The Iran Dilemma: A View from Tokyo and Jerusalem

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Featuring Amb. Yusuke Arai
Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

DUBOWITZ: Welcome back to *The Iran Breakdown*. My name is Mark Dubowitz. Today I'm joined by his excellency, Ambassador Yusuke Arai, Ambassador of Japan to the state of Israel. Ambassador Arai is a career diplomat with more than three decades of experience in Japanese foreign policy, national security, and intelligence. He's a graduate of the prestigious University of Tokyo's Faculty of Economics. He joined Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1990, and over the course of his career, he's held senior positions dealing with some of Japan's most consequential diplomatic and security challenges, including the Japan-US relationship and national security policy and intelligence analysis. His overseas assignments included service at the Japanese embassies in South Korea and Singapore. He later served as Deputy Director General and then Director General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Intelligence and Analysis Service, before being appointed Ambassador to Israel in April 2024. That background gives Ambassador Arai a particularly interesting vantage point for our conversation today.

He's examined regional and international security from Tokyo at the highest level of Japan's foreign policy establishment, and he now observes the Iranian challenge from Israel itself. Japan also occupies a distinctive position in this debate. It's a close ally of the United States, has a strong relationship with Israel, and at the same time, it has maintained longstanding diplomatic relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran. So today I want to explore with the ambassador how Japan views Iran's nuclear program and regional strategy, where Japanese and Israeli assessments converge and diverge, what decades of Japanese engagement with Tehran have taught Tokyo, and whether Japan can still play a meaningful diplomatic role at a moment of really profound tension in the Middle East. Ambassador Arai, thank you for joining *The Iran Breakdown*.

ARAI: Thank you very much for having me, Mark.

DUBOWITZ: It's great. So, Ambassador, before coming to Israel, you served in these senior positions in Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, including Director General of the Intelligence and Analysis Service, which is a very important institution in the Japanese government. And you've therefore had the opportunity to really look at Iran, first from Tokyo and from Israel. And I want to ask you, having spent your tenure now in Israel for a couple years, how does the Iranian challenge look differently to you from Israel than it did from Tokyo?

ARAI: Okay, Mark, thank you very much. First of all, I would like to say, I would, because what I'm going to tell you is not going to represent the position of the government in Japan, so that I can tell you what I think about everything you're going to ask me. Now, how Iran looks like from Tokyo and how Iran looks like from Israel, I mean, very different. I can tell you that when I was director general of Intel in the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the first thing is, the morning I wake up and worry, it was not about Iran. We have a lot of problems, and we have neighbors, including North Korea, including China, including Russia, and so-and-so. So although we consider Iran to be a challenge in terms of developing the nuclear weapon and the proxy and so and so, it's not the most important kind of thing that I was thinking from Tokyo.

Coming here in Israel, I can see that from the viewpoint of Israeli, this is the major challenge. So sitting here and sitting in Tokyo, things look very different.

Has anything you've seen or learned while serving in Israel caused you to revise an assessment that you previously held about Iran?

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ARAI: My experience here include the 12-days war, or the recent kind of war between US, Israel and Iran. And I was going in and out of the shelter all the times, and I was talking to my friend in the Israeli government and Israeli people. All of these experience, of course, give me a new kind of aspect of the challenge of Iran. And experiencing some country shooting missiles, and tons of missiles, toward where I'm living gave me a tremendous kind of impact. So yes, it did change.

DUBOWITZ: So let's talk a bit about Japan and Israel and the very different approaches...

ARAI: To...

DUBOWITZ: ...Iran. I mean, obviously Japan and Israel are close partners. I think you're going to be celebrating, is it 75 years of diplomatic relations soon? But certainly, approach the Iran issue from different histories, different strategic cultures. And of course, as you said, I mean, for Israel, Iran has been this existential threat. For Japan, it has been an important issue, but a faraway issue in comparison to North Korea and China and Russia and other security challenges in Indo-Pacific. It's fair to say that Japan has traditionally placed a greater emphasis on diplomacy and economic engagement and the issue of nuclear proliferation when dealing with Iran, where Israelis tend to see this exclusively through the lens of national security and hard power. Where do you see the principal differences between the Japanese and Israeli approaches and in the views about how best to deal with this problem?

