Does Trump Have an Exit Strategy for Iran?

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Featuring Matt Pottinger
Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

DUBOWITZ: Three weeks into the Iran war, talk of a diplomatic off-ramp has blanketed Washington. Could be a pause. Maybe some sort of deal. Maybe a ceasefire. Maybe even the beginning of the end. But here's the problem: Iran says there are no talks. And moreover, the war is still clearly expanding kinetically. The United States and Israel continue strikes inside Iran, and the regime continues firing back across the region. Which means the gap between what is being said and what's actually happening in this war is only getting wider. So, are we deescalating? Or is this just an illusion or a ruse? And if it is, for what? And even if there is some deal on the horizon, would President Trump actually take it? Would the regime? Who is the regime?

Joining me today to break all of this down is someone who has been grappling with these questions in recent weeks, over months, in fact over years: my FDD colleague and good friend, Matt Pottinger. Matt chairs FDD's China program and helped coordinate US national security in his role as deputy national security advisor on the National Security Council at the White House. He previously led Asia policy, shaping the Trump administration's Indo-Pacific strategy and its major shift on China. Matt's been tracking what this war means for the global balance of power and so has Beijing. I'm your host, Mark Dubowitz. This is The Iran Breakdown. So… let's break it down.

Matt Pottinger, great to have you.

POTTINGER: Hey, Mark. It's very good to be with you.

DUBOWITZ: Unfortunately, we're not in person, Matt. I really want to be in person. I know we're on opposite coasts, but it's great to have you here because I want to dive in. I know you've been looking at this war not through the lens of the Middle East alone, but also through the prism of great power competition. And you said recently– in fact, wrote recently– that there may be a diplomatic off-ramp emerging, but let's not be too quick to assume that President Trump will take it, and that whatever happens next will have consequences far beyond Iran, especially in China. So, let's start there, Matt. Tell us about China. China has skin in the game. Where do you think we're heading with the Chinese?

POTTINGER: Yeah. Mark, I think we're at the very beginning of a phase that the Chinese revolutionary Zhou Enlai would describe as "talking while fighting." So, it means that you have some diplomatic back channel– clearly. President Trump has now spoken publicly about it this week. There's some indirect discussion, at least, happening between the Iranian regime and Washington DC, but the fighting is not going to pause for that. And in fact, you might even see the fighting escalate as the diplomacy begins, but that suits President Trump in many ways. He's not someone who believes that diplomacy is a separate track, that it has to be sequenced, that there can't be fighting for there to be diplomacy. So, I think you're going to see a period of some weeks of talking while fighting.

The real negotiation right now is not the messages that are being passed back and forth by intermediaries between Tehran and Washington. The real negotiation is on the battlefield. And the real auditor of who has more bargaining power for an ultimate off-ramp is going to be determined on the battlefield– and specifically over the Strait of Hormuz, because that's really where the center of Iran's last leverage is right now. It is their leverage, their ability to control shipping, stop shipping, and do damage to ships and energy infrastructure in the region. So, that's really how the next couple of weeks shape up. Whether the US is able to begin opening Hormuz again through force of arms is going to tell us a lot about how the diplomacy goes.

DUBOWITZ: So, you know President Trump. You worked for President Trump. You've had a lot of experience in how he conducts negotiations, how he conducts geopolitical strategy. I guess the first question I would ask you: has anything surprised you in the past 25, 26 days during the war, or anything surprised you leading up to the war?

POTTINGER: Look, I was among those who believed that it was very likely that we would be at war. And you could argue that this war is really a 47-year-old war. You could more easily still argue that this war really began on October the 7th, 2023, and it just moves back and forth between hot and tense phases and low-grade warfare phases. And now we're in a hot phase again. But I think we shouldn't make any mistake about who really began this war. It began with a militant regime that guns down its own people by the tens of thousands, and which has really been running a regional war that has targeted Americans and Israelis and Arabs, and a lot of people in between.

