

Noam Chomsky: Trump Is Consolidating Far-Right Power Globally



It is no easy task to make sense of U.S. foreign policy in the current era. Trump is wildly unpredictable and lacks any semblance of a coherent view of world affairs, appearing to believe that all it takes is “the art of the deal” to turn “enemies” into friends. Meanwhile, since Trump’s rise

to power, the end of U.S. hegemony has come into sight.

In the exclusive *Truthout* interview below, renowned public intellectual Noam Chomsky — one of the world’s most astute critics of U.S. foreign policy in the postwar era — sheds considerable light on the current state of U.S. foreign policy, including Trump’s relations with the leaders of North Korea, Russia and China, as well as his so-called “Middle East Peace Plan.”

C.J. Polychroniou: Noam, in 2016 Trump called U.S foreign policy “a complete and total disaster,” claiming that previous administrations in the post-Cold War era were guided by unrealistic expectations that damaged America’s national interests. Since taking office, he has withdrawn the country from a series of international agreements, demanding that countries pay for U.S. protection, and seeking to advance U.S economic interests through tariffs and protectionism. These moves have led many analysts to speak of a new era in U.S. relations with the world. What’s your own take on Trump’s foreign policy?

Noam Chomsky: One of the most appropriate comments I’ve seen on Trump’s foreign policy appeared in [an article in The New Republic](#) written by David Roth, the editor of a sports blog: “The spectacle of expert analysts and thought leaders parsing the actions of a man with no expertise or capacity for analysis is the purest acid satire — but less because of how badly that expert analysis has failed than because of how sincerely misplaced it is ... there is nothing here to parse, no hidden meanings or tactical elisions or slow-rolled strategic campaign.”

That seems generally accurate. This is a man, after all, who dismisses the information and analyses of his massive intelligence system in favor of what was said this morning on “Fox and Friends,” where everyone tells him how much they love him. With all due skepticism about the quality of intelligence, this is sheer madness considering the stakes.

And it continues, in ways that are almost surreal. At the recent G20 conference, Trump was asked about Putin’s statement that Western liberalism is obsolete. Trump assumed he must be talking about California: *Western* liberalism. Putin “may feel that way,” Trump responded: “He sees what’s going on. And I guess, if you look at what’s happening in Los Angeles, where it’s so sad to look; and what’s happening in San Francisco and a couple of other cities which are run by an extraordinary group of liberal people.”

He was asked why the U.S. alone is refusing to join the G20 in a commitment to address global warming and responded by praising the quality of U.S. air and water, apparently not understanding the distinction.

It’s hard to find a comment on foreign policy that departs from this impressive norm. Efforts to detect some coherent global strategy indeed seem to be a kind of acid satire.

Not that there is no coherent policy. There is one policy that emerges from the chaos — the kind we would expect from an egotistical con man who has one principle: Me! It follows that any treaty or agreement reached by predecessors (particularly the despised Obama) is the worst deal in history, which will be replaced by the Greatest Deal in History negotiated by the most accomplished deal-maker of all time and greatest American president. Similarly, any other action carried out in the past was misguided and harmed America, but will be corrected by the “stable genius” now in charge of defending America from those who are cheating and assaulting it on all sides.

It makes no difference what the consequences are — terrible, decent, indifferent — as long as the imagery is preserved.

It may be recalled that a president who obtains his picture of the world from “Fox and Friends” is not an entirely new phenomenon. Forty years ago, a revered predecessor (Ronald Reagan) was learning about the world from movies, and was so mesmerized that he even came to [believe that he had taken part in the liberation of Nazi concentration camps](#) (while not leaving California).

All of this tells us something about modern politics. But Trump can’t be compared

to Reagan, any more than farce can be compared to tragedy, to paraphrase Marx. It's understandable that the farce elicits ridicule, and no doubt some are relishing the coming photo-op of Trump and Boris Johnson upholding Anglo-American civilization. But for the world, it's dead serious, from the destruction of the environment and the growing threats of terminal nuclear war to a long list of other crimes and horrors.

The most dangerous immediate foreign policy crisis is the conflict with Iran, which has been deemed the official source of all evil. Iran must end its "aggression" and become a "normal country" — like Saudi Arabia, which is making rapid progress in Trump's fantasy world, even "a great job in Saudi Arabia from the standpoint of women," he explained at G20.

The charges against Iran resonate through the media echo chamber with little effort to assess the validity of the accusations — which hardly withstand analysis. Whatever one thinks of Iranian international behavior, by the miserable standards of U.S. allies in the region — not to speak of the U.S. itself — it is not much of a competitor in the rogue state derby.

