

Noam Chomsky On Donald Trump And The “Me First” Doctrine



Noam Chomsky ~ Photo:
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President Trump’s [sudden cancellation](#) of the upcoming denuclearization summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un is just the latest example of Trump’s wildly erratic approach to foreign policy.

While Trump’s domestic policies seem to be guided by clear objectives — increasing corporate profits, undoing every policy made by the Obama administration, and appeasing Trump’s anti-immigrant base — the imperatives driving US foreign policy under Trump remain something of a mystery.

In this exclusive interview, renowned linguist and public intellectual Noam Chomsky sheds light on the realities and dangers of foreign relations in the age of “gangster capitalism” and the decline of the US as a superpower.

C. J. Polychroniou: Noam, Donald Trump rose to power with “America First” as the key slogan of his election campaign. However, looking at what his administration has done so far on both the domestic and international front, it is hard to see how his policies are contributing to the well-being and security of the United States. With that in mind, can you decode for us what Trump’s “America

First” policy may be about with regard to international relations?

Noam Chomsky: It is only natural to expect that policies will be designed for the benefit of the designers and their actual — not pretended — constituency, and that the well-being and security of the society will be incidental. And that is what we commonly discover. We might recall, for example, the frank comments on the Monroe Doctrine by Woodrow Wilson’s Secretary of State, Robert Lansing: “In its advocacy of the Monroe Doctrine the United States considers its own interests. The integrity of other American nations is an incident, not an end. While this may seem based on selfishness alone, the author of the Doctrine had no higher or more generous motive in its declaration.” The observation generalizes in international affairs, and much the same logic holds within the society.

There is nothing essentially new about “America First,” and “America” does not mean America, but rather the designers and their actual constituency.

A typical illustration is the policy achievement of which the Trump-Ryan-McConnell administration is most proud: the tax bill — what Joseph Stiglitz accurately called “*The US Donor Relief Act of 2017*”. It contributes very directly to the well-being of their actual constituency: private wealth and corporate power. It benefits the actual constituency indirectly by the standard Republican technique (since Reagan) of blowing up the deficit as a pretext for undermining social programs, which are the Republicans’ next targets. The bill is thus of real benefit to its actual constituency and severely harms the general population.

Turning to international affairs, in Trumpian lingo, “*America First*” means “*me first*” and damn the consequences for the country or the world. The “me first” doctrine has an immediate corollary: it’s necessary to keep the base in line with fake promises and fiery rhetoric, while not alienating the actual constituency. It also follows that it’s important to do the opposite of whatever was done by Obama. Trump is often called “unpredictable,” but his actions are highly predictable on these simple principles.

His most important decision, by far, was to pull out of the Paris negotiations on climate change and to tear to shreds efforts to prevent environmental catastrophe — a threat that is extremely severe, and not remote. All completely predictable on the basic principles just mentioned.

The decision benefits the actual constituency: the energy corporations, the

automotive industry (most of it), and others who pursue the imperative of short-term profit. Consider perhaps the most-respected and “moderate” member of the Trump team, former ExxonMobil CEO Rex Tillerson, kicked out because he was too soft-hearted. We now know that ExxonMobil scientists were in the lead in the 1970s in recognizing the dire threat of global warming — facts surely known to the CEO, who presided over efforts to maximize the threat and to fund denialism of what the management knew was true — all to fill some overstuffed pockets with more dollars before we say “goodbye” to organized human life, not in the distant future.

It’s hard to find a word in the language to describe such behavior.

The decision also appeals to the pretended constituency: the voting base. [Half of Republicans deny that global warming is taking place](#), and of the rest, a bare majority think that humans may have a role in it. It’s doubtful that anything comparable exists elsewhere.

And, of course, the decision reverses an Obama initiative, thus keeping to high principles.

One cannot overemphasize the astonishing fact that the most powerful country in world history refuses to join the world in doing at least something — in some cases a lot — about this existential threat to organized human life (and to the species that are disappearing as the Sixth Extinction proceeds on its lethal course). And beyond that, is devoting its efforts to accelerating the race to disaster. And no less astonishing is the failure to highlight, even to discuss this extraordinary situation. Considering what is at stake, it is hard to find a historical parallel.

The same hold pretty much on other policies, though sometimes with more elite opposition. Take Obama’s Iran deal — the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). That, of course, has to go, on pretexts too ludicrous to discuss, and always ignoring the fact that while Iran has been adhering to the agreement, the US has been violating it all along by acting to block Iran’s reintegration into the global economy, particularly the global financial system, and to undermine “the normalisation of trade and economic relations with Iran.” All in violation of the JCPOA, but of no concern, on the prevailing tacit assumption that “the indispensable nation” stands above the law.

