get there, given the ramifications that the war could have for the American economy and the global economy moving forward. So that story isn't over yet, but I guess so far, I'm kind of pessimistic in terms of how I read American domestic politics, doing all that it would need to do to make this time different, to produce real galvanizing action toward policy change.

### **Trita Parsi 12:08**

Thank you, Stephen and before I go to our second Stephen W Just a quick comment on what you said, because I think it's very important, because I think it's precisely why Trump thought he could get away with this, because the calculation was that this would be a four day long war, so any real opposition to the war would never even have time to get triggered, because people are only against it insofar that it ends up becoming costly to them. If it isn't, you know, they'll forgive it, as they did with the strikes in June. So we're not there where you're talking about in which there actually is a really strong opposition to this, regardless of how it ends, and more principle opposition to it. Stephen Walt, what are your comments and assessments?

### **Stephen Walt 12:51**

First of all, it is a pleasure to be here with people that I'm going to learn a lot from over the next 45 minutes or so, that I'm glad of the opportunity, and I want to second Steve's comments about epistemic humility here, it's early days, and the full ramification of this is impossible for anybody to forecast. That said, I will go out on a limb and say I think this is actually a more significant blunder than the earlier blunder in 2003 and let me say a little bit why, and then I'll talk about what I think the broader implications might be. I mean, first of all, the Iraq war did achieve regime change. By the end of it, Saddam Hussein was gone. That created a new set of problems. But there was a genuine success, a political success, from that war, and it's worth remembering that George Bush's approval ratings went through the roof. Quite different, as Steve said, from what we're seeing with Trump and this war as well.

Also, in the case of this war, we've gotten a government that's not been eliminated, but in fact, more hard line than the one that preceded it, which is not exactly what they intended when we when we started the war second, the Iraq war did not have profound consequences for the rest of the world, and it did have some, I mean, the creation of ISIS did have repercussions in a variety of different ways, within the region and even into Europe and elsewhere, but not nearly as profound as I think we're seeing already come from this war, and are likely things that are likely to get worse. Economies in Europe, in Asia, in the developing world, are all going to be profoundly affected by this, some possibility of a real global recession. Again, the Iraq war didn't cause anything like that. There's going to be widespread hunger in parts of the world as a result

## Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

of this war, because fertilizer precursors are not getting out to strait of Hormuz as well. You have, I think, a genuine possibility of stagflation occurring in a variety of places that then, as we saw in the 1970s last for years, doesn't necessarily get fixed.

So I think there's a real chance here that this will have much more profound global consequences than the Iraq war did for all the variety of reasons. Third thing this war has taught Iran something that was theoretically known but not been proven, namely that they have real leverage here because of geography and because of their ability to shut the Strait of Hormuz. This war has turned into a proof of concept for any Iranian government going forward. And that's not necessarily a concept we wanted to have proven as well. This is going to force, I think, a fundamental rethinking of how we approach Iran as well. And then finally, this war, unlike the Iraq war in 2003 has caused collateral physical damage around the Gulf, raising real questions about their overall if you want to call it business model of relying very much on American protection being closely associated and assuming that the environment would stay peaceful enough and allow them to be engaged in international business in a whole variety of ways. All of that now has to be rethought, if not reconsidered.

So if you put all of this together, I think this is going to have more profound consequences than the Iraq war did. The two big implications I see in this. First of all, this echoes some of what Monica said. This casts real doubt on American judgment and competence. The Trump administration assumed this would be over quickly, that they would get regime change, that the government would just collapse, ignoring the overwhelming evidence from many cases that this is not something you can accomplish with air power, ignoring the advice they got from inside the administration not to do this as well. And now we're seeing the administration basically making it up as it goes along. There was no plan B, no preparations for what would happen if Iran proved to be more resilient, et cetera. And this matters, because American influence in the world isn't just a function of wealth or power. It's also a function of other states. Thinking that the United States knows what it's doing, not that it's infallible, but it generally knows what it's doing. It thinks things through clearly. It can execute a plan in a competent fashion.