So, I was not surprised that President Trump chose to shift back to a hot phase. And I'm not surprised that he also took a shot at decapitation of the regime– successfully decapitated the regime– but I'm more skeptical that this is going to lead to any near-term regime change. And that was not the primary goal in any case. President Trump's primary goal, in my view– I think he's been pretty clear and consistent about it– is really about the nuclear arms. What this really boils down to is the fact that Iran has continued to pursue nuclear weapons even after the June attacks– the successful attacks by Israel and the United States in June of last year. Iran is not willing to give up the enriched uranium and is trying to reconstitute the ability to enrich more. And that's really what brought us to this current hot phase.

DUBOWITZ: So Matt, you mentioned Hormuz. Obviously, there's been a huge amount of attention paid to Hormuz. I would note that I was surprised to see this morning– Wednesday morning; this might change by Wednesday afternoon or by tomorrow, and certainly may change by the time this episode comes out– but that the price of Brent is under a hundred bucks, in the 90s, and the price of WTI, West Texas Intermediate crude, is I think high 80s. So, despite the physical crisis over Hormuz with tankers not being able to move, the price of crude is actually– I think it's at the same level as the average price of crude since 2001, which is a kind of remarkable number. It's also considerably lower than the price of crude in 2012, and certainly lower than when Russia moved into Ukraine on the first occasion and on the second occasion.

So, we're not actually seeing in financial markets the crisis reflected in the price. Now, we may be seeing it in the physical markets as crude does not make its way through the strait into the hands of refineries, particularly in the Indo-Pacific. And that's where I want to shift next is the Indo-Pacific, and particularly Beijing. Let me ask you again: how much skin does China have in this conflict, and what does Beijing stand to gain or lose depending on how this war ends? And how are they interpreting US and Israeli military performance?

POTTINGER: Yeah, this is a great question. If you look at Beijing's rhetoric around the hottest phase of the war in Europe for the last four years, Beijing sometimes speaks platitudes about how it would be great to have a peaceful resolution, but really everyone knows whose side Beijing is on in that war. Beijing is the main enabler of the Russian effort to conquer Ukraine. Beijing never criticizes Russia. So, this is why it's interesting because now you're talking about Iran– also an axis member, also effectively a proxy of Beijing– and yet the rhetoric from Beijing is a bit different than the rhetoric that you've heard around Russia and Ukraine. Remember that Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, in an unguarded moment last year, told the top diplomat for the EU that China cannot afford to have Russia lose the war in Ukraine. That's not exactly what we're hearing right now.

And I think the reason you're hearing at least oblique criticism of the Iranian regime by Beijing– they're not calling out Iran by name, but they're calling out actions that everyone knows are Iranian actions alone, targeting oil tankers and the like. Beijing is saying, "We cannot tolerate people attacking oil rigs and oil tankers and going after key infrastructure and hitting civilian targets." What they mean is Iran. When they first started making those comments, it was only Iran that qualified for that role. What that tells me is that Beijing, while I'm assuming that Beijing would be happy to see the US tied up for a long time in a conflict, they’re nervous about the economic impact. Beijing's got tons of oil– strategic reserves– not infinite, but a lot. But there are other things. There’s parts of China's economy that really do depend on feedstock coming from the Gulf.

And also, the only part of China's economy that's still really running is their export economy. So even as China is probably in negative growth now– they reported last year five percent growth. I was talking to an economist yesterday who said it was really probably one or two percent, and right now it's probably negative. The only part of the economy that's really performing is exports. China is growing its trade surplus with the world. If the rest of the world begins to slow down economically because of an energy shock, that's going to be tough for China's factories and exporters. That's why I think when I see China's foreign minister just this week saying– advising Iran that we need to find a way to end this war, I think there's some sincerity there. I think that Beijing is a little bit worried about where this could lead if it turns into a real energy shock that is protracted.

DUBOWITZ: So Matt, talking about energy shocks that are protracted and China's dependence on Middle Eastern energy– I mean, I find it interesting that Yousef al-Otaiba, who's the Emirati ambassador to the United States, had a piece in *The Wall Street Journal* today. There have also been reports about statements made by the Saudis– not only the foreign minister and the defense minister, but MBS himself, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. And the statements coming out of the Saudis and the Emiratis are really tough on Iran. I mean, tough– much tougher than many people would have expected. They're not calling for deescalation, they're not calling for restraint, they're not calling for peace deals. They are saying that Iran must be left with no capacity– no war-making capacity– to threaten them and to threaten the Gulf.

