

IC project #10, Amb. Chas Freeman on the China-Pakistan peace initiative

*Transcript of the conversation Helena Cobban had with Amb. Chas Freeman on 4/1/2026.
Find the full video and audio records of this conversation [here](#).*

[Helena Cobban]

Hi, everybody. I'm Helena Cobban. I'm the president of Just World Educational.

This is the ninth episode of our ongoing series on the Iran crisis. We've had Ambassador Chas Freeman with us before, but of course, it's always a real pleasure and an honor to have him back with us again. So welcome back, Chas Freeman.

[Amb. Chas Freeman]

Thank you. Glad to be back.

[Helena Cobban]

Yeah, what a day really. I mean, I know you and I were saying that April Fool's Day seems like a good day for Donald Trump to be giving a major address. The eponymous, as I said, April Fool.

But the more important thing actually, in my mind is this five point peace plan that has been put forward for the Iran crisis by Pakistan and China jointly. So the first issue I'd love to hear your views on, Chas, is why Pakistan and China and what is the backstory and what is the relevance and potential implications of this?

[Amb. Chas Freeman]

Well, there was a meeting in Islamabad between the Turks, the Saudis, the Egyptians, and the Pakistanis. Pakistan has the approval of China to act as a mediator in this war, and now it has gained the endorsement of these other key parties in the region. The foreign minister of Pakistan flew to Beijing to confer with Wang Yi, his counterpart, and the two of them issued a declaration with some points about how to resolve the conflict.

I think this is a hopeful development in the sense that if Donald Trump does want some way to exit this war without first creating a cataclysmic end to it, which I fear he may be intending, I note that A-10s, which are the workhorse air support for infantry, both air support for infantry, are now being deployed from the United States to the region, which is an ominous sign. But if he does want a way out, the fact that there is an international peace process on offer, offers him a way to defer the achievement of any objective other than death and destruction, which is all that this war has achieved so far.

[Helena Cobban]

So there is a question, I have a couple of questions. You seem to be framing this still as though it's about Donald Trump. But I think there's a different way of framing it where he's not the person who's going to make the big decisions here, it strikes me.

But we can come back to that later because we're going to discuss geopolitics later. I want to note, first of all, that Pakistan has an important border with Iran, and with China as well. So that's one key aspect here.

Another is that these three other Muslim majority countries that you mentioned, Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, are all actually considered by most people in to be close US allies. So that makes it particularly significant to have them working with Pakistan, which until recently was considered a US ally in close coordination with China.

[Amb. Chas Freeman]

Well, I dispute the word ally. I don't think these countries have any reciprocal obligation to the United States, with the exception of Turkey, which is a member of NATO. But NATO is a defensive alliance.

It was not created and is not empowered to conduct wars of aggression outside European territory, or even within it. It is defensive. So Turkey, for this purpose, is not allied with the United States.

It's an independent actor, as is Saudi Arabia, as is Egypt. Egypt, of course, is kept in the Camp David Accords through the largesse of the American taxpayer on behalf of Israel. So I think you're right, decisions are not going to be made by Donald Trump.

We're on the eve, as you mentioned, of the April Fool's address. And I think we don't know what that is going to contain. It appears that he has decided that we can leave the war without opening the Strait of Hormuz, thus abandoning everybody to the consequences of a war that he began on behalf of Israel.

And this raises a whole series of very interesting questions. Where does it leave Israel if the United States drops out? I heard this morning on the National Public Radio broadcast of the news, the commentators say, well, this just means that Israel and the United States will have to do the same thing again and again.

But I don't think there is any possibility that the American people will permit that. That is to say, this war has paid to the American subservience to Israel in terms of attacking Iran. But it also raises huge questions for the Gulf countries.

If they are no longer confident that they can be defended by the United States or that the United States even has the will to defend them, what do they do? This is where Pakistan, Egypt, and Turkey come in again. Because recall that Saudi Arabia and Pakistan now have a defense pact, and that defense pact has two elements to it.