The Trump administration has, I think, sent a message to the rest of the world that that's not the case anymore, and that means other states are going to be less likely to rely on American advice going forward, at least for a while. Second, the other message this war has sent is that the administration really cared about only one other country in the world. All right, the Europeans weren't consulted. Would have opposed this. Asian countries weren't consulted. They would have opposed this. Our Arab allies, to the extent that they were consulted, their advice was ignored. We basically took Benjamin Netanyahu's advice that this would be easy to do, despite the fact that he has a terrible track record of forecasting events in the Middle East. So the recognition that the United States didn't care about any of these other countries around the world, right, is not going to be lost on them. That they are going to, I think, increase the tendency to diversify their ties away from the United States, be less reliant on the United States as well. I read this morning that Mohammed bin Salman, the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, got on the phone with Xi Jinping in the last day or two. I don't know what was said. I don't know if that's absolutely true, but if it is true, it's hardly surprising under these circumstances, and that

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

will have some, I think, profound effects going forward. So this is, in fact, a big and unfortunately negative event for the United States, possibly also for the rest of the world. Let me stop there. We'll get into some of these other questions, I'm sure as we proceed.

### **Trita Parsi 18:55**

Thank you. Thank you so much. Excellent points that were raised, and all of those negative repercussions nevertheless happening, despite the fact that the worst of the things that could have happened in this war actually were evaded through the ceasefire. I personally think that Trump got quite lucky that he got that ceasefire, because the trajectory was going to be even worse in these last couple of weeks had it not been secure. But still, you're painting a very, very dire picture of what the consequences would be. Monica, you mentioned in your comments that there is this pattern in which asymmetric warfare against a superpower can prove to be quite helpful. You've written extensively about how strong states lose asymmetric wars now Iran's strategy, as you pointed out, has been to just raise the cost to make it intolerable for the United States not necessarily match the US militarily or even defeat the US militarily.

But does this potentially provide a blueprint for other states if they want to start challenging us primacy in various regions, or was this very much specific to this region? Because of its peculiar geography, in which the Iranians, as Steve pointed out, had in theory this ability to straight close the Strait of Hormuz, but actually turn out that they really could. The proof of concept was provided. Is this a unique scenario, or do you think it is replicable by other challenges of U.S. primacy?

### **Monica Toft 20:18**

It's a great question, Trita. And I think tragically, actually, it was completely predictable. If you look at data, and it's not just my data, you know, other people, my husband, in fact, Ivan, arguing this that since the 1950s great powers have only been winning 50% of the time. So it's a crapshoot. So again, Vietnam, Afghanistan, took out two great powers. Iraq was a real slog for us. And then, of course, you look at Ukraine, and the issue is, is that terrains can be shaped. They can be, you know, so geographies can be shaped based on what you need to either stop a victory by a great power or actually to prevail. And we've seen that in Ukraine over the last four years. And you and Iran was watching this look. You know, Iran is a smart country. It's watching what's happening. It saw what happened in Armenian Azerbaijan. You know, Azerbaijan defeated the Armenians with a drone swarming. It was the first time we had seen that in battle. And so then the Ukrainians adapt, adopted drones, and here we are with Iran using drones to go after American assets.

So I think Trita, I think what's the tragedy here is, is that the writing was on the wall already, if we had learned our lessons from Vietnam and then moving forward from Afghanistan into Iraq, and we just, we were just cocky about it. And so one of the things I, you know, I talk about in my new book, is the hubris, humility index. And it's not that the scale runs from bad to good. You know,

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

leaders need both humility and they need hubris right in order to act right and assert certainty, but they also need to update on new information.

And what I see is these leaders, in particular Trump, you could say Putin. I think Xi has updated, by the way, which is why I think he's going to be resistant or reluctant to go into Taiwan. And you know what I saw happening in February 2026, with this operation epic fury. I mean, even think about the title of it was maximum hubris and like zero humility. You know, Trump and Netanyahu amplified each other's sort of grandiosity about the use of force and drowned out sort of rationality about what we could achieve with the military. And so they discounted Iranian agency, Iranian smarts, rationality, resolve, and the simple historical record that some of our colleagues have talked about here, which is that decapitation is really, really difficult. And then, oh, by the way, if you decapitate Steve is or Steve Walt has already pointed out we have a regime that's worse, right? That's even more extreme than the one before. It's always the careful what you wish for.

So hubris doesn't just cause bad decisions. It actually blocks the decision process that could correct it, and we could even talk about our Department of War here, under Hegseth firing major military leaders in the midst of a war. So what we need, actually, is a little bit more humility, something like the calibration that we had under George H W Bush in the first Gulf War, which was actually our last best war, I think, and there was high confidence for what he did, the action that they were chosen, which is just to get Saddam Hussein out of Iraq. There was genuine humility, even there was pressure on him on Bush to follow him to Baghdad, but he stopped at Kuwait's border, and he resisted that pressure to march, and that restraint, I think we can agree, was a weakness. It was strategic intelligence, and I just wish we had a little bit more right now.