A considerable majority of Republicans have always opposed the deal, though in this case, Republican elites are often more realistic. The business world does not appear to have supported even the earlier sanctions regime — one of those interesting cases where state policy diverges from the interests of the actual constituency, much like Cuba policy. The decision harms the welfare and security of the general population, and might have truly horrendous consequences, but that is scarcely a consideration.

The Trump team is working hard to maximize the likely disastrous effects. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made his [first major speech](#) at the ultra-reactionary Heritage Foundation, focusing on Iran, with demands so extreme that the goal must be to ensure that they are instantly rejected. Among them, that Iran withdraw its forces from Syria and end its support for Hezbollah and Hamas, and more generally, end its campaign “to dominate the Middle East” — newspeak for Iran’s unwillingness to retreat into a shell and allow the US its traditional right to dominate the Middle East (and any other place it can) by force, with no impediments. Pompeo also warned the Europeans to join the US jihad, or else.

There is some merit in Trump’s posturing about how the JCPOA should be improved. It definitely can be. In particular, it can be extended to establishing a Nuclear Weapons-free Zone (NWFZ) in the Middle East, with serious inspections, which would eliminate any alleged threat of eventual Iranian nuclear programs. To achieve that goal should be quite straightforward. There is no need to obtain Iran’s acquiescence. Iran has long been in the forefront of those calling for establishment of a NWFZ, particularly as the spokesperson for G-77 — the former non-aligned countries — which strongly advocates this development. The Arab states, with Egypt in the lead, initiated this proposal and have strongly urged that it be implemented. There is overwhelming international support. The matter regularly comes up in the review sessions of the Non-proliferation Treaty, with full agreement — almost. One country regularly blocks the effort, most recently Obama in 2015. The reason is not obscure: Israel’s nuclear weapons systems must not be subject even to inspection, let alone steps toward dismantlement.

It is important to add that the US and UK have a special responsibility to work to establish a Middle East NWFZ. They are committed to this goal by Security Council Resolution 687 — a commitment that takes on even greater force because it is this Resolution to which they appealed when seeking desperately to create some legal pretext for their criminal invasion of Iraq in 2003.

But all of this is unmentionable, so we can put it aside.

The Trump decision has infuriated much of the world, with the usual exceptions. In particular, it has infuriated European allies. Whether they will be willing to stand up against the global bully is unclear; it is a frightening prospect. If Europe does not proceed with the JCPOA, as the Trump wreckers hope, that might encourage Iranian hardliners to develop “nuclear capability” — a capacity to produce nuclear weapons if they ever decide to, which many non-nuclear states have. That might provide a green light for those who have been itching to bomb Iran for a long time, among them the new National Security Adviser John Bolton and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Case by case, we find much the same, sometimes with further complexities.

Trump’s view of world affairs seems to assign very little role to diplomacy, as evidenced by the desolation of the State Department under his administration. What’s your own understanding and explanation for Trump’s aversion to diplomacy?

His position makes good sense. In confronting adversaries — for Trump, most of the world, apart from a few favored dictatorships (and the increasingly reactionary Israeli client) — it is only reasonable to play one’s strong card. The US is militarily strong — in fact, overwhelming in military strength. Trump’s *increase* in the vastly inflated military budget amounts to about 80 percent of the total Russian military budget, which is declining. But increasingly under Trump, the US is diplomatically weak and isolated. So why bother with diplomacy?

Incidentally, this is by no means a completely new departure. As its global power declined from its peak in the 1940s, the US has increasingly disregarded international institutions. During the years of its overwhelming global dominance, when the UN could be counted on to stay in line and serve as a weapon against adversaries, the UN was highly respected by elite opinion and Russia was berated for constantly saying “no.” As other industrial countries reconstructed from wartime devastation and decolonization proceeded on its agonizing course, the UN lost its allure. By the 1980s, respected intellectuals were pondering the strange cultural-psychological defect that was causing the world to be out of step. The US cast its first Security Council veto in 1970, and quickly gained the

lead in doing so. It is the only country to have gone so far as to veto a Security Council resolution calling on all states to observe international law — mentioning no one, but it was understood that it was a response to Washington's rejection of World Court orders to end its "unlawful use of force" (aka international terrorism) against Nicaragua and to pay substantial reparations. The US rarely ratifies international conventions, and when it does, it is typically with crucial reservations, effectively exempting itself: the genocide and torture conventions, and many others.

Rather generally, while Trump is carrying defiance of world opinion to new extremes, he can claim predecessors.

Trump's decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem (something which many of his predecessors had actually promised of doing but never carried out when in office) has created havoc in the Middle East, just as expected, although the administration has justified this decision as part of the need to "secure peace" in the region. First, what were the motives behind this decision? Second, can this move be regarded as legal according to norms and principles of international law? And, thirdly, can this decision be undone by future US presidents?