One is an implied nuclear umbrella for Saudi Arabia from Pakistan, and we can talk about that if you want. But the other is cooperation in developing regional defense industries that would end the over-dependence on the United States as a major arms supplier, a fickle arms supplier, to the countries in the region. I say fickle because in this war, the United Arab Emirates, which has been singled out for greatest attacks by Iran because of its membership in the Abraham Accords, its collusion with Israel, and its demands on the United States that it prosecute the war to the end, the United Arab Emirates is going to be left high and dry.

It can no longer market itself as a safe real estate haven for wealthy Europeans and others who wish to find a nice sunny place to spend part of the year. It can no longer serve as a safe place to put data centers or a center for cybernetic development. It can no longer serve as a safe banking area, as long as Iran remains hostile.

So the Gulf countries, including the UAE, confront a dilemma. The only way they can eliminate the threat from Iran is to make peace with Iran. But to make peace with Iran implies a break with the United States and with Israel.

What will they choose? Watch that space.

[Helena Cobban]

Another thing that worth noting about the role of Pakistan in the Gulf is that a large proportion of the elite forces of both the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, and quite possibly other Gulf states, is actually Pakistani nationals or people. I don't know if they're on secondment from the Pakistani armed forces.

[Amb. Chas Freeman]

No, I don't think it's accurate that the Saudi armed forces are partly Pakistani. But that is certainly the case in the other smaller countries. They're either Pakistani or Omani.

Oman has the distinction of not having the abundance of oil and gas that others do, and therefore its people have to find their own employment. And many have done so as mercenaries in the other Gulf countries. But, you know, Pakistan, to go back to Pakistan's role with Saudi Arabia under this pact, Pakistan, if asked, might very well deploy nuclear forces to Saudi territory, much as the United States stationed nuclear forces in South Korea or in Europe during the Cold War.

And this would be entirely consistent with international law and practice. But it would be a matter of very grave concern, particularly to Israel. As you mentioned, Iran and Pakistan are neighbors.

They have had a sometimes troubled relationship. They have problems in common, I guess you could say. I particularly think restive minorities like the Baluch.

But in this context, Pakistan has clearly opted to support Saudi Arabia. And Saudi Arabia wants peace. And here I'll just mention something in the New York Times and other of the Wall Street Journal and other American media, citing anonymous sources not otherwise

identified, has claimed that Saudi Arabia is pressing the Trump administration to continue prosecuting this war to the end.

I think that is true of the UAE for the reasons I mentioned. But it is not true of Saudi Arabia. And so this is Israeli disinformation.

And you can even see Benjamin Netanyahu in a video making a similar claim. The object is obviously to cement the split between Iran and the Gulf Arabs, and particularly Saudi Arabia, and complicate the process of Saudi rapprochement with Iran, which I think will have to resume after this immediate warfare is over. I mean, the Gulf Arabs have every reason to be alarmed and concerned and angry at the beating they're taking from Iran.

On the other hand, the answer to that is very simple. Get rid of the American bases that are hostile to Iran on your territory. That is why Iran is attacking these countries.

And I don't think it takes a genius to figure out that that may be the only move available to them, since they cannot prevail over Iran militarily. The United States can't prevail over Iran militarily, evidently. And they are, or Israel for that matter.

So I think we're looking at a real shift in regional dynamics and orientation, but it will come slowly. Let me just make one final comment here, and that is, if indeed Donald Trump, whether he chooses to go out with a big bang, as I suspect, fear he may, or not, if Donald Trump just leaves the war, quits the war, proclaiming victory, he's doing a number of things. He's saying the only purpose of the war was Hegsethian death and destruction.

It had no political purposes at all. He claims, he will claim, that it has stopped the Iranian nuclear program, but in fact, it has probably put that program over the top. But since we've provided the most convincing set of arguments we possibly could to Iranian hardliners, who are now the successors to more moderate leadership, which Israel and we murdered.

So, second, regime change. Yes, there has been a shift in the regime toward a harder line, not a more accommodating line. The support for the protests?

No, the protesters have been alienated. Cementing allied support for American expeditions abroad? No.