### **Trita Parsi 23:45**

But your bottom line, though, is that even in other areas, I mean, Ukraine doesn't have a straight over moves that it could close, but it could still shape the terrain in such a way that a great power would, at a minimum, not win the war absolutely. So this can be replicable in other regions, even if something as strategic as the Strait of Hormuz is missing from the picture?

### **Monica Toft 24:04**

Absolutely, and Ukraine has done that. I mean, the innovation of Ukraine, it's the finest fighting machine right now in Europe. What it's doing with its drone warfare, what it's doing with building up its own terrain to block armored assaults. And look what's what it did in the Black Sea. It basically cut off at the knees the Russian Navy. So absolutely, and you know, I'm just waiting for Bab El maneb to go with the Houthis, with Iran. I mean, that's a card that Iran still has where it could cut off 50% of world trade. And how many of us now, in as many days, have seen the map of the choke points, the Marine choke points around the world, right? So absolutely, I think even if the terrain doesn't match, in some cases, it does absolutely other states, other actors are going to learn from this and say, Okay, how do we innovate around this? And what I'm saying is, in the last 70 years, guess what they've been doing that we're just ignoring it as a great power.

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

**Trita Parsi 24:58**

Stephen Walt?

**Stephen Walt 25:00**

Two quick points. I mean, I think the Strait of Hormuz is an unusual choke choke point for all the reasons people know, given the vitality of petroleum based products for the world economy. But there are other places that others will be able to have similar effects. And you're going to see some of that, at least. And the reason this bites, of course, is that shipping companies are not going to want to risk their assets. I mean, the problem is not that you can't necessarily get ships through. It's that no one wants to risk them. Insurance rates skyrocket. So that's the real vulnerability here, in lots of different ways. The other larger point, though, is that what's also going on here is a symmetry of motivation. This was a complete optional war for the United States. We didn't have to do this. Nobody was crying out for it here in the United States, or hardly any. A few hawkish columnists in places were occasionally advocating for but there was no public upswell. This was a completely optional thing for us to do, a war of choice for Iran. This is completely existential. This is survival of the regime, survival of, in their view, their entire society. So they're much more willing to pay a large price here than we are, as indeed they have. They have paid, thus far, a larger price than we have, and that same situation is going to replicate itself in other places around the world, where highly motive weaker but highly motivated adversaries are going to be willing to do things in response to optional sort of wars of luxury that we decide to wage. And that's something we need to bear in mind before we start, you know, pulling out the military tool and assuming it will solve every problem for us.

**Stephen Wertheim 26:49**

Can I just add Can I just add one factor to the mix and a foot another point that Steve made? I think we should separate the Strait of Hormuz leverage point from the military performance of the United States in this war to some degree, because even if not for the choke point of the Strait of Hormuz, it doesn't look like the United States military was going to be successful in wiping out, decimating Iran's missile capacity, drone capacity, Air Force, even naval capacity, you know, the small speed boats now that's more of a Hormuz related issue, nevertheless, have not been decimated. So I think that just illustrates, you know, fundamentally, that defenders have a lot of advantages. Aerial bombing can accomplish only so much. Now, to footstove another point you know, this war illustrates the continued very low tolerance of the United States as a country for incurring serious costs for foreign policy goals. Iraq began after 911 and there was an effort to marshal support. This war began with low support, and it's flatlining at this point. In addition, you know, the United States has expended an enormous number of high end munitions. We don't know the official numbers, but CSIS had an interesting report out recently with some alarming figures.

So I think this is a big deal because I had thought others had thought that the United States was overstretched for quite some time. But if not enough goes wrong in the world, causing the

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

United States to actually use up its stockpiles, then it sounds to a lot of people like a theoretical point one that you can face later. Well, now I think this war is going to come at a cost to, you know, us, deterrence and defense, to Europe, to Ukraine in particular, and Taiwan and others in Asia for potentially years to come. And again, this war is not over, so we don't know where we're going to end up here, and so I think that could have a profound impact on the perceptions of allies and partners.

### **Stephen Walt 29:30**

I was going to both partly agree and just but offer a cautionary point. I mean, I've seen a number of commentators suggest that this might be America's Suez moment, referring back to the Suez War 56 where Britain and France were kind of exposed as no longer being great powers. I think that's wrong. The United States will come out of this war. At the end, we will still be the world's most powerful country. We're not going to drop out of the ranks of the great powers, although I think it is exposing some of the limits of America. In power as well. And as Steven just said, you know, not only are we drawing down a bunch of our weapons stockpiles, we are wearing out the ships, planes and crews that are deployed there and doing these activities, they're going to need to be repaired, rested and restored, and we can't do that overnight. So you know, when you fight a war like this, you are burning up some of your military capability. It isn't just the weapon stocks. It's also the people. It's also the platforms that need to be repaired afterwards. So in that sense, the United States is going to have less wherewithal to act elsewhere in the aftermath of this war, whenever it's over.