So, strong words. And again, reports that the Saudis and Emiratis are calling on President Trump to continue this war, to ensure that this regime is not left with these deadly capabilities. Which leads me to this question: since the Chinese depend on Saudi oil, Emirati oil, Qatari natural gas, and as you mentioned, fertilizers and other important commodities coming out of that region, why is China not doing more to restrain the Islamic Republic? I mean, why are they not calling their friends in Tehran and saying, "That's it, knock it off, open up Hormuz. And we want those tankers passing the strait and serving us as an important customer"?

POTTINGER: Yeah. We don't know what Beijing is saying specifically to the regime there behind the scenes. What we've seen is some China-bound crude getting through Hormuz. You've seen China sort of accommodating the Iranian demand that they get Iranian permission– maybe even pay tolls, you know, multimillion-dollar tolls– to move their ships through. If China is doing that, it's a sign that that relationship is not quite as robust as either side may have tried to lead the world to believe before the war started. It might also be a sign that China's hurting for oil. Ultimately, Beijing gets oil from Iran, but it gets even more oil and gas from the other Gulf states. And as you mentioned, they're not keen to settle for a new status quo whereby Iran controls Hormuz as if it were the Suez Canal.

So, I don't know that Beijing really has the ability to really steer the fate here. In fact, I think it's been Iran's goal from the beginning to put pain on China– basically to create pain for the whole world by bottling up energy, but that includes creating pain for China so that Iran has more leverage to– in asking China to provide weapons or to serve as their lawyer if negotiations really get moving. It's not clear what Iran wants to do with that, but I don't think Beijing is really calling the shots right now in what's happening in the Gulf.

DUBOWITZ: Well, it's interesting because obviously China has basically been the only purchaser of Iranian oil. They've been demanding and getting pretty steep discounts. So, they've really had leverage– they've had the Iranians over a barrel. And I guess the question now is: are the Iranians trying to flip the leverage and put the Chinese over the barrel? So not only do they not have to pay discounts, but now the Chinese are going to have to pay a toll for all those tankers moving to China. It's an interesting potential recalibration of the relationship. But Matt, from China's perspective, I mean, how are they interpreting American and Israeli military performance? Is this something that would greatly concern them given the superiority of US and Israeli arms in action, or are they actually happy?

POTTINGER: That’s interesting. You know, there’s lessons already from this war that Beijing and Taiwan can learn from, and there’re lessons that actually favor Taiwan's situation. That includes both lessons from what the US is achieving in the fight together with Israel, but also the fact that Iran– even though Iran is in shambles now– is still, at least for right now, able to bottle up shipping traffic in the Gulf, actually favors Taiwan. It basically sends a message to a defender against an amphibious or naval assault. It sends the message that with relatively cheap, plentiful weapons– coastal defense cruise missiles, drones, sea drones, sea mines– you can actually keep a superpower at bay for a while. The US Navy– I think the US is going to prevail ultimately in Hormuz– but we're now nearing the one-month mark, the US Navy isn't really transiting Hormuz because of the risk of some of these remaining asymmetric weapons that are still in the hands of the Iranian.

So, this is actually a positive lesson for Taiwan. You can keep a superpower's navy at bay for weeks using mobile, plentiful, cheap, asymmetric weapons. Now, the other side though, is– what is so formidable is really how quickly the US and Israel were able once again to establish dominance in the air. And it also sends a lesson that offensive capabilities are really important. That is to say, it's not enough for Taiwan– just as it's not enough for the UAE– to have the ability to defend against incoming drones and missiles. They should have the ability to reach out and touch their enemies offensively. And that is one of the other lessons that the US and Israel are demonstrating in force right now. We have command. We can bomb anyone we want whenever we want and really command the battlespace from the air. So, t hose are two lessons that I think Beijing is probably studying, and hopefully Taiwan is taking to heart as well. It should cause Beijing to be more cautious about how effective an amphibious invasion would be.