NATO is in danger of dissolution over this issue. We've already seen Spain refuse the use of US bases on its territory and its airspace to support this war. France has now joined that.

Of course, there are no bases in France, but the airspace has been closed. Italy apparently has made a similar decision, the exact details of which I don't know. We hear in Germany, Alternative für Deutschland, which is a very serious political movement, whether you like it or not, saying that no, the American bases now have to go, that 80 years of occupation is enough.

So, I think we can say that one knock-on effect of this war is to bring the Atlantic alliance very close to dissolution. It's even rumored that Donald Trump may announce withdrawal from NATO tonight. If he does so, the implications are very interesting.

The United States cannot project power to the Middle East without the bases in Europe. And so, if we leave NATO, those bases will not be there, and we really will be out of the Middle East. And there will be people in Washington who have favored a pivot to Asia, or overlordship in the Western Hemisphere, who will take great delight in that.

But where does that leave Israel? That is a fundamental question.

[Helena Cobban]

That is a really important question. I'll come back to that in a moment. Before we look at the region, like the West Asia-wide implications of this new peace plan, I think it's worth just looking quickly at some of the five points.

So, this is the Pakistani-Chinese peace initiative, not a plan. So, number one is immediate cessation of hostilities, which is great. Like, utmost efforts to prevent the conflict from spreading.

Humanitarian assistance must be allowed to all war-affected areas. Now, I hope that includes Gaza and Lebanon.

[Amb. Chas Freeman]

I'm sure it does. I'm quite sure it does.

[Helena Cobban]

So, an actual effective cessation of hostilities in those areas, as well as in the Galizia, the Gulf, would be amazing.

[Amb. Chas Freeman]

Yes, but let me make a point here, and that is that that would require regime change in Israel.

[Helena Cobban]

Yes.

[Amb. Chas Freeman]

And whether that happens or not is going to be determined by the Israeli people, who still, to this day, remain bloodthirsty supporters in the majority, although there are protests now growing in Israel, supporters of this war of choice against Iran. Illegal war crime-laden war with Iran. And, of course, the genocide in Gaza continues, although in a less visible, less dramatic fashion than before.

And it has now been extended, essentially, to the West Bank, buttressed recently by legislation imposing the death penalty on anyone who resists Israeli occupation. And so, we

have also, as you indicated, the effort to annex southern Lebanon, south of the Litani River. Very clear.

Not just creating a security zone, but actually seizing land for settlement. So, Israel, true to form, has never, in all of its years or decades of existence, never once offered a peace plan or a peace proposal to any of its neighbors, or to the Palestinians.

[Helena Cobban]

Or drawn a boundary.

[Amb. Chas Freeman]

Or drawn any frontiers. It is a state with no frontiers. It is engaged in perpetual pursuit of the so-called greater Israel initiative or plan, which would control all the territory between the Euphrates and the Nile.

And that, of course, is, I believe, another pipe dream and a fatal ambition. But there it is. And we can see it in action now in Lebanon and Syria.

So, we need to have a peace proposal from Israel, after whatever it is, almost 80 years. And we have not had one. So, the Chinese and Pakistani plan is essentially a demand for Israel to change its evil ways.

And that's why I believe it does apply to Gaza and to Lebanon.

[Helena Cobban]

So, yeah, there is a point here. Point five is primacy of the UN Charter and having, you know, international law be the basis for everything. We can come on to that in a moment.

But point two is the start of peace talks. And I found this really interesting, the wording that the two powers, with their three backup powers, agreed to. Sovereignty, territorial integrity, national independence, and security of Iran and the Gulf states should be safeguarded.

National independence and sovereignty, really, you know, that's speaking to whether they want to continue having American bases on their soil, I think.

[Amb. Chas Freeman]

Of course, and it also dovetails with various proposals for security architecture in the Persian Gulf that have been put forward by the Chinese, by the Russians, in the past by the Iranians. And incidentally, Iran apparently is willing to share management of the toll booth in the state of Hormuz that has now erected with Oman. But that leaves the other Gulf states out unless they find an accommodation with Iran.