### **Trita Parsi 30:42**

Monica, quick comment from you, then when I was going to go on to the next question.

### **Monica Toft 30:44**

It's actually picking up on Stephen Wertheim's initial opening comments, which is, I actually have, I think we're seeing that Americans, even though we don't have boots on the ground, we're not suffering costs of loss, of large scale loss of Americans. We've lost 13 and and many, many casualties, by the way, which we're not hearing about. But I think we're showing that economically, this is too painful. So I'm hoping that some rational minds say, okay, maybe, maybe we should not. This was not a primary or a first order interest that we're going after. It should have probably been dealt, dealt with diplomatically, continue diplomatic and economically. And I think the American people are telling the administration enough, we do not want to be fighting for these kinds of wars if it's the case that I have to pay more at the pump. Oh, and inflation, by the way, which you promised to bring down, is now rising, and we're probably, as Steve Walt says, we're probably going to go into a global recession because of this war.

### **Trita Parsi 31:44**

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

So Stephen, Stephen Wertheim, you have argued that primacy depends not just on power but also a degree of legitimacy. And in the past, American primacy has been held up not just because of a military industrial complex and the hegemony of this idea within the foreign policy establishment of Washington, but also because many of these countries around the world that are part of the alliance system have benefited from it, or at least believe that they benefited from it, and have lobbied very hard to retain it, and have pushed back when the US has tried to limit its global footprint. But after this war, going back to what many of you have pointed out in terms of the perception of American power, perception of American credibility, are we going to be in a situation in which there's going to be an assault on primacy from two directions, one from the American public that for over and over again, are voting against these type of policies, but also now from these allies that used to benefit from it, but are now realizing, at a minimum, they need to diversify away from having all of their eggs in an American security basket?

### **Stephen Wertheim 32:53**

That's a huge and important question, and I think the answer is, it's possible, yes, it's too soon to tell you're absolutely right that allies are a key constituency for American primacy. They're an important voice in policy making, even in American politics, to some degree and for you know, the past almost four decades of the post Cold War world, they have generally reflected back to Washington what it wants to hear, that the Allies stand behind us global leadership. They don't just say we value our alliance with the United States. They express appreciation for what the United States is doing in other regions too, and we saw that very much under the Biden administration, where Asian allies would express strong support for us, support for Ukraine, even though one could argue that US resources were finite, and that might not have been in their interests. So, you know, I think this war again has the potential to change this calculus, in part, because, first of all, it's coming in an era of arguably emergent multi polarity. In other words, countries have other places to turn besides the United States.

And second of all, it's coming after a series of Trump shocks, not just the first term, but the second term, Greenland, etc, etc. So one thing it shows vividly is that American allies and security partners have conflicting interests. I mean, who's in? Whose interest was this war? Other than Israel. You know, we hear different things about what some Gulf countries thought, and we're counseling Trump prior to the war, but basically, this is a war that favors Israel, at least certainly Israel wanted the war, and comes at the expense clearly of American allies in Europe and Asia, and you know, potentially, every other American partner in in the Middle East. So I think it should be a wake up call to American allies that they face different interests. Secondly, it again shows you know the limits of American resources and good judgment.

The fact that the national security strategy by this administration was released like four months before the start of this war, and in every way, contradicts exactly what President Trump did with this war, a new regime change more the Middle East, which was supposed to deprioritize. I mean, it just shows the poor quality of American governance. And frankly, how the fact is that if allies want American protection, they are in competition with each other right now. So I think there's, you know, bet, more potential than before for allies to rethink their basic approach to

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

these matters, whether they want to hedge a little bit from the United States, or even de risk from the United States, as Europeans now talk of doing language once developed to talk about China now applied to the United States, or whether They want to remain close to the United States, they may need to appreciate that. You know, the United States is overstretched, has limited time and attention, and so, you know, continuing to feed back to Americans that the United States must be the world leader everywhere all at once is actually not in their interests, and that does create some some new possibilities going forward.