DUBOWITZ: So Matt, it's interesting, I mean, because obviously what we're seeing right now despite all the criticisms of Israel from the far left and the far right, we have for the first time ever gone to war with a country with a military that is basically acting as a peer partner, with the Israeli Air Force and the US Air Force flying together– great integration. The Israelis are providing, I think somewhere, from what I understand 70, 80, maybe 90 percent of the intel for targeting. And the Israeli Air Force flying– let it be said– American fighter jets, dropping American bombs, but Israeli pilots are actually responsible for maybe somewhere around 50 percent of the strikes. So, we've gone to war with what the Pentagon described in its most recent National Defense Strategy as a "model ally." My question from an Indo-Pacific perspective is: do we have a model ally in the Indo-Pacific? And if not, how quickly can we build one? Because clearly– maybe I'm wrong– but I don't think the Israelis are going to be flying with us in the Indo-Pacific protecting Taiwan. So, we need an Israel in the Pacific. Do we have one? Is it Japan? Do we turn Taiwan into one? Is it Korea? How do we actually recreate similar battlefield partnerships so that when the United States, God forbid, has to go into battle, we actually have a model partner next to us?

POTTINGER: It is kind of amazing to realize that the two most effective– proven combat partners of the United States, neither of them are formal defense treaty allies of the United States. One is Israel, the other is Ukraine. They're not actually allies in the literal sense, but they certainly are in the figurative– metaphorical sense. Ukraine is doing all the work of Europe. One small country being invaded by a former superpower – a major power in its own right still, Russia – they are single-handedly holding off that horde from collapsing Europe as an entity, as a secure continent. Israel – what's the population now? Is it 10 million?

DUBOWITZ: 10 million people.

POTTINGER: I mean, it's ridiculous. It's just incredible what they've been able to do. They were fighting starting in October 2023. They were fighting a seven-front war by themselves. And then at the bottom of the seventh inning, the US came in to help with the – with Operation Midnight Hammer last June. And now it's really the ninth inning, and the US and Israel are working together as well as two allies could really work together on the battlefield. But neither of them are formal treaty allies.

So, look, in terms of formal treaty allies in the Indo-Pacific, we've got, of course, South Korea – a great ally, formidable. They pay what they're supposed to pay. They get credit for that from the new – the second Trump administration. Under Secretary Bridget Colby went there basically to say this is like the model ally, because they spend so much, they're capable as well. Japan is an absolutely crucial cornerstone ally. It's a larger economy. Its geography is so crucial for the fate of the Pacific, and they are now manning up as it were as well – they're womaning up, in the form of Prime Minister Takaichi, who is continuing the legacy of one of her former mentors, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo when Prime Minister Abe laid the groundwork for doubling defense spending in Japan as a percentage of GDP. And so, Japan is really, really key here. You never know how an ally is going to perform in wartime until it really happens. And that's where Ukraine and Israel have really distinguished themselves.

Now, what about Taiwan? Taiwan is not a formal treaty ally of the United States, but it sure is important. The economic shock from higher oil prices is nothing – I mean, nothing – compared to what we will feel in the United States and around the world if there's a war over Taiwan. And that's because the high-tech economy will come to a halt. And that's because almost 100 percent of the advanced semiconductors that go into everything that matters – from AI to modern weapons systems and all the rest – all of that is made possible by Taiwanese chips. And even though we're doing the right thing to try to build semiconductor plants here in the United States and so forth, it's going to be years before we take a really big bite out of Taiwan's central position in that market. So, Taiwan has got to be more like Israel. Taiwan has to think more like Ukraine in terms of just resolve, in terms of using asymmetric weapon systems like drones and counter-drones.

By the way, Ukraine is better at this than the United States. Taiwan should not be looking to the United States to solve their drone problem. They should be looking to Ukraine, because Ukraine has actually proven on the battlefield – and on the seas and the Black Sea – that they know how to stop drones and how to also use drones effectively – offensively in ways that the United States is not yet capable of.

DUBOWITZ: Well, Matt, you raised a couple of really, really important points. The first is this obsession with what's going on with Hormuz. If you look at the numbers, right, it's 20 percent of global oil that goes through there. Of that 20 percent, about a third is actually still moving via pipeline. the East-West Pipeline that the Saudis control. The Fujairah pipeline that the Emiratis control. And I would expect after this Hormuz crisis that the Saudis, the Emiratis, the Qataris, and others will start to move towards a diversified approach that doesn't depend on the Strait of Hormuz, no matter what happens as an end state here. And there will be many more pipelines built in order to ensure that we don't end up in a situation where Iran can have a stranglehold on the strait and therefore disrupt 20 percent of the world's oil. OK. And there's a lot we can do in order to mitigate that risk.