ARAI: Two things. Point number one is that how we view Iran and how Israel view Iran. I understand that from Israeli point of view, you got a nuclear issue, you got a ballistic missile issue, and you got the proxy and the issue of Iran. Now, we are clearly saying that we don't allow Iran to have nuclear weapon. This is clear. Prime Minister has said that several times, and we say that loudly. And on the proxies, we are sanctioning, if not all, most of what we call proxies. We are calling Tehran to use the influence against their proxies. And concerning our approach to Iran, we are sanctioning entities who are involved in the develop of nuclear weapon. So it's not as different as it seems. The difference is geography. Geography, because we are located in the far east and Israel is in the Middle East. Israel feel much more about the ballistic missiles. Israel feel much more about the proxies than we're feeling about Iranian Balis missile or proxies. It's not pointing at us, it's pointing toward Israel. And also, there is a history of Israel, of Jewish people experiencing Holocaust. And when you experience Holocaust and you have a nation who say, "death to Israel" and develop a nuclear weapon, you have a different magnitude of animosity towards the nations, which we do not have.

DUBOWITZ: So I want to talk about the North Korea parallel in a little while, but first, just to dig a little bit deeper into Japan's longstanding relationship with Iran. Again, I mean, you're a close diplomatic ally of the United States, you've got a strong relationship with Israel, but you've had this longstanding relationship with Iran that continued after the '79 Islamic Revolution. Can you assess what practical diplomatic value Japan's longstanding relationship with Iran has provided, or provides today?

ARAI: Yes, we can talk to the Iranian. Iranian probably trust us. Iranian hoping that we don't trust in many Americans. I'm pretty much sure they don't have any much of a trust with Israel, but they trust us. So in times of difficulty, that, let's say, we are having vis-a-vis Iran, it helps. It helps. I can give you example. For example, one of the example is when our ships were in the Persian Gulf during this war, Iranian were offering us to get our ship out. And our prime minister was making press conference, things that, "I talked to the leadership over there, and we got our ship out." And this is something that we could do because of our relationship with Iran.

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DUBOWITZ: So it's interesting. I want to talk about that example, but just going back about seven years, I think it was 2019, when then Prime Minister Abe visited Iran, and he traveled to Tehran. He met with then President Hassan Rouhani and the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and was during a period of also very intense tension between Iran and the United States. Looking back at that initiative, the conversations, what did Japan learn about diplomacy and negotiation with the Islamic Republic?

ARAI: Well, I mean, then Prime Minister Abe has talked about his visit to Iran after he stepped down. And in his memoir, he was referring to that visit to be coordinated with the US. So he was talking about the value of the relationship with Iran. But what he said in his memoir was that he was raising the example of Japan's involvement in the oil field of Azadegan, which is one of the biggest oil field. And Japan was developing Azadegan under the sanctions of the US. We have to get out from that project, but then which country fills the gap? China. So he was writing about that example, saying that, "Is it good for the US, for Japan, for the Western society that we're not taking that and China is taking that, and which is strengthening the relationship between China and Iran is a good thing?" That was the question of Abe.

And he was talking to then President Trump, because it was the first Trump administration, and apparently he was telling to President Trump that he can talk to Khamenei, and Trump interested. And of course, during that time, a national security advisor was John Bolton, and he has a very totally different idea about how to approach Iran. But Trump was basically asking Abe to do things, and he went to Tehran, and he made Rouhani, and he made Khamenei. And he is, he meaning Abe, was writing his memoir that the difficulty was not with Rouhani, was with Khamenei. And Khamenei, basically, he was recommending Khamenei to have a dialogue with United States, according to what Abe wrote. Khamenei say, "I cannot. I have to be the hotliner." So the answer of Khamenei was, I had to be the hardliner, according to the memoir of Abe. So this is what he's describing.

So the difficulty is the power structure of Iran, where you can talk to the president against something, but you always have a supreme leader who had to be a hotliner.

DUBOWITZ: So, Mr. Ambassador, I believe my memory is correct that after Prime Minister Abe met with Khamenei and returned back to Tokyo, the Iranians fired on, I think it was a Japanese ship at the time.

ARAI: Okay. So the ownership of the ship was a Japanese company, but the ship nationality was Panama. And Abe is writing about that event in his memoir, that it didn't have a Japanese flag, that ship, which is making things difficult to assess whether they're firing towards that ship because of his visit or not. That is what Abe is writing in his memoir about that event.