### **Trita Parsi 36:49**

The amount of time many of us spent analyzing, writing, thinking about the December NSS now feels like a complete waste of time, but on the point that you raised, Stephen, could there not also be a shift in which some of them will conclude that, yes, pushing for global American primacy was a mistake, but that this actually provides an opportunity to tell the United States be more selective, but select our region. If the GCC, for instance, ends up choosing to phase out most of the GC, the GCC basis, 17 or 19 of them, because they turn out to be of little use. That makes European bases that were actually used extensively in projecting power in this war more important. So could we end up going away from a global primacy? But a lot of these different states still nevertheless pushing even harder, actually, that their own American security umbrella should be kept.

### **Stephen Wertheim 37:44**

Well, absolutely, I think that's probably exactly what it would mean for these countries to shift away from support for global primacy. And you know, they could all sort of cancel out because the United States struggles to genuinely prioritize one region after another. So this kind of shift alone, you know, doesn't add up necessarily to Grand strategic policy change. And then, you know, it could also go the other way. So GCC countries could decide they want a closer security guarantee or more formalized security maybe, maybe fewer bases, but, but a kind of NATO, like treaty commitment. So there are a lot of different permutations for for us to think of. It's also the case that you know, clearly, especially among the Democratic Party. There's now a criticism of one us, ally in particular, Israel, but we should be cautious about extrapolating from policy shifts that may occur toward one ally, Israel, toward others. So GCC countries may welcome, actually a more conditional us relationship with Israel that Democrats may want to bring about, because, after all, their experience with this war was that their influence in Washington counted for far less than Benjamin Netanyahu. So you know, you could see actually a closer relationship under, say, the next administration with the Gulf countries, a less close relationship with Israel. Does that amount to a change in American primacy, even regional primacy in the Middle East? Probably not.

### **Trita Parsi 39:37**

Steve and Monica. You guys want to get into this?

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

### **Stephen Walt 39:38**

Let me. Let me make two quick points. I liked what Stephen had to say. I wanted to focus a little bit more on Asia. And first of all, one of the consequences of this war we haven't talked about is what's the impact on China. I mean, there's some economic costs associated for China if energy prices stay high. But on the other hand, I think this is a net win, and. The United States, of course, once again, bogged down, distracted in a costly war in the Middle East. China, by comparison, looks like the mature, responsible, great power that cares about world order that is running around the world, building ports and bridges and railways while the United States is blowing things up. This has to be great from a public relations point of view for the Chinese as well. It's it's not surprising that the Economist Magazine ran a cover a couple of weeks ago showing a picture of Trump and Xi Jinping was Yi smiling, and the headline was, you know, never interrupt an opponent when he's making a mistake, right? And this has to be the way this looks in Beijing, and because of the effects of the war on our Asian partners, like South Korea and Japan and the Philippines and others, this has got to be something that's going to make them wonder if the United States really does care about them, if it can be relied upon, if they are pushed by by China. This is not good, you know, from a broader American perspective at all.

The second point I wanted to raise is, you know, is there a silver lining here? And this is a point that Steve made at the beginning. You know, is this the case where we finally learn the right lessons from another failed Middle East war? We've learned, I think, that boots on the ground in the Middle East doesn't work. Maybe this time, we learned that blowing things up without a clear strategy doesn't work either. What Works is diplomacy backed up by power and conducted by competent people, ie not Jared Kushner and Steve Witkoff as well. I think you know that would also require us to finally stop listening to the people who keep selling this recipe as a solution to complex foreign policy problems as well.

And so going forward towards the Middle East, one could at least imagine a focus where the United States goes back to wanting to preserve stability in the region, not trying to disrupt it or transform it, or engage in regime change, where we have normal relations with all the countries in the region, instead of a special relationship with one or two and no relations at all with some of the others as well, which, of course, is what China does right, and where We reduce the American military footprint there substantially, with the capacity to intervene if there was a serious problem like the first Gulf War, a real threat to the local balance of power, but otherwise, staying as disengaged from the region as possible. That's a formula that worked pretty well from World War Two to roughly the first Gulf War, and it's at least theoretically possible that we will move to a more sort of restraint oriented approach once the full consequences of this war are registered by the American people, and especially by people in the foreign policy world.

### **Trita Parsi 42:58**

I want to follow up on that last point, Stephen, but one of the Monica to come in first?