But from a US perspective, I think only two to three percent of our energy needs depend on Hormuz. Now, you've made the point that almost 100 percent of our semiconductor needs depend on Taiwan, and that if we lose Taiwan, we're going to probably go into a severe recession and…

POTTINGER: No, no. We'll be in a Great Depression.

DUBOWITZ: A Great Depression. And the Chinese will have an absolute stranglehold on the entire global economy and the United States as a result of the control over Taiwan. So, I'm going to ask you a scenario – and I hope our friends in Beijing are not listening and haven't thought about this – but if I'm China, seeing what's going on right now in Hormuz, why don't I park a bunch of coast guard ships encircling Taiwan and basically say, "All right, Taiwan is mine. I own Taiwan. It's part of greater China. You don't think so? We think so. And as a result, for every semiconductor chip that leaves this country – in fact, anything that leaves this country – I'm going to put a toll on that, and you're going to be paying me 20 percent of the cost of everything that is exported and imported from and into Taiwan. It's a gray-zone warfare move, and I'm going to challenge the US to do something about it – by the way, while the US is right now massively distracted in the Middle East."

POTTINGER: Yeah. Look, I actually think that some variation of the scenario you've just laid out is the more likely way that a crisis would begin in Taiwan. It might begin just with Beijing issuing a circular announcing that all international ships have to get Chinese customs clearance before they sail or fly to Taiwan. Right? And it won't be anything as dramatic as a gunshot or cannon fire. Nonetheless, that will be the beginning of a serious crisis.

Yeah, Beijing may move in this direction, and perhaps they will accelerate plans to move in that direction as a result of this war. My base case is that there are other things that Xi Jinping wants to put in place first before he moves forward with such a fateful roll of the dice. We don't know for sure, but I do take seriously some of the interesting clues that have emerged even as recently as the first quarter of this year.

Xi Jinping has now purged more than 80 percent of the generals that serve on the Central Committee of the Communist Party – scores of generals. He has removed all but one general that serves on the top security body, which is the Central Military Commission of the Chinese Communist Party that Xi Jinping himself chairs. He purged all the generals except for one guy who's the political commissar, right? It's like, from watching all your old Cold War films, there's a commissar who doesn't actually command troops or wage war. He's just there to spy on and enforce discipline on the other generals. He's the only guy who's survived so far, and he's probably sweating bullets himself at this point. So, the fact that Xi Jinping has cashiered almost his entire general officer corps – this is almost on par with what Joseph Stalin did in the late 1930s – tells me that Xi Jinping may lack confidence in some aspect of his readiness. And that's why I think it's more likely that he doesn't leap right into a global crisis right now.

It's possible, though. We'd better be ready for it. If I were in Taiwan, I would be seeking to acquire every single system that Ukraine has ever developed and training my staff – building the ecosystem, being able to build rapidly to scale up manufacturing. This is the kind of thing that I'd be devoting most of my time to.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. And I think you've written about this in the past and talked about this. You'd be getting the Ukrainians in on anti-drone technology, bringing the Israelis in on air defenses. You would have the Israelis actually – not the Americans – training a reserve army. What the Israelis call *Miluim*, because I think they've done a remarkable job over the years of developing a reserve army that is able to be called up with unit cohesion. There's a lot of continuity in these men and women who serve together and fight together. And Taiwan has a very large – from what I understand, Matt, correct me if I'm wrong – but like a seven-figure reserve army. But what percentage of them are actually capable of fighting is a – room for concern. Say a little bit more about that, because I think it's really interesting what the Ukrainians and the Israelis could do to help us turn Taiwan into a model ally and into the sort of porcupine.

POTTINGER: That's right. Yeah. Look, again, the US is the wrong model for Taiwan. There are certain weapon systems and things that the US is providing that are going to be really important for Taiwan, but that's higher-end equipment. When it comes to actually how to structure their military – you recall from when you and I were in Taiwan and brought with us some Israeli – a former national security advisor from Israel, a general from their air defense, and also a colonel from their ground defense forces who had fought in Southern Lebanon. The way that they organize their military in Israel is much more relevant to Taiwan. There are other countries too that have things to offer in this regard – Finland, Estonia.