In the real world, the U.S. unilaterally decided to destroy the well-functioning nuclear agreement (JCPOA), with ludicrous charges accepted by virtually no one with the slightest credibility, and to impose extremely harsh sanctions designed to punish the Iranian people and undermine the economy. The [U.S. government] also uses its enormous economic power, including virtual control of the international financial system, to compel others to obey Washington's dictates. None of this has even minimal legitimacy; the same is true of Cuba and other cases. The world may protest — last November, the UN General Assembly once again condemned the U.S. embargo on Cuba, 189-2 (only the U.S. and Israel voted against the resolution). But in vain. The weird idea of the founders that one might have "decent respect to the opinions of mankind" has long vanished, and the pained bleatings of the world pass in silence. On Iran as well.

This is not the place to pursue the matter, but there is a good deal more to say about the U.S. specialty of resorting to sanctions (with extraterritorial reach) to punish populations — a form of "American exceptionalism" that finds its place within what Nick Turse calls "the American system of suffering" in his harrowing expose of the U.S. assault on the civilian population of South Vietnam. The right to engage in this malicious practice is accepted as normal in the U.S. doctrinal system, with little effort to analyze the actual motives in individual cases, the

legitimacy of such policies, or in fact even their legality. Matters of no slight significance.

With regard to Iran, within the government-media doctrinal system, the only question that arises is whether the victim will respond in some way, maybe by “violating” the agreement that the U.S. has demolished, maybe by some other act. And if it does, it obviously will be deemed to deserve brutal punishment.

In commentary made by U.S. officials and media, Iran “violates” agreements. The U.S. merely “withdraws” from them. The stance is reminiscent of a comment by the great anarchist writer and Wobbly activist T-Bone Slim: “Only the poor break laws — the rich evade them.”

Analysts have tried hard to detect some grand strategy behind the U.S. assault on Iran, another exercise in futility. It’s easy enough to detect the goals of the thugs surrounding Trump: for Pompeo and Bolton, the goal is to smash the miscreant — from a safe distance, so that it isn’t costly for us. And damn the consequences. Trump himself seems to see it quite differently. Whether he in fact called off a military strike because of his compassion for 150 possible victims, who knows? The only evidence comes from a source that is not famous for its credibility. But it seems clear that he doesn’t want a war, which would spoil all the fun and games that he is so greatly enjoying, and would harm his electoral prospects. It’s far better to go into the elections facing the cosmic threat of an evil enemy that only the Bold and Courageous Leader is able to confront, not any of those weak-kneed Dems, surely none of those “mere” women. Reagan grasped the principle as well when he boldly faced the threat of Nicaragua, strapping on his cowboy boots and warning that Nicaraguan troops were only two days’ march from Harlingen, Texas, and declaring a national emergency because of the extraordinary threat to the security and survival of the U.S.

This is not the place to pursue the matter again, but in the background of the Iran conflict are some unmentionable facts. The alleged threat of Iranian nuclear weapons can readily be overcome by adopting the demand of the Arab States, Iran, and in fact virtually the entire world, to establish a nuclear weapons-free zone in the region, a policy to which the U.S. and UK have a unique obligation, and which the U.S. regularly blocks — for reasons that are hardly obscure: If the U.S. were to officially acknowledge the existence of Israel’s nuclear arsenal, the huge flood of aid to Israel would be illegal under U.S. law, and of course, Israel’s weapons of mass destruction cannot be subject to inspection.

What about tariffs? “Tariff man” tells us that the tariffs are designed to promote U.S. economic interests, but whether he believes it or not, or cares, we have no idea. Political pronouncements can rarely be taken at face value, and Trump is not notorious for his truthfulness and credibility.

There is, to put it charitably, scant evidence for Trump’s boast that his tariffs are forcing China to pour “billions of dollars” into the Treasury Department. “We never had 10 cents coming into our Treasury” under past administrations, he explained. “Now we have billions coming in.” In the real world, the costs of the tariffs are borne by U.S. companies (which may choose to compensate by reducing wages) and consumers, burdened with a highly regressive tax that targets mostly less affluent. In brief, Trump’s tariffs are yet another one of his policies to harm American workers and the poor.

It is, however, true that “billions” are involved. A study by the New York Fed with Princeton and Columbia Universities estimates that [U.S. companies and consumers have paid \\$3 billion a month in additional taxes](#) because of tariffs on Chinese goods and on aluminum and steel from around the globe, in addition to a \$1.4 billion in costs to U.S. companies related to lost efficiency in 2018.