### **Monica Toft 43:04**

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

So it's a nice follow on to both Steve's and the first point is, is about, I think, for Steve Walt, I think the American public is already ahead of the strategic class on this, not us at the Quincy Institute. But the question is, you know, they're already feeling it. Their Maga was supported based on an American first policy, President Trump did win the popular vote. So the American public seems to be out on this. And actually, if you look at polling of Americans, they think that the United States needs to be involved in foreign policy, but it doesn't necessarily have to be the first mover. It's okay to be in the second place, but the elite, whoever these elite, are making these decisions at that this particular moment. And then, of course, we want to talk about the military industrial complex. The big winners here are going to be those who are rebuilding the American military, looking at the weapon systems that worked and didn't work, and thinking about the next war.

So that's kind of unnerving, because we were warned about that again decades ago, and then on an allied diversification, diversification, I think that' as great Trita Trita, you know, great question. But what I'd say is, again, it's too soon to tell, because the European allies still need us. Our Asian allies still need us, and China is still very scary, right? Even though it is the big, responsible partner or great power in the room, it's still kind of scary. It's an autocratic state one party system, and it wants to direct, unilaterally and bilaterally, trade relations and to some extent, a lot of how these states conduct their foreign affairs. So So China is not necessarily a great partner for them. So that hesitation, I think, is still there. But, you know, they're still hedging. Our allies are hedging, and they're hedging in real time. Because I think the Iran war has demonstrating something that Ukraine had already suggested, which is that US commitments are administration dependent. They're not system dependent. And so Biden, where did he go right after the first term administration? We went right right to Europe to say we got your backs right. But now here we are with whiplash again, with the Trump administration.

So the big question about American unpredictability is, can we do something through the 2026 election? The 2028 election? I doubt it. Foreign policy is never really on the docket. It's always economics to have a conversation about this is not the nation that we want to be as a country. And then my last point is that the end of primacy, it doesn't necessarily produce a vacuum. What it does is produce a contest, which is why I think Steve wall breaking China in here is absolutely right. And China is just, you know, President Xi is rubbing his hands together, saying, There they go again. There was Americans, right? And because we did over invest in military primacy, which means actually we are making trade offs and under investing in geoeconomics and the geotechnological domains. And I think that's where the next 30 years of great power competition is going to be, because the Iran war has shown use of force is really difficult in the modern era. It's very, very hard with surveillance technology, satellite communications. So if you want to use force, I think it's going to have to be all in or nothing, sort of like Steve Walt talking about diplomacy, maybe pulling back a little bit and just having a better foreign state department and a full gambit of ambassadors and diplomats that can get out ahead of these problems before we decide to blow them up.

**Trita Parsi 46:30**

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

So on that point, this is relevant to what Steve Walt ended up saying in his last answer, and what Stephen raised, which I think is very important, that this is not just about the straight up Hoos. This is also about the fact that militarily, there were a lot of other things going on that didn't work out the way that the United States had hoped. On the restraint side, there's oftentimes been an argument that instead of focusing on dominance, there should be a focus on denial to have over the horizon capabilities that would be able to strike instead of having bases.

And we've seen that now twice, the United States has struck Iran and both times, it completely vacated all of its bases in order to make sure that they weren't vulnerable. Imagine if this war had taken place when the US was still in Iraq or in Afghanistan, the Iranians would have plenty of additional targets to go after. Now it didn't happen that way, but even with what in essence was an over horizon capability, because the US Navy was keeping itself 3000 kilometers away from the Iranian shorelines to avoid getting hit by Iranian missiles. We still saw that that strategy also does not seem to work particularly well. So do we need a much deeper rethink about this altogether, including to really question if the region no longer is that strategically important to the United States at all is even denial worth pursuing anyone?

### **Stephen Walt 47:49**

I think the United States still has an interest, as is being demonstrated now, in making sure that energy and other supplies that come out of the Middle East continue to flow to world markets, not because the United States depends on them directly, but because the price affects economic conditions everywhere. We've talked a little bit about fertilizer as well, now heavily produced in the Gulf and critical for farmers around the world, and therefore for people around the world and the United States doesn't want to be in a position doesn't want the world to be in a position where any single power can cut that off, right? And of course, Iran has now shown it has some capacity to do that, which means long term security arrangements in the region that make that much less likely to occur are in everybody's interest.

And that's probably not something you can achieve by constantly threatening to overthrow other governments. That is not how you create a stable security environment there. I think the United States still has an interest in doing that. Your broader point though about whether or not we are now in a world where much smaller countries can, you know, adopt various strategies of denial themselves, you know, make themselves into porcupines that are hard to attack, hard to conquer, be able to inflict a price on wealthier countries, more powerful countries, that those powerful countries aren't willing to pay. I think that is, you know, part of where military technology is taking us, as we see in Ukraine, as we see in this conflict as well, and the inability now of even very powerful, very capable militaries like our own, of operating up close to potential adversaries, taking expensive, high value assets like aircraft carriers or other warships up close to an adversary, even a much weaker adversary, is now something we don't want to do.