And then in terms of weapon systems that are cheap, plentiful, and extremely dangerous, I would look to Ukraine. Rather than the US – we're trying to learn this stuff as well, and we're actually behind the curve in terms of implementing the lessons of drone warfare from the Ukraine war. I don't see signs yet that we've cracked this nut. We're stockpiling more drones, we're building more drones. I talked to an expert on Ukrainian drone warfare this morning. She told me that the United States is now – we're now peaking at about 300,000 drones manufactured this year. I believe she said between seven and 12 million drones for Ukraine. We're late 20th century when it comes to drone warfare, and we've got a lot of work to do ourselves. Taiwan should not be looking at the United States as a model. It should be looking at Ukraine.

DUBOWITZ: Alright. So Matt, I want to end with this because there's a big debate in Washington – it's an ongoing debate. I know you're in the middle of this debate. I just want to sort of lay it out and then tell me where you land. I think there's a debate in Washington between what I'd call the China Firsters, the Fake China Firsters – who are actually neo-isolationists – and the Model Alliers.

What I mean by that is the China Firsters who believe that the United States of America – the most important strategic challenge we have the 21st century is to counter the Chinese Communist Party, is to ensure that we protect Taiwan and we protect the Indo-Pacific and we protect our allies, and that we should be devoting all our resources to the Indo-Pacific and that we should be providing no resources – or limited resources to the Middle East and to Europe. And we should essentially say the Israelis, the Gulf Arabs, the Ukrainians, the Poles, everybody else: "You're on your own. We are going to the Indo-Pacific." China Firsters.

Fake China Firsters…

(LAUGHTER)

POTTINGER: Yeah.

DUBOWITZ: … Fake China Firsters…

POTTINGER: Yup.

DUBOWITZ: Well, let me just lay it out. Let me lay it out the taxonomy. Fake China Firsters, they say that, but what they really mean is we shouldn't even be defending Taiwan. And the Model Alliers are – what we need to do is defend model allies like Ukraine and Israel, and if we defend them and help arm them, then they can take care of our enemies in Europe. Meaning we can keep Vladimir Putin at bay, so he doesn't invade Eastern Europe, take over the Baltics, take over Poland, and crack NATO. And we should defend the Israelis and give them what they need, because coming out of this, we're going to need a reliable model partner who can keep the Islamic Republic at bay.

OK, if that's the taxonomy, where do you land? And what do you think are the most persuasive arguments the China Firsters will make coming out of Operation Epic Fury?

POTTINGER: Well, look, first of all, before I talk about my own view – I'm actually – I think we're fortunate that President Trump has already settled this debate. President Trump does not believe, clearly, through his actions – he's demonstrated that he doesn't believe that the Middle East is irrelevant or that the war in Europe is irrelevant, or that the Western Hemisphere is irrelevant, and that we should only focus on the western Pacific. In fact, all these things are tied together. They've been tied together by our adversaries. Beijing is the chief sponsor for the adversaries that President Trump is dealing with sequentially, and it's wise to do this sequentially. Going all the way back to Roman times, even Julius Caesar didn't seek to wage too many fronts at once in war. There was a sequencing going on here.

President Trump has dealt with the Venezuela problem. I still would love to see a legitimate government elected there. I think that's really, really important, and I hope President Trump moves in that direction. But my gosh, we're in a much better position right now, even with the rump regime leftover after US troops went in and raided Caracas and took the dictator away in his pajamas. Cuba, as well. President Trump, far from abandoning Ukraine, he has been there – he simply insisted that the Europeans pay for the US armaments that are going to defend Ukraine. And I hope that robust American support continues, and I hope the Europeans keep paying for it.

Now you're dealing with Iran, which launched a war in 2023. In 2022, the Russians launched the largest ground war in Europe since World War II; the next year, the Iranians and their proxies like Hamas end up launching a seven-front war against Israel. You can't just ignore these things and say, "Not our problem. We're just going to sit and babysit Taiwan." You have to be able to do all of them.