The tariff war against China may lead to some shifting of assembly operations from China to Vietnam and other countries with even lower labor costs, but as for the U.S. economy, more typical is the decision of Apple a few days ago to [shift Mac Pro computer assembly](#) from Texas to China.

Trump’s tariff wars seem to relate primarily to domestic policy, crafted with the coming election in view. He has to somehow convince his voting base that he is the one man in the country protecting battered Americans who are suffering from the “carnage” created by his predecessors — which is real enough for a great many Americans, as illustrated dramatically by the astonishing decline in life expectancy among white working age Americans, attributed to “deaths of despair,” a phenomenon unknown in developed societies. Trump’s trick is to wave a big club and threaten others with dire consequences unless they stop torturing poor America and agree to “play fair.” When we take all this apart, a different picture emerges, much as in the case of the ominous threat of Iran. But what matters for the con game is the “alternative reality” that the conjurers are concocting.

With no little success. It’s a mistake to “mis-underestimate” Trump (to borrow W. Bush’s neologism). He is a canny demagogue and manipulator, who is managing to maintain the allegiance of the adoring crowds that believe he is standing up for

them against the hated elites while also ensuring that the primary Republican constituency of extreme wealth and corporate power are doing just fine, despite some complaints. And they surely are, in fact, making out like bandits with help from Trump and his associates.

It is quite remarkable to see how effectively alternative reality is created. Iran is typical, but the successes are far broader. Consider the charge that “China is killing us,” stealing our jobs, joined by “Mexican robbers.” How is China killing us? Did China have a gun to the head of CEO Tim Cook of Apple, ordering him to end the last vestige of production of Apple computers in the U.S.? Or Boeing, or GM, or Microsoft, or any of the others who have shifted production to China? Or were the decisions made by bankers and investors in corporate boardrooms in New York and Chicago? And if the latter, is the solution to wave a fist at China or to change the mode of decision-making in the U.S. — by shifting it to the hands of stakeholders, workers and communities, or at least giving them a substantial role, as democratic theory would suggest? It seems a fairly obvious question. Oddly, it isn’t raised, while the official mantra persists unperturbed.

It’s claimed that China imposes unfair conditions on investors, demanding technology transfer (following the pattern of development of others from England and the U.S. to the East Asian tigers). Perhaps so. If Apple and others don’t like these conditions, they’re free not to invest in China. Worshippers of free enterprise and the market should surely agree.

Another charge is that China is unfairly pursuing an industrial policy that subsidizes favored industries. If so, U.S. political leaders and analysts should be cheering. According to the economic doctrines they profess, China is harming its economy by departing from the optimal free market mode of development, thus contributing to U.S. economic hegemony. What’s the problem?

Somehow, that’s not what we hear. Nor do we hear much about how this is normal policy in Western state capitalist societies, notoriously in the U.S. throughout its history, and dramatically since World War II, the basis for the creation of today’s high-tech economy, and continuing today.

What appears to be a more credible charge is that China is violating the intellectual property rights regime (TRIPS) established in the World Trade Organization. Suppose so. Several questions arise. One is: who gains, who loses? To a large extent, American consumers gain, while Big Pharma, Microsoft, and others granted exorbitant and unprecedented patent rights under TRIPS suffer

some reduction in their enormous profits. That leads at once to another question: Is the TRIPS regime legitimate? True, it was established by interstate agreement, but who made those decisions? Did the public have any role, or even know what was happening? Hardly. The misnamed “free trade agreements” are more properly described as investor-rights agreements, often with little relation to trade in any meaningful sense, and not surprisingly, serving the interests of their designers in the investor class.

Other elements of the “China is killing us” complaints actually make sense. Concern is often openly expressed that Chinese progress might leave the U.S. behind — for example, that Huawei’s cheaper and superior technology may give them an “[unfair advantage](#)” in establishing 5G networks. Plainly that has to be stopped, U.S. officials argue, along with Chinese economic development generally. Their concerns are reminiscent of the 1980s, when superior Japanese manufacturing techniques were undermining inefficient U.S. enterprises, and the Reagan administration had to intervene to block Japanese imports by “voluntary export restraints” — where “voluntary” means “agree or else” — and other devices to enable backward American management to catch up.

Without proceeding, while there are some detectable strategic objectives, much of what is offered and discussed is concealing something quite different. And there is good reason to agree that the sight of experts seeking to detect some grand strategy behind Trump’s antics is “[the purest acid satire](#).” But there is a strategy. And it is working quite well.