So I think we are on the verge of some very difficult choices that have to be made by those countries. The idea of an immediate ceasefire, of course, is fine, but only if it is coupled with a peace. If there is a ceasefire, where?

In the Gulf, I guess we're talking about? Because I don't think Iran is going to agree to stop pummeling Israel. And that bombardment of Israel, which now does not face effective missile interception, is apparently taking quite a toll on Israelis.

I'm sorry for them, but in a way they asked for it with this war.

[Helena Cobban]

Well, they certainly helped push Donald Trump into the decision. I think when we last talked, you and I were trying to discuss whether it should be called the Israeli-US assault against Iran or the US-Israeli assault. It really doesn't matter because you've got two tails wagging two dogs there in some sense.

[Amb. Chas Freeman]

Well, one tail may be chopped off or fall off, leaving Israel to conduct the rest.

[Helena Cobban]

Well, they can't do it without, as you mentioned earlier, some American presence in both. I think they need the American presence in the Gulf as well as in Europe in order to support.

[Amb. Chas Freeman]

Well, I'm not sure that that helps Israel. It provides, as we've seen with the attack on Prince Sultan Air Base outside Riyadh, south of Riyadh, in Al-Kharij, it provides logistical support and intelligence support. The Iranians successfully, apparently, destroyed an AWACS aircraft, may have damaged another couple of them.

They certainly have taken several tankers out of commission. So, when the Gulf Arabs, on the one hand, say correctly that they expended great effort trying to persuade the United States not to begin this war and did not want the war, they're speaking truth. But when they say they're not involved, they're not speaking truth, because they are permitting, they have permitted offensive operations or the support of offensive operations from their territory.

And they're paying a huge price for it. I think we need, Helen, I think we need to take account of the fact that in addition to claiming that he's willing to call off the war and leave the Strait of Hormuz under its current management, leaving the removal of that management to others, which is not going to occur. In addition to that, he has threatened to commit horrendous war crimes, attacking all the power plants, the civilian infrastructure, including the desalination facilities in Iran, which he appears to imagine match those in the Gulf.

They don't. About 2% of Iranian water is from desalination. 90% of Kuwaiti water is from desalination.

One plant in Kuwait was struck. It's not clear whether it was the Iranians or a false flag operation by Israel, but it appears to have taken 38% of the water offline in Kuwait. Saudi Arabia is 60-70%.

Bahrain is 80-90%. Qatar, the same. UAE perhaps 50-60% dependent on desalination.

This means that if the United States strikes desalination plants in Iran, if Iran makes good on its threat, these societies cannot survive. They will disappear because water is essential to human life, and they have built up large populations of foreigners and indigenous people based on the technology of desalination. If that is removed, they are finished.

So, this is turning out to be, we will find out whether Donald Trump has any empathy or concern whatsoever for the wealthy Arabs of the Gulf, whom he has courted as part of his basic search for corrupt gains.

[Helena Cobban]

Just more on this, the role of the GCC countries, these Arab states of the Gulf. I think it is indisputable that there would be no way for Israeli Air Force planes to go across what they refer to as the air bridge, to go across and bomb all these facilities in Iran, including they on the first day were the ones that did the decapitation strike. And since then, they've undertaken a lot.

There seems to have been a kind of geographic division of labor that U.S. forces have been attacking targets in the southern half of Iran, whereas the Israelis have been flying over this air bridge. There is no way they could do that without the support of U.S. intel, refueling, real time surveillance, all that stuff that is located in the air bases in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia.

[Amb. Chas Freeman]

Well, Helena, I think this brings us to the subject of the American presence in Iraq. The United States has controlled the airspace in Iraq since the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The Iraqis are not happy about that.

The American facilities in Iraq are now under regular attack from insurgents aligned with Iran and supportive of Iran. The Iraqis want that presence gone. And it is that presence and the neutralization of Syria that has given the Israelis the ability to fly close to Iranian airspace and fire into it, or maybe even enter it.

We have claimed there is control of Iranian airspace. That is not correct. And when we have intruded, as we did recently in Chabahar, we have lost aircraft to ground fire.