The motive was hardly concealed, and follows from the usual Trump principles. The move is strongly supported by Trump's Evangelical base — by now, the major popular support for Israel as more liberal sectors, as elsewhere in the world, are coming to oppose Israel's violence, repression and flagrant violations of international law. The move is also a gift to major Republican Party donors like Sheldon Adelson and Paul Singer. This decision, too, isolates the US in the world scene, harming the country in the longer term, but that is irrelevant. The US vetoed an otherwise unanimous Security Council resolution condemning the move, which is in violation of numerous [UN Security Council] resolutions on Jerusalem since 1968. The decision can be reversed.

The Gaza massacre in the aftermath of the Trump administration decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem exposed not only the historical insensitivity of the Trump gang to the plight of the Palestinian people under Israeli occupation (as well as its unconscionable ignorance of Muslim culture and history), but also the brutality of the Israeli state and, equally important, the cowardice, once again, of the so-called international community. Your thoughts or reactions to all of the above?

All correct, except that reference to the “Trump gang” is too narrow. Few are aware of the extent of Israeli brutality. Just to take one pertinent example, few are aware that just as the recent nonviolent demonstrations were beginning, leading to the Gaza massacre when Israel responded with military force, Hamas leadership approached Israel with a [call for a long-term cease-fire](#) (“hudna”). Israel, of course, rejected it, as it invariably does, rarely even giving reasons, though after the murderous Operation Protective Edge in 2014, an Israeli defense official explained that Israel does not respond “because there was no reason to conduct a dialogue with a bruised and beaten movement.” In short: *We have overwhelming military force, you are defenseless, we can smash your society to bits any time we like, so why on earth should we call for an end to violence, abandoning our virtual monopoly?*

The North Korea nuclear saga has become a key global issue featuring the “rocket man” and America’s “dotard.” Do you see any prospects for a lasting peace between North and South Korea?

One possibility, advanced by China with broad international support, including North Korea intermittently, has been a double freeze: North Korea would freeze its development of nuclear weapons and missiles, and the US would cease its threatening military maneuvers on North Korea’s borders, including menacing flights by the most advanced nuclear capable bombers — no laughing matter in a country that was flattened by merciless US bombing, even destruction of major dams (a serious war crime), within easy memory. The option has been rejected by the US.

A double freeze could have opened the way to further negotiations, perhaps reaching as far as what was achieved in 2005. Under international pressure, the Bush administration turned to negotiations, which achieved substantial success. North Korea agreed to abandon “all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs” and allow international inspections — phrases worth re-reading in the light of constant misrepresentation. In return, the US was to provide a light-water reactor for medical use, issue a non-aggression pledge, and join in an agreement that the two sides would “respect each other’s sovereignty, exist peacefully together and take steps to normalize relations.”

At once, the Bush administration broke the agreement. It renewed the threat of force, froze North Korean funds in foreign banks and disbanded the consortium

that was to provide North Korea with a light-water reactor. Bruce Cumings, the leading US Korea scholar, [writes](#) that “the sanctions were specifically designed to destroy the September pledges [and] to head off an accommodation between Washington and Pyongyang.”

That path could be pursued again.

On April 27, North and South Korea signed a historic document, the Panmunjom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification of the Korean Peninsula. It’s worth reading carefully. In the Declaration, the two Koreas “affirmed the principle of determining the destiny of the Korean nation on their own accord [repeat: *on their own accord*] ... to completely cease all hostile acts against each other in every domain [to] ... actively cooperate to establish a permanent and solid peace regime on the Korean Peninsula ... to carry out disarmament in a phased manner, [in order to achieve] the common goal of realizing, through complete denuclearization, a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula ... to strengthen the positive momentum towards continuous advancement of inter-Korean relations as well as peace, prosperity and unification of the Korean Peninsula.” They further “agreed to actively seek the support and cooperation of the [international] community [meaning, the US] for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.”

Furthermore, as Korea specialist Chung-in Moon reviews in *Foreign Affairs*, the two sides did not just make high-level commitments. They also laid out specific timetables for implementing them and took concrete steps that would have immediate effects in facilitating cooperation and preventing conflict — something quite new and very significant.

The import of the Declaration is clear. The US should back off and allow the two Koreas to achieve peace, disarmament, unification and complete denuclearization. We should accept the call for support and cooperation in this endeavor by the two parts of the Korean nation to determine its destiny “on their own accord.”

To put it more simply, the Declaration is a polite letter saying, “Dear Mr. Trump, declare victory if you want to prance around in public, but please go away and let us move towards peace, disarmament and unification without disrupting the process.”

US analysts have been clear and frank about the real nature of the North Korean

threat. New York Times foreign affairs commentator Max Fisher writes that North Korea “has achieved what no country has since China developed its own program a half-century ago: a nuclear deterrent against the United States,” and Trump’s threats and sanctions have not succeeded “to stall or reverse those gains.” Clearly, we must act to prevent anyone from deterring our resort to force and violence.

