

The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] **Nate Hagens:** Good morning. It is Monday, June 15th, 9:00 AM Central Time. I do not wanna do this, frankly. I would rather do a frankly on the non-dual experience I had with a spider in my bathroom, this weekend. But, I feel compelled to do this frankly. Yesterday it was announced that Iran and the United States agreed to a memorandum of understanding to a 60-day ceasefire, which will be signed in Switzerland this Friday.

[00:00:37] And because of this and how it came about, I feel compelled to do an impromptu uncomfortable questions for unsettled times. And I'm sure the pundits will be out in spades in coming days talking about who got the best of this deal. Is this a taco or an enchilada, and how will Israel respond and, all the other relevant stuff.

[00:01:02] I'm going to take a different angle, and today's questions are all on one topic, nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence and all things nuclear, which even the mention of that word makes me uncomfortable. Events of the past week have brought the question of nuclear use out in the open more than I have seen in my lifetime, and the topic deserves its own episode.

[00:01:34] Why? Because of all the systems analysis I've done in the last 30 years, I have concluded the biggest risk to more sustainable landing spots for humanity and the biosphere are the ones where we navigate to the future without the use of nuclear weapons. I don't want to talk about this, but I feel it's my responsibility to share the direction of my thoughts and particularly my questions.

[00:02:07] A reminder on the spirit of this format, better questions are not meant to necessarily provide us answers. At worst, they're a form of preparedness in

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unsettled times, and I think when discussed with other people, they also become a form of community

[00:02:37] Okay, I think 13 questions today. Some come with context and some analysis. Others stand on their own, and all of them are uncomfortable. so a peace fire will include the full opening of the Strait of Hormuz, a 60-day technical negotiation on Iran's nuclear program and their sanctions and releasing Iranian funds and presumably 300 billion for reconstruction, among other things.

[00:03:10] importantly, peace in Lebanon from all parties is an important part of the agreement. Whether a real peace deal gets actually signed this Friday or next month or at all, still has quite a bit of uncertainty. But whether it's signed or not, the questions I'm about to raise are still relevant and perhaps even more relevant.

[00:03:37] So Saturday, when I should have been, weeding my potatoes, I was following what was going on, and President Trump posted about the agreement on Truth Social, and the post celebrates the brilliant pilots of the B-2 bombers. It refers to radioactive contamination from earlier strikes as nuclear dust that will be cleaned up at the appropriate time when all is calm and downblended and destroyed, whether in Iran or the United States.

[00:04:08] It expresses hope that the process will all work out quickly, easily, and smoothly. But near the end, there is a line that has gotten the most media coverage, but still not remotely enough media coverage. Quote, "If it doesn't, we have the ultimate alternative, hopefully never to be used again." Notice the gap between what is being discussed and how it is being discussed.

[00:04:38] The subject is nuclear weapons, ongoing war, radioactive contamination of an inhabited country and those downwind, as well as all humans exposed to some elevated background radiation, and the conditional use of

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weapons that have not been used against a nation since August of 1945, and never by an aggressor nation.

[00:05:02] The White House and other sources are quickly walking back that this and other previous tweets were not intimating tactical nuclear weapons. And this insinuation of nukes Wasn't news other than it being outwardly stated by the most powerful human in the world. Pulitzer-winning journalist Seymour Hersh reported a few days before that, citing White House insiders that the president had floated the nuclear option in private national security meetings, and Brandon Weikert, senior national security editor at The National Interest, has since corroborated the reporting independently.

[00:05:43] So that option is being talked about inside the room, and Saturday's Truth Social tweet is the first time the public has heard a version of it spoken from the room, and the tone it was delivered in matches the tone being used now from everything from tariffs to immigration raids to weather events. So whether or not the deal or peace fire extension gets signed later this week, those words are now in the public record, and the questions they raise will outlast the news cycle.

[00:06:21] Back on April 2nd, in the last uncomfortable questions, number three, I asked a two-part question: Could the US actually lose this war? And what would happen if tactical nuclear weapons eventually got used to reach Iran's deep underground sites? Two months later, two and a half months later, I think that question has gotten more uncomfortable, not less.

[00:06:48] In April, the tactical nuke scenario was something I had heard discussed by serious people. It followed logically, but it was still in the realm of, well, this is what could happen if nothing else works. Well, two months on and nothing else had worked. The strait was still contested. The interceptor missiles and logistics of the US side were running low.

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[00:07:10] Most of the off-ramps that were available in April are now closing. So to stop a country from even acquiring nuclear weapons, the USA is now openly threatening to use nuclear weapons against them in a war they didn't start. The very thing the non-proliferation order existed to prevent is being deployed in language as the means to enforce it.