So, I think the other issue here is, what is the impact on Iraq of this egregious strategic error by Donald Trump and his administration? I think even Benjamin Netanyahu, who clearly is the initiator of this war, marched the December 29 meeting at Mar-a-Lago, agreed. He got agreement from Trump to do it.

I think even he now recognizes it's a mistake. On the other hand, his political survival depends on its continuation. We're seeing now people in Israel calling on the Israeli security establishment, retired generals and the like, come forward and speak the truth.

This war is a disaster. And, of course, that is not happening. But we don't know very much about what is happening militarily in Israel because of wartime censorship.

And we do know that Israel's continuing to kill journalists in an effort to ensure that there is no news that is adverse to their war morale. Lebanese journalists being the most recent victims. But now Israel has killed, what, 250 journalists, something like that?

Unbelievable. And that itself is an incredible crime against the values of Western civilization, which Israel appears to have utterly abandoned, in which our Secretary of War Crimes, Pete Hegseth, has joined them in abandoning.

[Helena Cobban]

Richard the Lionheart lives again.

[Amb. Chas Freeman]

Richard the Lionheart had a bit of chivalry to him, but I don't see that evident in this crowd.

[Helena Cobban]

So you mentioned earlier that you wonder how much empathy Donald Trump has for the peoples of the Gulf Arab states. The other bigger question, in a sense, is does he have even a drop of empathy for the people throughout the Global South who are already starting to hurt really, really badly? And I think we need to look at that factor in this whole matter.

[Amb. Chas Freeman]

Well, I was actually asking a facetious question. I don't believe he has any empathy for anyone. However, the fact is that there is much collateral damage from this war.

India, in particular, has been very badly hit. The rupee is in free fall against the dollar. Indian restaurants have closed because they don't have cooking gas.

People are desperate for fuel. And of course, we also have the planting season, not just in India, but elsewhere, where the fertilizer supplies, including in the northern hemisphere of the United States and others, where there will be a supply shock and a crop failure, or if not a crop failure, at least great reduction in productivity. So those are effects.

We see gas rationing and terrible shortages in places like South Korea, the Philippines. The Philippines, under the impact of this war, seems to be trying to figure out how to reconcile with China, which it had been standing up against in response to American urging. Japan, well, I think actually the greatest collateral damage of the war is to the idea of non-proliferation.

Because when Iran goes nuclear, as it will now, when it builds an ICBM to match that which North Korea built in response to comparable maximum pressure policies, you can expect Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey, to name three of the other parties that Pakistan met with. Pakistan is already a nuclear power. You can expect them to go nuclear.

And farther afield in South Korea, where 80 percent of the public favors nuclear weapons to match those in North Korea, they will build a nuclear weapon. And so will the Japanese, very

likely. There was an interesting report by the People's Liberation Army of China that plutonium has enough plutonium to build 5,500 bombs.

And Japan has the missile technology, which it has developed for its space program, to marry those warheads very rapidly to missiles. So we're talking about the nuclear genie coming out of the bottle on a global level. And I don't know what the implications would be for the Western hemisphere.

You know, Brazil had a weapons program which it abandoned, and so did Argentina. We may very well see these resume. You know, and there, it's interesting that one of the consequences of the renewed American strategic assertion of overlordship in the Western hemisphere has been a pact between South Africa and Brazil to develop weapons jointly.

Well, let's recall that South Africa was nuclear. It has not given up its nuclear materials. It stored them.

It did dismantle the cruise bombs it had built to deliver those nuclear weapons. But it has the technology. And so I think the knock-on effects, the rippling impact of this egregiously misguided war are yet to be seen, but they will be seen.

And I don't think we will like any of them. I should add, however, that one of the other victims of the war is the dollar. You can see other central banks dumping treasuries at the moment.

I think the idea that the dollar is a safe haven is now coming up against the reality that the United States is essentially insolvent. And would you put your money in a bank that is insolvent? Many people are beginning to wonder whether that's wise.