It’s worth noting that Iran poses a problem rather like that of North Korea. Among specialists, across the political spectrum, few would disagree with the conclusion of the respected and properly conservative International Institute of Strategic Studies in 2010 that “Iran’s nuclear program and its willingness to keep open the possibility of developing nuclear weapons is a central part of its deterrent strategy.” US intelligence concurs. Again, that is intolerable to the two rogue states that demand the right to rampage freely in the region, as they regularly do.

If Trump and his advisers have any sense, they will seize the opportunity and accept the plea of the two Koreas.

Unfortunately, expecting some sense may be too hopeful. The egregious hawk John Bolton, who has been just as publicly eager to bomb North Korea as Iran, went out of his way to bring up a model that he surely knew would infuriate and antagonize North Korea — the “Libya model”: *You give up your deterrent, and then we will destroy you, ending with a brutal murder applauded with a vulgar joke by Hillary Clinton.* Then Vice President Mike Pence [chimed in](#) saying it’s not a mere threat but “more of a fact” that “this will only end like the Libyan model ended if Kim Jong Un doesn’t make a deal.”

Along with threatening military maneuvers at the North Korean borders, this is just the way to move negotiations forward. Predictably, there was a harsh verbal North Korean response, though coupled with some crucial actions: North Korea reported that it had just [destroyed its key nuclear weapons testing site](#), setting off explosions to collapse underground tunnels. Trump responded a few hours later by [cancelling the planned summit meeting in Singapore with Kim Jong Un](#).

This not the end, however, and perhaps those who understand that Trump might register an ill-deserved triumph may prevail.

Israel’s prime minister, the irrevocable Bibi Netanyahu, has been driven for years

by the idea of “regime change” in Tehran. Do you think this is a realistic objective now that Tel Aviv has a “real friend” in the White House?

I don't think so, and I doubt that Israeli strategists do either. An invasion of Iran is most unlikely. If the US and Israel attack, it's likely to be from a safe distance — missiles mainly — and aimed at specific targets, though there might be Special Forces operations. We might recall that the US and Israel have already committed what the Pentagon describes as an [“act of war”](#) against Iran, justifying a military response from the target — namely, the cyberwar attack on Iranian nuclear facilities.

Europe's key leaders seem to be distancing themselves with ever greater frequency from Washington's policies on global affairs. Do you think we may be at the start of a new era between European and American relations? This is something which many had expected to happen from the time of Charles de Gaulle all the way up to the reign of Mikhail Gorbachev, but perhaps the time has finally come. So, your take on this? Is the era of US hegemony and obedience to Washington's dictates nearing its end?

From the early postwar years, there was considerable concern in planning circles in Washington that Europe might move to become a “third force” in global affairs, a neutralist bloc. De Gaulle was indeed the leading proponent of this conception, and a version was revived by Gorbachev in his call for a “Common European Home” of cooperation and interchange from the Atlantic to the Urals, in which both NATO and the Warsaw Pact would be dismantled in favor of a pan-European security system. The idea was dismissed by the US in favor of expanding NATO, over the strong objections of George Kennan and other statesmen who warned, accurately enough, that this “policy error of historic proportions” would lead to rising and very ominous tensions on the Russian border. NATO's mission today, historian Richard Sakwa writes, is “to manage the risks created by its existence.”

As to whether Europe today might move in an independent direction, I'm skeptical. Despite Trump's moves to diminish and isolate America, and to alienate allies, and despite the exit of America's major advocate (Britain) from the European Union, I suspect that Europe will be unwilling to pose a serious challenge to Washington. Europe faces too many internal problems, and despite Trump, the US still remains unmatched as a global power, with means of violence and coercion that it is not reluctant to use, as the world knows all too well.

But a lot remains uncertain. [As the business press observes](#), The United States' "ability to impose financial sanctions around the world depends on the willingness of China and Europe to comply — and that may be waning." In the case of China, it has been waning rapidly. China has been moving to establish an international currency regime and trading system independent of the US. Trump's effort to destroy the Iran nuclear deal has infuriated the Europeans, who reacted at once by agreeing to invoke rules to shield European Union companies from US sanctions, to permit the European Investment Bank to finance business in Iran, and to encourage European countries to explore transfers to Iran's central bank, bypassing the US-dominated international financial system. These "blocking mechanisms" were last invoked in 1996, when Clinton sought to curb European investment in Cuba, Iran and Libya. Clinton backed down. But the world has changed.

It's possible that Trump may succeed in creating a diminished America, hiding in fear behind walls, isolated and marginalized — though retaining plenty of guns to kill one another and a fearsome capacity to destroy at will.

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