One of Trump’s stated objectives behind his understanding of diplomacy is to “turn enemies into friends.” Is there any evidence that he is actually pursuing such a diplomatic objective? I have in mind, in particular, the cases of North Korea and Russia.

In this case, the stated objective seems real. It elicits ridicule and bitter condemnation across the mainstream political spectrum. But whatever Trump’s motives may be, the general policy makes some sense.

The Panmunjom Declaration of the two Koreas in April 2018 was a highly significant event. It called for the two Koreas to proceed toward amicable relations and eventual denuclearization “on their own accord,” without the external interference that has often in the past undermined what seemed to be initiatives with some promise: repeated interference from the U.S., as the

historical record shows, facts commonly evaded in reporting. In this Declaration and related agreements, as discussed by Korea specialist Chung-in Moon in the main establishment journal *Foreign Affairs*, for the first time the two Koreas laid out specific timetables and took concrete and promising steps toward reduction of tensions and disarmament — developments that should be welcomed and supported.

To his credit, Trump has largely adhered to the request of the two Koreas. His recent meeting with Kim at the demilitarized zone, the symbolic border crossing, and possible tentative agreements are steps that with goodwill could have salutary consequences. They might facilitate efforts of the two Koreas to proceed on the difficult path toward accommodation and might offer a way to relieve the sanctions that are blocking badly needed aid to the North and contributing to a major humanitarian crisis there. All of this may infuriate commentators across the spectrum, but if there is a better way to bring peace to the peninsula and to take steps toward denuclearization and reform within the North Korean dictatorship, no one has yet informed us about it.

Putin's Russia need not be turned into a "friend," but cooperative relations with Russia are a prerequisite for survival. Trump's record on this score is mixed. Mattis's [Nuclear Posture Review](#) (February 2018) poses very severe threats, escalated since by the unbelievable decision to carry forward development of hypersonic weapons. Adversaries are doing likewise. The right approach is diplomacy and negotiations to prevent a suicidal course, but there is not a hint of that. The same is true of the INF Treaty negotiated by Reagan and Gorbachev, which significantly reduced the risks of terminal war. Each side claims that the other is violating the treaty. The right approach is to have neutral analysts investigate the claims and to negotiate an end to such violations as are discovered. The worst approach is to withdraw from the treaty, as the U.S. is doing, with Russia following. The same considerations hold for the other major arms control treaty, New Start. Throughout, it seems that John Bolton, consistent in his malevolence, has succeeded in blocking progress and driving policy in directions that are extremely ominous.

What's your assessment of the Trump administration's Middle East plan? And how instrumental is Jared Kushner's role in this?

I presume that Kushner is the main architect, as reported. What has been

released so far is fairly straightforward, and consistent with earlier policies of the administration authorizing Israel's takeover of the Golan Heights and development of Greater Jerusalem, all in violation of Security Council orders (backed at the time by the U.S.). At the same time, the meager U.S. aid to Palestinians has been terminated on the grounds that they do not thank the boss politely enough when he is undermining their most elementary rights.

The Kushner plan carries this forward. Israel is to be granted the fondest wishes of its expansionist leadership. The Palestinians are to be bought off by development funds provided by others (not the U.S.). The essence of the Trump-Kushner "Deal of the Century" was [captured succinctly by Israeli UN Ambassador Danny Danon](#), in *The New York Times*: Palestinians should realize that the game is over and "surrender."

Then there can be peace, another triumph of the "great negotiator."

In this case there is an underlying strategic objective: to consolidate the alliance of reactionary states (the oil monarchies, Egypt, Israel) as a base for U.S. power in the region. That is by no means something new, though earlier variants had somewhat different forms and were less visible than today.

These objectives fall within a broader strategy of forming a global reactionary alliance under the U.S. aegis, including the "illiberal democracies" of Eastern Europe (Hungary's Orbán, etc.) and Brazil's grotesque Jair Bolsonaro, who among other virtues, shares with Trump the dedication to undermine prospects for a livable environment by opening up the Amazon — "the lungs of the earth" — to exploitation by his friends in mining and agribusiness. That's a natural strategy for today's Trump-McConnell Republican party, well ensconced [to the far right of the international spectrum](#), even beyond the European "populist" parties that were not long ago considered a contemptible fringe.

Without asking you to play the role of a Cassandra, how do you think history will assess Trump's stance on climate change, which is by far the biggest global challenge facing the world?

To borrow from [Wittgenstein](#), with a slight tweak, "Whereof one cannot speak politely, thereof one must remain silent."

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