So we see a diversification of currency holdings. This isn't just the Chinese currency at all. It's many other currencies.

And notably, after beginning with a demand that transit fees, in the straighter form, must be paid in Chinese yuan, Iran has gone to its own currency, the rial, recognizing, I think, that that would bolster its currency, which is one of the main concerns of the Iranian protesters. So there are lots of things going on here off camera, out of consideration. But tonight, I suppose, the focus will be on whether the United States is actually going to quit the war, and whether it will do so without doing further substantial damage.

[Helena Cobban]

I know we're looking at that happening, you know, just what, about 12 hours, 11 hours from now, Chas. But let's come back to West Asia and see, like, what would be the likely effects of this Chinese-Pakistani peace initiative for Gaza and Lebanon and the West Bank and southern Syria, all those places that are being ravaged by unbridled, US-supported Israeli militarism.

[Amb. Chas Freeman]

Well, I think the implication, as I said, of this peace proposal is that there must be regime change in Israel. Whether that regime change would temper Zionism sufficiently to end the genocide or curtail the effort to build a greater Israel on the corpses of neighboring peoples, I do not know. But I do sense that American support for the state of Israel, which was once rock hard, immovable, essentially, is now very movable.

And it is also, of course, a partisan matter. That is something Netanyahu went out to create. He will pay the price for that, I believe.

Republicans continue to be, in the majority, supportive of Israel and of this war. Democrats, six percent, roughly, favor Israel now. And if you look at the demographics, it's the young people who are most alienated from Israel, whether they are Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or whatever they are.

So, I think this is a *Zeitenwende*, as Mr. Schulz, the German Chancellor, said.

[Helena Cobban]

Zeitenwende, that means a world-turning...

[Amb. Chas Freeman]

It's an epochal change, a tidal change in history.

[Helena Cobban]

And we, I think, as US citizens, have some unique responsibilities here to actually support a decent end to this war that is one in which we ask our government to take responsibility, for example. We should have US forces out of the Gulf, because they have been a major factor of instability and destruction there. And probably we should be demanding an end to US support for Israel.

[Amb. Chas Freeman]

Yeah, I think, with respect to the Gulf, the Gulf Arabs will make that decision. In effect, Netanyahu, Prime Minister Netanyahu, anticipated a breach with the United States. He's been speaking about what I consider a foreign policy fantasy, or a political fantasy, of Israel as a new Sparta, independent of foreign support.

Israel can't survive without foreign support. I think those who support Israel should demand that Israel attend to its own security by making peace with the Palestinians and the neighbours. So, if you care about Israel, and I think many Americans do, then the appropriate position to take is pressure on Israel to reform.

[Helena Cobban]

And to pull back inside the borders that were allotted it in 1947.

[Amb. Chas Freeman]

Of course, and we're left with, you know, the fact that the Prime Minister of Israel and some of his principal advisors and colleagues are now subject to judicial warrants for their arrest, which are not being respected internationally. Perhaps they should be. Perhaps we should be enforcing the rule of law, not only abroad but at home, where it is seen it's taken some hard knocks.

So, Helena, I think I've really exceeded my time. I hope this has been somewhat useful.

[Helena Cobban]

It's been really wonderful. It's always great to talk to you. I think there's obviously a lot more we can talk about.

I'm kind of excited at the idea that we might finally be getting some accountability and some hope, and something that's different from Donald J. Trump and his Board of Peace, which is not a Board of Peace, that we might return to something that is internationally and nationally something that we can support. So, thank you very much, Chas, for being with us.

Good luck with all your many great interventions that you make into the public discourse and into, as I understand it, some diplomatic exchanges. And may we all build a much better world.

[Amb. Chas Freeman]

Well, I'd like to think so. However, you know, I'm constantly reminded that I saw a quiet retirement and did not wish to be involved in public matters at all. And yet, events have conspired to demand that I do so, which I think is a moral duty.

And I do not plan to join the Board of Peace, which is, I think, more accurately called the Board of Genocide. And so, let's leave it there.

[Helena Cobban]

Great. Thank you so much.