DUBOWITZ: That's interesting. I mean, I assume the Iranians don't have much of a problem with Panama, so it sort of stretches credulity to believe that they were firing on the ship because that had a Panamanian flag. I remember the incident at the time that this was a direct, literally, shot across the bow to Japan, that we know the ship is owned by Japan, and we're going to just send a reminder to our Japanese friends that we don't appreciate their mediation or their role. Again, it may not have been ordered by Khamenei. It may have just been some IRGC commander who decided to do this. It may have been a coincidence, or it may have been because it was a Panamanian flagged ship. But I remember just being interpreted as it was quite an insult to Prime Minister Abe.

ARAI: Well, I mean, I told you what Abe is saying about that in his memoir. And the thing we don't know is that whether it was targeting a Japan owned ship, because there was many Japan owned ship, and there are ship with Japan flag there. So whether they did that, or they did want to shoot at some vessels for some reason that we don't understand.

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DUBOWITZ: So I want to talk about Iran's nuclear program. Japan approaches nuclear weapons from a very unique historical position, obviously because of World War II, and nuclear non-proliferation has always been an important element of Japan's foreign policy. At the same time, the debate surrounding Iran increasingly concerns not only the possession of a nuclear weapon, but also the possibility of Iran becoming a threshold state, which they certainly were before Operation Midnight Hammer and Operation Rising Lion. From Japan's perspective, what is the legitimate line between a civilian nuclear program and a nuclear capability that becomes unacceptable from a non-proliferation standpoint?

ARAI: Okay. Our stance is that Iran has the right for civilian nuclear energy and being a member of the NPT. It is stipulated, NPT, but that right come with a responsibility under the condition that they abide all the obligation of IAEA. And right now, Iranian are doing that? No. I mean, they have banished all the inspector. I mean, 60 percent, that's a little bit too much. We are not saying how many percent, but in one of the press conference in 2019, we're saying that they have to go back to agreed number, which was, during that time, the JCPOA number, 3.75 percent. So that was the press conference that we had. Does it mean that they have the right to go to 3 percent or 4 percent? We are not saying that, but we're just saying that they have to abide to the rule.

DUBOWITZ: So it's interesting on the nuclear question. And it's been a huge debate, and it was a very big debate around the JCPOA, because the JCPOA ultimately granted Iran enrichment capability on their soil, despite the fact that there've been at least five UN Security Council resolutions calling on the suspension of enrichment and reprocessing by Iran. There's also, I think, the last count, 23 countries in the world that have civilian nuclear programs but don't have enrichment or reprocessing on their soil, and they buy their nuclear fuel from abroad.

So there's certainly, I think, a strong argument. I've made the argument over the years that Iran is entitled to a civilian nuclear energy program, but the Islamic Republic should not be entitled to enrichment or reprocessing, because it raises the risk that with that capability, they can become a threshold nuclear power, and that at the turn of a screw, at a time that they're choosing, they can develop nuclear weapons. Japan's interesting, because Japan is a exception to that rule in that Japan has a robust civilian nuclear program, but you do have the ability to produce domestic fuel, energy fuel on your soil. But Japan is also a member of the NPT, and my understanding is strictly complies with its NPT and IAEA obligations. So I think Japan and Iran represent an interesting contrast. There you have Japan, a democracy faithfully abiding by its obligations and having domestic enrichment, reprocessing, the ability to produce civilian nuclear energy. But Japan has a nuclear infrastructure that, if it wanted to, and it doesn't, but if it wanted to, could turn that infrastructure into nuclear weapons.

But no one worries about Japan. No one's losing sleep over Japan becoming a nuclear weapons power. The Islamic Republic of Iran is the leading state sponsor of terrorism, flagrant violation of its NPT obligations. And it seems to me, and it seems to many people, that Iran was on the pathway to develop nuclear weapons. It was not interested in civilian nuclear energy. It wanted that capability to develop weapons. Is that consistent with the way Japan has viewed the situation, or is it Japanese policy take a very different view, that Iran can have domestic enrichment or reprocessing like Japan, and its civilian nuclear energy program doesn't represent a nuclear weapons and nuclear weapons proliferation risk?