[00:07:41] If this deal does get signed and the strait reopens, this will be sold as a foreign policy success. And from a narrow perspective, it may be one. The wide boundary view is that we have just shown in front of every other government on the planet that nuclear coercion works against non-nuclear nations.

[00:08:06] That's the opposite of what eighty years of non-proliferation was supposed to teach. Okay, to the questions. In uncomfortable question number three, I asked what tactical nuclear use against Iran would do to the security calculus of every non-nuclear state on Earth. I wanna revisit that question with a longer historical lens.

[00:08:31] Look at the practical lessons from the last twenty-five years. Libya gave up its active nuclear program in two thousand and three in exchange for sanctions relief and normalization. Eight years later, Gaddafi was overthrown and killed with NATO assistance. In contrast, North Korea kept its program through sanctions, isolation, and decades of threats, and remains intact and largely undisturbed.

[00:08:58] Iran did not have weapons and was bombed and threatened with more. If the practical lesson of the last thirty years is that giving up nuclear weapons gets you invaded, but keeping them gets you respected, what does the world actually look like when a dozen or more states draw that conclusion in the coming years?

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[00:09:22] Saudi Arabia, Turkey, South Korea, Japan, Brazil, and others. What are the conversations in their defense ministries gonna sound like today, Monday morning? Are we walking into nuclear re-proliferation regardless of how the Iran situation ends? Next, there is a Frankly I recorded a couple years back on the concept of spite from evolutionary biology, which I should probably update.

[00:09:54] Spite is when an organism pays a cost to itself to impose a larger cost on a competitor. It has been adaptive and shows up across species, and it shows up in humans, sometimes at the level of nations. I wanna bring it back here because the Iran situation may have a spite layer that many analyses, are missing.

[00:10:20] The Persian Gulf holds the largest concentration of cheap energy left on the planet. South Pars, the gas field that Iran shares with Qatar, is the single largest in the world. In a global economic system running into physical limits, those reserves are not merely economic assets. They are strategic assets in a future of great uncertainty.

[00:10:46] And if a nuclear weapon were to be used against Iranian infrastructure, even tactically, the contamination would probably not respect borders, and Pars gas operations could be degraded for a long time, decades. Some of that hydrocarbon wealth becomes unreachable, not just by Iran, but also by China, which is Iran's largest customer.

[00:11:12] That raises an uncomfortable possibility. Is part of the calculus in the room not just stopping Iran from getting a weapon, but denying a major energy resource to the rising power that the United States is increasingly measuring itself against with the AI power race and the like? And if so, might we be watching nuclear weapons being repurposed as instruments of resource spite between superpowers dressed up in the language of non-proliferation?

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[00:11:48] And ultimately, other than deterrence, will nuclear weapon use truly be an evolutionary manifestation of spite? Well, that would be what it is Next, President Trump's Truth Social post implied a single one-time use. The ultimate alternative, hopefully never to be used again, gets invoked, the target capitulates, and the matter is closed.

[00:12:19] The military and strategic logic of that does not hold up under examination. If a single tactical weapon were used and the target state does not immediately fold, the threatening state then faces a brutal choice: escalate or be exposed as having crossed that line for nothing. And every game theoretic incentive would point to escalation.

[00:12:45] The same logic that made the first use thinkable makes the second use easier, and the third use easier than that. Israel holds an undeclared nuclear arsenal estimated at roughly ninety warheads, I think. Pakistan has roughly one hundred and seventy. India, similar numbers. Russia and the United States, of course, hold the vast majority of the global stockpile.

[00:13:14] Every one of these arsenals is resting inside a strategic logic that depends on the eighty-year taboo. So to the question, once the taboo is broken once, what is the realistic estimate of how many weapons get used in the cascade that follows? Is one and done actually a coherent strategic concept, or is this a kind of a, marketing phrase that lets people accept the first use because they cannot bring themselves to imagine the second?

[00:13:51] Next question. In Frank Herbert's Dune novels, every great house holds what he called family atomics, small private nuclear arsenals. They're never used precisely because everyone has them. That taboo is held in place by mutually assured destruction at the household level. Are we walking toward a real-world version of that, where every mid-sized state holds a small arsenal as a precondition of sovereignty?

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[00:14:24] And if so, would that world be more stable than the current one, less stable, or stable in a way that we've never previously experienced as a species? Next question. If the use of nuclear weapons stops being unthinkable, does the threshold for use of all other categories of weapons of mass destruction, chemical and biological and autonomous also drop?