So, what did President Trump do in addition to sequencing these things? He said, "We need to increase our defense spending by 50 percent." That would bring it up to at least the bottom range of the level it was at under President Reagan as a percentage of GDP. In your taxonomy, you mentioned these sort of Fake China Firsters. You notice that they're always the ones who also argue that the US can't possibly spend more on its defense, right? President Trump has already settled that. I mean, he's got to get that through Congress, but he's made a very clear statement. That – it's a realist statement – he's the realist here, saying: "Okay, Europe's at war. We didn't ask for that. The Middle East is at war. We didn't start that war. We're trying to finish it now and to reduce nuclear risk and also other risks emanating from that militant regime that kills its own kids by the tens of thousands in the street. I didn't ask for the war, but here we are, trying to finish it." And yes, China's the major factor that looms behind all of this.

But if in fact Venezuela democratizes, if in fact this regime in Iran is left toothless and without claws for a generation, and if Ukraine can remain sovereign and Russia remains frustrated losing a thousand men a day on that battlefield, President Trump will have inflicted a serious strategic blow to the People's Republic of China and to the regime there. So, he's coming at it from a different direction than just focusing on the western Pacific but nonetheless changing the strategic context in ways that are going to be problematic for China, so long as we win these fights. We can't lose Ukraine. We can't afford to let Iran emerge from this conflict with a chokehold on Hormuz and controlling the fate of the world energy market.

So, that is – I think President Trump has settled this kind of fake debate that's been lurking in recent years about restraint or non-restraint, or first prioritize China, not prioritize. He's moving forward with the strategy, and if he sees it through, it's going to be effective at dealing with all of our enemies.

DUBOWITZ: So Matt, listen, I want to thank you for a number of things: first of all, for your fascinating insights, for your friendship, for being an amazing colleague. But I didn't mention at the beginning what I wanted to mention at the end. Not only are you a brilliant strategist, a great practitioner, and have served our country at the highest levels of the US…

POTTINGER: I don't know about all that. I am a practitioner, but…

DUBOWITZ: Well, I want to point out that you're also a former US Marine.

POTTINGER: Yeah, that's what I mean.

DUBOWITZ: You served our country in uniform and fought for our country. And I think about you and I think about many of your colleagues during this war. Because the Islamic Republic of Iran went to war against America in 1979 and for 47 years has been killing and maiming and torturing and kidnapping thousands of Americans – including Marines in 1983 in Beirut in that brutal bombing that was orchestrated by Iran-backed Hezbollah. And I get actually some pleasure in watching the United States of America and Israel hunt down the very men who were responsible for all of those – that bloodshed against America, including those who were responsible for that Marine barracks bombing. I think that is how you deliver justice, and justice is being delivered.

POTTINGER: Yeah. Look, Marines don't forget. When I was training at Officer Candidate School in Quantico, we would sing cadences while we were running. And one of the lines was: "Beirut, Lebanon – I think it's time to get it done." And that is really about Iran and Hezbollah. And look, the 31st MEU [Marine Expeditionary Unit] is steaming towards the conflict. Those are my old brethren and sisters from when I was based in Okinawa at Camp Hansen – that's the headquarters for the 31st MEU. That's my old base. So, I'm wishing them all Godspeed. The 82nd Airborne and certainly our Air Force and Navy and others who were already committed big time in this war. We've got to see it through now. It's only been less than four weeks. The price of oil being higher for a while is worth seeing this through, so that we don't have to deal with this regime in anything like its form just a few weeks before the war, when it was gunning down college kids and street protesters by the tens of thousands. This is a criminal regime and it's seen its comeuppance.

DUBOWITZ: Well, as we think about your brothers and sisters in the MEU – the Marine Expeditionary Unit – that is on its way to the Middle East, Godspeed to them, and God bless. And Matt Pottinger, thank you very much for being on *The Iran Breakdown.*

POTTINGER: Thanks, Mark. Thanks for having me.

DUBOWITZ: The war is still clearly expanding. The gap between what is being said and what's actually happening in this war is only getting wider. The question now is: if there is some off-ramp, would President Trump take it? I'm Mark Dubowitz. This has been *The Iran Breakdown.* Until next time, when we break it down all over again.