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ARAI: Okay, so the comparison between Japan and Iran is not a very comfortable one for me. Being compared to Iran is not probably the most good example I've heard. But as I told you, we consider NPT very seriously. We consider non-perliferation very seriously, not only because of our experience, but because, as a security kind of issue, we believe that proliferation of nuclear weapon is bad for all security. From that aspect, if Iran has, as you have said, malign intention of trying to be close to the threshold and jump to possess nuclear weapon in certain period of time, that's not the things that we want. So it depend on how we assess the situation at this moment, but certainly we don't want Iran to be close to get nuclear weapon. Sure.

DUBOWITZ: Okay. So I think we all agree, and there's certainly no comparison between Japan and Islamic Republic Iran. If anything, I would make the case that they're completely different case studies, that no one is losing sleep over Japan's civilian nuclear program precisely because Japan is a responsible liberal democracy that is in full compliance with its non-proliferation treaty and IAEA responsibilities. And the Islamic Republic is the complete opposite: leading state sponsor of terrorism, engaged in war and violence, and is in flagrant violation of its nuclear obligations, which is why we should never give the Islamic Republic of Iran domestic enrichment or plutonium reprocessing, because the risk of giving them that means that they will go for the bomb.

But I want to ask you about the question of diplomacy, deterrence, and the Israeli perspective, because I think a central argument in Israel is that negotiations with Iran, like the JCPOA, may delay aspects of Iran's nuclear program, but they're not resolving the underlying strategic problem. If anything, the JCPOA merely kicked the can down the road and would give Iran these patient pathways to nuclear weapons when many of the restrictions were going to disappear or sunset. And Israeli officials, I think increasingly American officials, believe that you are not going to resolve this problem through diplomacy alone, but you need to have the credible threat of military force, or even the application of military force, in order to stop Iran from developing a nuclear weapon. How does Japan assess that argument, that diplomacy with Iran has to be accompanied by credible deterrence and either the threat of military force or, when needed, the application of it?

ARAI: We are not against anything like deterrence, and a combination of deterrence, military kind of deterrence against Iran or North Korea or any country, and combination of that with diplomacy, is not things that we have anything against. For example, I believe we're going to talk about North Korea later, but this is exactly what we're trying to achieve with North Korea. And now that Israel is thinking about the combination, I think it's very natural for Israel things that way. So we don't have anything against that.

DUBOWITZ: So Japan wouldn't oppose circumstances in which military action against nuclear infrastructure could become necessary, or does Japan believe that these questions have to be resolved through diplomacy alone?

ARAI: First of all, we are not going to be the one who is going to apply military forces against Iran in order to stop the nuclear development, and we don't feel that necessity, Japan. So, I mean, we are not going to be the one who is going to judge when and if military pressure or application of military force is necessary. But the case of, for example, North Korea, in 1993, there was a nuclear crisis in the Korean Peninsula, and we're talking very seriously with the American government about military operation in the Korean Peninsula, and all the kind of issue related to US-Japan Security Treaty, I mean, US-Japan Alliance, was on the table. But in 1994, June, President Carter visited Pyongyang, and the military operation was canceled. But it means that if there's something necessary, it's not something that we are excluding from the first kind of place.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah, so let's jump into the question of the lessons from North Korea, because obviously that's a direct security threat to Japan.

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ARAI: Yes. I...

DUBOWITZ: ...think we have an example of how a rogue state that was in pursuit of nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles, and certainly threatened not only South Korea, but threatens Japan and the region, was able to game the system, was able to use diplomacy with the United States and with other countries to advance its nuclear weapons program. There wasn't sufficient deterrence, because I think the North Koreans didn't believe the United States or Japan or South Korea would use military force to stop it. There was a flawed agreement which was signed with the objective of constraining North Korea's ability to develop nuclear weapons. It turned out to be a fatally flawed agreement. And now we have North Korea in possession of multiple nuclear weapons, long-range ballistic missiles, working on intercontinental ballistic missiles, a huge conventional military threatening South Korea, threatening Japan, and it's a problem from hell. It's one of these problems that you have much more experience, and I wouldn't even begin to understand how we solve the North Korea problem.

So with that, I mean, are there lessons from Japan and America's experience in North Korea that are relevant to the international community's approach to Iran?

ARAI: I think on North Korea, we've been very, very tough on North Korea, from the sense that we have to keep the military pressure. Dialogue is okay, but should always, always accompany strong military pressure and economic sanction and so-and-so. And we were, and we are, very reluctant to alleviate any of this sanction without any meaningful kind of step that North Korea is going to take. The challenge was that it was always a trilateral approach with not only the US, but with South Korea. And you have always the element of China and Russia. Hence, there was a six-party talks. Hence, we have many of the coordination we're having trilaterally with South Korea and United States. But it was not always consistent, from our viewpoint, that the necessary pressure to North Korea was kept.