[00:14:57] Next question. On a deeper level, perhaps the resurgence of some of these more horrific forms of weaponry are an indicator of a deeper erosion of the purpose or maybe the ideal form of our international governance structures as an upholder of human well-being. And maybe that ideal form was always a dream from within an age of energy and resource abundance.

[00:15:25] The events of the last few years, maybe the last few decades, represent a move away from those humanitarian values and back toward the hard game theory and vying for power that has long shaped humanity. What happens when our global and even national governance veers more and more into strategic power games separated from the real impacts on human life and the biosphere?

[00:15:58] Next, is nuclear deterrence and mutually assured destruction generally, in order to be effective, dependent on both parties being rational actors? And related question, and perhaps the scarier question, how many of our world leaders in today's world are rational actors?

[00:16:25] Next, the taboo has, in prior decades, been supported and carried by something deeper than language and treaties. You could call it lived terror. The generation that grew up during the Cold War was terrified, a visceral feeling in the bodies, of these weapons. Duck and cover drills, backyard fallout shelters, the movie *The Day After* being watched by over a hundred million people, including President Reagan, who was deeply shaken by it.

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[00:17:05] The Hibakusha touring schools, and showing photographs of what these weapons actually do to human beings. That fear infrastructure is mostly gone now. Does the eighty-year taboo rest more on policy frameworks or on a generation of people who had been terrified of these weapons? And if the answer is the second one, what does it mean that the terror has not been transmitted to the generations now in power, to the individuals with their fingers on the buttons?

[00:17:42] Next, the original Manhattan Project scientists, many of whom became disarmament advocates within years of Hiroshima, expected the world to outgrow these weapons within a generation. They were wrong. What did they get wrong about human nature or about institutions that we should be learning before we assume the next generation will handle this any better than we have?

[00:18:12] Next question. If a deal gets signed under nuclear threat and the threat is later disclosed publicly as having been credible, what is the legal status of the agreement? Coerced treaties have historically been considered void under international law. Does this one survive such scrutiny? Next question.

[00:18:40] Notice your own response to reading or hearing the Truth Social post or to watching this video. A line about nuclear use moves through a culture before any weapon actually does. Did the president's threat at the end land on you with the weight the words actually imply, not just as a real physical possibility, but as an indicator of our societal view on the violence and war?

[00:19:11] And if they did, were you at all moved to any action? Where is our peace movement? Where is our civil society response to the most explicit nuclear threat from a sitting U.S. president in our lifetimes? And is it even possible to have a peace movement again, as most cultures are moving away from the access to information and the sense of agency that it would require to act on more humanitarian anti-war values?

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[00:19:47] And if the answer to that is no, that may be the most uncomfortable question, of all

[00:19:57] Has the US become inured to war post 9/11 with long failing wars and interventions with relatively low casualties for the USA, but devastating consequences for other countries like Iraq and Afghanistan and, many others? To borrow a Pink Floyd line, have we become comfortably numb? And I guess relatedly, to an anxious, stressed, and polarized population, are these questions that I'm raising today publicly net helpful or net harmful?

[00:20:38] That's a question I personally increasingly sit with steering this particular ship. Last but not least, and perhaps the most uncomfortable, what if everything since February was not primarily about Iran having or acquiring nuclear weapons despite the information blitz on that headline? What if this all along was about US hegemony vis-a-vis the spice in the Middle East, coupled with Israel and her intentions, and the Iran nuclear story was an Iraq WMD 2.0?

[00:21:20] If so, Iran has effectively demonstrated conventional military deterrence against a nuclear power, in effect showing to the world the USA may not have the conventional military capacity to win versus a second-tier military adversary with the drones and the missiles and the geography and all that, let alone a peer-to-peer adver-adversary.

[00:21:48] And the most uncomfortable question of all because of all the other uncomfortable questions it raises is, what if the USA is not as strong a superpower as it believes

[00:22:03] These are some intense and difficult questions, and I do not have any, let alone good answers to them. And again, I honestly don't want to discuss this topic, but I've learned enough about it in the last four or five years from experts that I really believe a lot more people should be thinking about and discussing

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this because it affects all the issues that comprise the more than human predicament, even if it's uncomfortable to think about and discuss I can't stay silent because this is one of those moments where what gets said out loud and what gets responded to is going to matter for a long time The 60-day pause between the United States and Iran, and hopefully Israel, is genuinely good news, but it is also a window.

[00:23:04] Whatever questions get asked now and whatever movements get built in the next 60 days will, by definition, matter more than the ones that get asked and built after the next escalation. I hope we use the pause. Much more on deck. I will talk to you soon