We've talked a little bit about public opinion. What would happen in public opinion in the United States if one major American warship were actually sunk somewhere near Iran, et cetera. So.

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

This is going to, I think, constrain the impunity with which the United States has become accustomed to operating for really 75 years or so in many parts of the world, we felt we could sort of go anywhere and do anything. It was a question of whether it would be militarily effective, but not whether it would be militarily risky. Gets back to what I said about the difference between putting boots on the ground and just operating at a distance. That's going to be more difficult, it seems to me, than it used to be. Last point, even if we got good at operating from a distance, relying heavily on missiles, etc, that doesn't allow you to dictate the political conditions on the ground. You can blow things up, you can remove leaders, but you can't determine what the political fate of that society is going to be. And until we wean ourselves off the belief that we can control local politics from 40,000 feet or from 500 miles away, we're going to find ourselves stumbling into conflicts like this over and over again.

### **Monica Toft 51:05**

Yeah, I just like to edit that. You know, denial, you know, is necessary. I mean, I think Steve made Steve Walt made that. But it's not sufficient, right? So it's worth pursuing, right? Because you don't want another state to deny your sovereignty in any, any meaningful sense, right? And I think, you know, in the case of Iran, you know the problem is, is that we used, we thought that the use of force was going to be, not only was necessary, but then both sufficient. And so the problem that we face is that the US is strategy. Its grand strategy is that it's treating every challenge to the US as an emergency requiring a military response, and so now we're seeing us burn through even more resources and credibility right at a ridiculous rate, and we're not getting these strategic wins.

So I think denial is worth pursuing when you have sort of an objective that you're trying to achieve, but it has to be a positive objective. And I think the problem right now is we're thinking about where the United States needs to go next is, is, what is it that we're trying to build to after, you know, World War Two, it was the whole Bretton Woods order, in order to contain the Soviet Union. And right now we're kind of at a loss. What it is that, what is it that the United States is trying to achieve in terms of its denial strategy? It doesn't have to be the liberal international order, but it needs to be something that's not just defensive, but actually is building towards something that maybe the United States stands for in some way. It could be just global stability, that simple. That's China's right. China doesn't get involved in the internal affairs of other states. It wants free trade or it wants markets to be open, right? And it just wants global stability. The question is, what is it that the United States wants, if it's the case, that it cannot any longer pursue primacy as that objective that it appears it was trying to achieve from at least '89 or '91 forward.

### **Stephen Wertheim 53:04**

Can I just make a couple observations on this theme? You know, first of all, the United States, to my mind, has one clear permanent interest when it comes to the Middle East. And what I mean by permanent interest is not an interest that's generated circularly by the United States already committing to do things in the region, or stationing people in the region, that then creates an

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

interest in in protecting what the United States has committed to, and that is to see the sea lanes open, not closed, not causing global shortages economically. And it was US military action that brought about the very problem that it is supposed to prevent. Not only that, it appears that the United States does not have a very good military option for forcing the straight open. Presumably, President Trump would have exercised that option now he's done this second blockade that seems to have actually gotten in the way of making a diplomatic agreement that could have lifted the original one, but you know in theory that could be used effectively for coercive leverage toward an agreement.

But we get this recurrent story where you know, in theory, military capability ought, if used wisely, to allow the United States to do things that will pursue its interests. But in practice, how many times have we seen, particularly the Middle East, that that the United States uses its capability unwisely and in ways that damage its own interest? So you know, I'm inclined to agree with the other, Steve W that you know the United States needs some ability to project power into the region. There are real interests here. They're limited, but they're not zero. But we do have to weigh the question of, you know, how much good do we expect from having, you know, a large US military presence that's stationed in the region, against how much harm might that cause for American interests. And then add to that the fact that I think none of us know what the trajectory of American politics, the quality of our governance, will be in the future, but we shouldn't assume that it will be better than than what it's been in the last several decades.

### **Trita Parsi 55:46**

Someone mentioned silver linings earlier on in the conversation, and one of them, obviously would be if there is a movement stronger than what we saw after the Iraq War, towards or away from primacy and towards restraint. I think. Steve Stephen wartime, you pointed out that the NSS was not a step towards restraint, but it was a step away from primacy. How do we what is needed to be done to make sure that the lessons of this translate into actual action away from primacy and towards restraint. I'm going to start with you. What are the concrete measures that need to be taken to make sure that what we learn from this is not just a movement away from primacy in a temporary fashion, but actually a positive movement towards a restrained grand strategy?