From the viewpoint of Seoul, when you have a conservative kind of administration, they were totally aligned with us about the pressure. But when you have a progressive kind of administration in Seoul, they're much more eager to have dialogue, even by paying the North Korean. So my kind of feeling is that if you have to pressure some country to, let's say, do something like denuclearization or giving up nuclear program, you have to have a strong alliance, and you should not be waving from the right side to left side, left side to right side, which they're going to take advantage.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. I mean, it's interesting just to think about the mistakes that are made with respect to North Korea and what we can learn about how not to repeat those mistakes with the Islamic Republic of Iran. You talked about the importance of the unity of the alliance.

ARAI: Yes.

DUBOWITZ: And that alliance had certain fractures and fissures that the North Koreans were exploiting at the time between United States, Japan, and progressive South Korean governments. You always had the role of China and Russia that were providing support to North Korea and were problematic players. And again, certainly I don't remember in the beginning, but certainly through the crisis with North Korea, it's hard pressed to think that we had a credible military option, or the North Koreans never thought we had a credible military option, in order to deter their nuclearization. But you also didn't have a country like Israel that had the willingness and the capabilities to use military force, or at least had the credible threat of military force that could be used as leverage against the Islamic Republic of Iran. I know these are two very different cases, but I'd love to draw you out on some more lessons that you learned from your experience in North Korea with respect to Iran.

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ARAI: On that, during the first Trump administration, Trump was threatening North Korea about fire and hell, and he was very much implying that war may be a possibility. And during that time, I was responsible for security policy in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and I was commuting to the Pentagon to talk about all kind of possibility. And North Korea was listening. They got serious and were very strong about denuclearization. We're talking about what we call CVID, complete, verifiable, irreversible technicalization. That was a buzzword, CVID. But again, there was one neighboring country who had a progressive administration who hated that CVID, telling us that it's impossible. Our thinking, or the leadership thinking of Japan during that time, was that the only things that North Korea cherished more than its nuclear weapon is the survivability of this regime. So we have to put the survivability of that regime at stake in order to let them make some strategic decision.

But that idea was not totally shared amongst allies.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. And then I think President Trump, unlike in the case of Iran, but in the case of North Korea, decided to go from fire in hell and threatening the North Korean regime with US military force and punishing economic sanctions, and veered into a diplomatic path with the North Koreans, a meeting with Kim on the DMZ, and all talk about an agreement and building beachside condos on the coast of North Korea. Just to take us back to those days, I mean, was that a shock to Japan to see the United States go from maximum pressure to maximum engagement? And then ultimately we saw the results of that, which was a diplomatic failure...

ARAI: ...with North Koreans. Yeah. So the Singapore meeting took place in 2018, and it was announced when the national security advisor of South Korea went to Washington. So that was the trigger. But we're thinking, okay, if President Trump make a decision to talk to Kim Jong-un and let him do some difficult decision, let's see, let's see. And I believe that President Trump was making the case that he can turn North Korea to economic financial kind of country, promising something very good. Yeah.

DUBOWITZ: Make North Korea great again.

ARAI: And showing him some film how he can turn North Korea to something prosperous and so and so. Didn't bite. Didn't bite. So too bad.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. I mean, my view is these dictators don't buy this because they understand that a prosperous and stable North Korea or Iran is a threat to them. I mean, the last thing they want is prosperity and stability and freedom for their people, because that's a threat to the regime. Let's move, I want to go back to North Korea, but I want to come back to an issue I think that is really critical for Japan, which is energy security and maritime stability in the Middle East and in Hormuz. Obviously, Japan has a heavy dependence on energy supplies from the Middle East, and so it makes freedom of navigation and stability across the Strait of Hormuz very important. What's your assessment of where we are today with Hormuz, US progress towards opening Hormuz, implications for Japan? And give us a sense too of, I mean, obviously Iran affects your maritime traffic, and it gives Tehran particular leverage over Asian economies, including Japan. Are you more optimistic today that we are winning the battle of Hormuz against the Islamic Republic of Iran, or you still see significant challenges?

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ARAI: First of all, or dependency to energy, dependency to the Gulf or to the Middle East, you have to take that into context. The energy supply in total of Japan, we rely, let's say the number, the percentage of our reliance on oil, is on the total kind of energy supply, is something around 35 percent. And the rest are LNG, coal, renewable, nuclear energy, so and so. And when you're talking about dependency on the Middle East, you're just talking about oil, because LNG is getting supplied by Australia, Malaysia, all these other countries. Coal is coming from outside the Middle East. So it's about oil. And I told you, the total supply oil is just 35 percent. If you're talking about electricity, you're talking about oil component is just 7 percent. So yes, we're dependent on the Middle East, we rely on the Middle East, but you have to think about the context.

It's not that we're heavily, heavily dependent on the Middle East about our total energy. This is point number one. Point number two is that when this issue of Hormuz moves happened, our prime minister was making clear that with the stockpile that we're having of oil, we can just provide everything until the end of this year, 2026. And the price of gasoline had been capped by subsidies to around 170 yen, which is roughly about a little bit $1, 3.5 seconds, something like that.

DUBOWITZ: Per liter.

ARAI: Per liter. Per liter.

DUBOWITZ: Which is about roughly $4 a gallon.

ARAI: Yes.

DUBOWITZ: Okay.

ARAI: Yes, exactly. So we were extremely unhappy about what's happening in the Gulf, and we're making the stance very, very clear that we want the Gulf to be open, the Persian Gulf to be open, and without any country taking any money. We don't accept that. We are co-hosting the Foreign Ministers Conference on the free navigation and freedom of navigation in the United Nations, for example. But the problem was much more about Asia, and Prime Minister Takaichi convening a meeting of leadership of Asia called Power Asia, by providing assistance to other Asian country in order to alleviate their kind of burden on energy. So to make the case that when the US and Iran was making the case that Iran were thinking that US is going to weaken in position because time is on their side, we're making the case that we're making to make sure that Asia is not going to be the one who is going to crime to United States to stop the situation.

So yes, we think that the Persian Gulf is extremely important, but we understand what the US was doing, and we supported that, and we're making sure that Asia is not going to be the burden on that.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. I mean, the good news is, thanks to the brilliant work of Admiral Cooper and CENTCOM and the US military, I think we're back to now pre-war levels of oil coming out of the region. If you deduct Iranian oil, which was at two million barrels a day and is now almost zero. So Iran is not being able to export any of their oil, but everybody else is getting...

ARAI: ...oil out. Exactly. Exactly.

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DUBOWITZ: So we're obviously in a much better position. My view is we've won the battle of Hormuz, and the Islamic Republic played the Hormuz card at its weakest point, not when Ali Khamenei wanted to play it, which is when he had nuclear weapons, missiles, drones, a Chinese-Russian-built military, and was in a very powerful position and then could control Hormuz permanently, because we wouldn't be able to deal with Iran's retaliatory potency. His son, Mojtaba Khamenei, played Hormuz without all of that. No nuclear weapons, no ICBMs, dwindling inventory of ballistic missiles. And thanks to the US military, we've taken Hormuz away from them. So I think it's been...

ARAI: Clearly, Iran is weaker now, is weaker. And they're having a huge economy difficulty right now. This is a result of the war.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. I mean, it's interesting, Mr. Ambassador. I'd love to get your assessment, because certainly the conventional wisdom for many, many months has been United States and Israel losing, Iran is winning. Some of that narrative is beginning to shift now, particularly because I think people are now recognizing that the US has won the battle of Hormuz. But what is your overall assessment as the ambassador sitting in Israel, but also viewing this with decades of experience in security policy and experience looking at the Islamic Republic of Iran over many, many years? Are they losing or winning?

ARAI: Well, I mean, it's difficult to say losing, winning, because it's not such a black and white. But from the national interest of Japan, my personal belief is that we need the resources of United States in the Indo-Pacific, which is the most important, vibrant kind of place. And when China is going to do some... If China do some kind of operation, military operation, we need the resources of the United States to be in Asia Pacific. And if Iran is weaker, and Iran do not have enough of capability or less of capability to disrupt this region, this is good news for us.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah, that's interesting. I mean, I think in some respects that's counter narrative, because the narrative, I think, from many in Washington, those who oppose the Iran war, those who are deeply concerned about China and the Indo-Pacific, is that the Iran war was a big distraction from the central challenge of China, as well as a munitions problem, because we expended so many munitions in this war that are now not available to us to try to deter China from invading Taiwan or causing additional mischief in the Indo-Pacific. I have a different view than the conventional wisdom, as usual, but I wonder what your assessment is. I mean, are we weaker today encountering China than we were before the Iran war, or are we stronger because of our relative success in actually diminishing Iranian capabilities?