### **Monica Toft 56:29**

You know, that is a really difficult question. And as you know, I wrote that book on dying by the sword, and I've already mentioned the military industrial complex. I mean, there's real embedded interests. What we have to do is move away from the sword as our sort of inclination in how we conduct foreign policy. President Trump's administration is just sort of the apotheosis of it. It's kind of scary. You know when, when Venezuela happened? I was nervous because I thought, oh, that went exceedingly well for this administration. They're going to get cocky, and then we have Iran. So I think there has to be a real reckoning about what the how the country's relationship with the use of force and the military industrial complex and money sort of sloshing around in the electoral system.

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

And I don't know how we go about doing that. You know, I hopefully, in some ways, this war is teaching Americans the lesson that war doesn't pay, that it's really costly, that it's harming us. It's harming our children. We're not getting our schools built, our medical facilities, built, medical insurance and all of that. So I think there has to be for the country a real reckoning that restraint is the way to go, not, you know, isolationism, we've talked about that before, but real restraint and a real balancing of what our priorities are and taking care of the home front and taking care of ourselves. And it's just like, you know, you put your mask on first in an airplane before doing before, and in the end, everybody will be better off if the United States has that kind of reckoning as a citizenry, and then our elected officials and the strategic establishment beyond you know, those who support a more restraint option have been advocating it for some time moving forward.

**Trita Parsi 58:36**

Thank you, Monica. Steven and Steven one minute each.

**Stephen Walt 58:41**

I'll go first. Fine. So we have to treat the Iran war as a teachable moment, where we do as much as possible to nail home and drive home the lessons of this conflict that once again, the United States tried to solve a difficult political problem with military force and made things worse. That means we also want to tout the success stories that a different approach has brought. And I'll mention too, the original Camp David Accords and the Egyptian Israeli peace treaty. This was a diplomatic achievement which helped stabilize the region for a long time, and the JCPOA, which hasn't come up yet. This was a diplomatic arrangement produced by a combination of American pressure but also flexibility that put Iran further from a nuclear weapon. And of course, if we'd stuck with that, we wouldn't be in this mess today, right?

So there's two examples of what works. We ought to pit that against the example of what doesn't work, and try to drive that point home as vividly as possible to the American people. And lastly, I think something that is happening is you are starting to get a sea change, especially among young people within the foreign policy community, right? So the next time we have a more reasonable president in the White House, they're not going to have to rely upon people who are committed to. To you know, sort of liberal dominance, liberal primacy, but might be more sympathetic to a more restrained point of view a president say, like a Barack Obama, won't have a cabinet, won't have a foreign policy group that doesn't necessarily agree with him, at least that's my silver lining for the future.

**Trita Parsi 1:00:19**

Thank you, Stephen Wertheim, final words to you?

**Stephen Wertheim 1:00:22**

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

And the lights go out behind me for some reason. So I think Americans need to connect the hubris behind unwise wars with the hubris behind the structure of peace through strength, as President Trump calls it, in other words, the idea that the United States is going to leave itself thoroughly entangled in security arrangements of entire regions, and then the regions that we want to do less in are going to sit still or will act wisely in them. It just doesn't work like that. And actually, the Biden administration had that view toward the Middle East and Europe, when it came in and found itself dealing with major conflicts in both of those places, President Trump has the same kind of hubris manifested in a different way.

So look, if we want to keep pursuing the kind of commitments and military presence that the United States has now support President Trump's request for a \$1.5 trillion annual Pentagon budget. Maybe it should even be higher, if not, if we don't like what we're doing in Iran, we should pull back from regions that matter less to us, or regions where the United States makes things worse, at least as much as it makes things better or where others can carry the burden of their defense, not just us.

### **Trita Parsi 1:01:49**

Excellent. Thank you so much, and thank you to you. Monica, to Stephen Walt. Stephen Wertheim, excellent conversation. We will post this on YouTube within a couple of hours of this, and I want to make sure that everyone who is watching, if you are not on the Quincy mailing list, please go to [quincyinst.org](http://quincyinst.org), sign up for our mailing list so that you get invitations to all future panels, as well as receive our products, our papers, etc, that all are touching these issues in one fashion or another. Thank you all so much for joining us, and hope to see you all soon again. Thank you.

**Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

**Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**