ARAI: Okay. We may be talking about the relationship between Iran, North Korea, China, and Russia later on, but the nightmare is one conflict is going to trigger another one, and you have multi-front kind of confrontation: one in Korean Peninsula, one in Taiwan, one in Iran, and one with Russia. And that nightmare, with Iran getting weaker, the possibility of that nightmare is smaller right now. And Iran is still suffering the damage of this war, with its weakened economy, the currency is falling down, inflation is high, you got all this situation. Now, US is concentrating on the midterm election right now, so it's clear that now Iran is weaker. But the overall assessment of this war is a little bit too early to say, because we'll see what's going to happen in Iran ultimately. We can talk about the domestic situation in Iran later, but they are in trouble right now.

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DUBOWITZ: May I ask you a quick question just on the munitions issue, because I do struggle with this issue. I think people are right that we have a munitions challenge, which I think preceded the Iran war. If anything, I think the Iran war was a wake-up call to the Pentagon and to the defense industry that we needed to start to address problems that we'd ignored for many years, and that I think you're starting to see a rapid increase in expansion and production capability, many of these new Israeli defense tech companies and American defense tech companies that are really innovating in ways that they can now provide scale. And I think we might be in a better position vis-a-vis China, as long as China doesn't go for Taiwan anytime soon. I think we'll be in a stronger position. Tell me a little bit about, on the Japanese side, in terms of, I mean, Japan has doubled its defense budget, Japan has accelerated its own defense production.

Where is Japan today in terms of its own ability to meet any shortfalls that maybe the United States has in the Indo-Pacific?

ARAI: Okay, so we believe that we have to be stronger and to solve most of the problem by ourself, first of all. So, for example, China is intruding our territorial water around Senkaku periodically. They're doing that with, what's it called, Coast Guard vessels, and we have to deal with that. With all Coast Guard vessels, but we're doing that by putting more vessels than China is putting, meaning that when it comes to the issue of defense of Japan and what's happening on the day-to-day basis, challenged by North Korea, by China, we basically possess the capability to deal that by ourself. And we're trying to increase that, which is something that is the conclusion of this administration and the past administration. But at the same time, we need to strengthen the alliance with the United States. But in order to strengthen the alliance with the United States, we need to do more by ourself.

And thirdly, we need a network of like-minded countries. So within the Indo-Pacific, we're creating a security relationship, strengthening that with country like Australia, with South Korea, with Vietnam, Indonesia, all these countries. So this is how we're trying to deal with all the challenges we're facing right now.

DUBOWITZ: I remember Vice President JD Vance, I think it was quoted as saying that when he goes around the world, he tells countries to be more like Israel. I think what he meant is exactly what you've explained, which is countries that have the military capabilities and the intelligence capabilities where they can project power in their own region against common enemies. And even though there's obviously a lot of debate about Israel and Washington from the left and the extreme right, I think that the Trump administration has identified Israel in their national security strategy as "a model ally," I think was exactly the wording that they used. And I think that was the idea, this was a model ally, because Israel was able to fight against common enemies without US support, and where the United States decided, after Israel had destroyed Iranian air defenses and lowered the risk for American pilots, it came in with Midnight Hammer and was able to destroy the Fordow facility.

And then President Trump made a decision in February that he needed to go back in and destroy Iran's remaining war-making capabilities and nuclear capabilities. Is it fair to say that there is an opportunity for Japan to be the Israel of the Indo-Pacific? Would you think that's an appropriate characterization, and where is it not?

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ARAI: Okay, so I'm a big fan of Israel, living here and being ambassador here, and I believe that stronger involvement of Israel in the Indo-Pacific is good, and I believe the stronger relationship between Israel and Japan is good. I genuinely believe that. But about Japan becoming Israel is not the way I would describe, just as Israel is not going to be Japan. Oh, we're different. We're different. And first of all, the challenge is different. We are not facing Iran, we're facing China, and facing Iran and facing China are very, very different, I would say. Even facing North Korea is different, because they possess nuclear weapon, and the capability of the balancing missiles is, frankly speaking, superior to the Iranian one. And facing these countries and Russia at the same time in a geography mean a little bit different kind of situation, I would say.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah, I think you're being understated. It's a completely different situation in terms of the nature of your enemy. I mean, how formidable the enemy is. China, obviously massive country, superpower, nuclear weapons, ICBMs, huge, huge military. North Korea, nuclear weapons, ICBMs, a regime that is also incredibly threatening.

ARAI: And also, I think in the United States, as you have pointed out, Israel is becoming, unfortunately, a very, how can I say, controversial kind of country. I don't like that, but it's a reality. I mean, at least how the progressive part of the United States is talking about Israel, and how all the demonstration happening over there, you don't have that against Japan, I think. Being progressive, being MAGA, any kind of element in the US political arena would not make a huge issue of the relationship with Japan. So we are a little bit different on that.

DUBOWITZ: So I think that's true, Mr. Ambassador, but I do always caution my friends that what happens to Israel doesn't stay with Israel. Israel, in many respects, the canary and the coal mine. And I worry that there are elements of the American right and elements of the American left that could turn on other allies. And if they turn on Israel, they could turn on others. I mean, I think there are elements of the right that have turned on Ukraine. I think President Trump has certainly been in major fights with traditional allies in NATO and Canada, mostly on trade policy, but that obviously economics can bleed into other areas.

It is inconceivable that in some respects that the Democrats or the Republicans could turn on Japan. But I do imagine a scenario where Japan has to get much more forceful in confronting the threat from North Korea and from China, and that there are elements of the American polity who believe that Japan is dragging us into war with China or dragging us into war with North Korea. And you could see the political trend lines changing. So again, I'm always concerned. I really do believe what starts with Israel doesn't end with Israel. And I think all democratic countries that care about democracy and also worry about the threat from this axis of aggressors, China, Iran, Russia, and North Korea, should be very cautious and careful and concerned about what's happening to Israel domestically.

ARAI: Sure. I mean, we cannot take for granted United States. US is going to act based on its national interest, not on the national interest of any other country. This is clear, and this is crystal clear to us. And hence, I go back to the first point, that we have to do much more thing by ourself. We have to be much stronger. We have to spend much more on military. And at the end of this year, our prime minister has been committed to amend the three strategic document in order to beef up or basically defense capability. So we are on that.

DUBOWITZ: So let me end with this. So you viewed Iran from senior positions in Tokyo and now from Israel. I think it give you a very interesting and unusual perspective on these different governments and understanding their strategic perspectives. If you could convey one message to Iran's leadership about how Israel perceives Iran, or what Israeli society is like, and one message to Israel's leadership about how Iran perceives Israel, and what they may be missing about the Islamic Republic of Iran, what would those messages be?

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ARAI: Well, I mean, to the Iranian, I'll just tell them that stop shouting that "death to Israel." I mean, Israel people are taking that very seriously, and you are missing a very huge strategic opportunity, because if you can have some kind of relationship with Israel, it's going to be a game changer. It's going to be a game changer. So if you think that US is a big Satan and Israel is a smaller Satan under the United States, you're wrong. There are very different view between US and Israel from time to time against Iran. And for Iran, you may play the Israeli card in a positive way, so that if you can do something with Israel, it's going to be a game changer. And by the way, Israeli people is against the regime, it's not against Iranian people. And before the revolution, you have a wonderful relationship with Israel, so don't forget about that.

This is going to be the message to Iranian. To the Israeli, I would say that I understand about how you feel about the existential threat of Iran but look at the bigger picture. The bigger picture is your relationship with United States, the relationship with all the Western kind of world, and this Western world of democracy, of like-minded country essentially, which is going to have to face not only Iran, but China, Russia, North Korea, all these countries. So, if you put yourself under this bigger kind of picture, there is way to do things. And when you are in a situation where you got all the things that's happening against you in Western countries, something is wrong.

DUBOWITZ: I think that's great advice. Obviously, something needs to change, and we'll see what happens in Israel over the coming months and years. Mr. Ambassador, thank you. First, I want to thank you for appearing on the show. I want to thank you for your friendship. I've really enjoyed the time that we've spent together. You're a remarkable host, an amazing intellect, and it's really been a real honor to get to know you and to build the relationship. So, thank you, sir.

ARAI: Thank you very much, Mark. I enjoyed, and it's not going to be last time.

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