

Rethinking US Foreign Policy

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Conor Gearty

Noam Chomsky, thanks for coming along here to Chatham House. We've got just about an hour. Noam Chomsky has some stuff that he has to do later on. We're incredibly grateful to you for finding this little space.

The conceit is that we have a conversation. Now, I think we should perhaps talk about American foreign policy and not just gossip.

Noam Chomsky

That's what they announced. Might as well talk about it.

Conor Gearty

I'm hoping we can move fairly briskly into a question and answer session, so we maximize our time. This requires a degree of restraint on the part of us all, not least myself. You will not even be told my name, much less my record, in a boring, chair-ish kind of way. It requires restraint on your part and you will forgive me in advance if I stop you in order to move things along.

Noam Chomsky

That's fine, I'm used to being interrupted. My children have a line they used if they asked a question, as kids do. They'd sometimes say: just the five-minute lecture, please.

Conor Gearty

And over time it was four, then three, then two. And it will require discipline on your parts as well, please. I might be quite tough on that. No speeches. I'll repeat that later on. The more concise the questions, the more enjoyable the event is for us all. We do say: tweet questions. Since we say this, we should nod in the direction of Twitter. I have a Twitter guru. She'll be asked to produce perhaps a tweet and also you guys can tweet. So as we are proceeding, if there's something that strikes you that you want to say, all you have to do is tweet (if you do tweet) with the hashtag #AskCH. But people who are outside the hall, people who are not here, can do it as well. So it's a nice way of broadening the audience.

Noam – I guess crudely, the Snowden stuff. A surprise? I mean by that: a surprise at quite how extraordinary it was? Or not a surprise at all?

Noam Chomsky

I think the scale was, at least to me, very surprising. It is in fact phenomenal. There's a new book by Glenn Greenwald, I don't know if it's come out here, which surveys a lot of it and brings it together. It's really a colossal campaign. It's very clear that they want to pick up everything: everything that anyone says, who they meet, who they see, anything you can think of. The goal is 100 per cent collection of all information about all of the enemies of the state. What this reveals pretty dramatically is something we all ought to know: that for states, one of their main enemies is the domestic population. They have to be kept under control. They are dangerous. If you look at policy decisions, it's pretty consistent that you have to control this dangerous enemy.

This carries it way beyond anything that's been done before. Of course, there's been plenty before. During the 1960s, I was very much involved in resistance activities against the war in Vietnam. We understood that you can't talk on the telephone. If there's anything serious, something that would involve particular human beings – let's say a deserter or something – you couldn't even talk in a group of friends because there's probably a government informer there. So everything had to be done with affinity groups. This is well understood and goes way back, but nothing like this scale has ever happened. And Britain agrees, as you probably saw. The British government requested the NSA to provide detailed, extensive information on cell phones, social media, other forms of interaction for British citizens who were an enemy of this state.

In the United States it's kind of dramatic because of the Fourth Amendment of the Constitution, part of the Bill of Rights. It guarantees the security of citizens in their persons, homes, papers and effects, and bars what are called unreasonable search and seizures. There's a reason for that. It has to do with England. The British rulers demanded the right to break into homes to search them. There were pretty bitter confrontations. Right in Boston where I live, in fact, citizens organized to bar the entry of British officers under what were called writs of assistance, that they could just enter wherever they like. This was one of the things that sparked the American revolution. Shortly afterwards, when the Bill of Rights was introduced in the Constitution, they made sure to put a barrier against any such practices on the part of the state. Well, now the Fourth Amendment is being violated in a way which is so dramatic that it takes your colleagues in the legal profession to try to figure out how to make them consistent.

Conor Gearty

But then they can always find a professor who can do the other work.

Noam Chomsky

That's the role of lawyers. They'll find a way to say that knowing everything that you do is a reasonable search and seizure.

Conor Gearty

When you compare the response to Watergate, which when you look at what's happening today seems small beer and yet it brought down a president. Maybe it was the cover-up, maybe it wasn't. But has the culture in America changed markedly in what is now 50 years since that time?

Noam Chomsky

I have to tell you that I was a minority of maybe one in thinking that Watergate was a kind of tea party. I was asked to write about Watergate right away by the *New York Review* and I agreed, but I said I would write only if I could explain that it didn't amount to anything. In fact, it was pretty striking. The Watergate exposures came out at the very same time as the exposures of COINTELPRO (Counterintelligence Program) – the same time. COINTELPRO was a massive government, criminal operation directed against the population that went through four administrations, mainly Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon (it started a little earlier). It targeted virtually all critical thought and action for not only surveillance but for disruption. It went way beyond the Snowden case. It went as far as literal political assassination. In fact, right at the time of Watergate there was an exposure of the fact that in 1969, in one of the COINTELPRO operations – this is an FBI operation (FBI is the national political police) – they were trying to destroy the black movement. They really decimated them.

The worst case, which had just appeared at the time of Watergate, was the assassination of Fred Hampton. Fred Hampton was a Black Panther, an organizer, a very successful organizer. No criminal charges, nothing like that. He was organizing in the Chicago ghettos. The FBI, under COINTELPRO, wanted to assassinate him. They tried at first to incite a criminal gang in the ghetto, the Blackstone Rangers, to kill him. They sent false letters to the heads of the Rangers, written in kind of fake black dialect, which they decoded instantly – the FBI is not very smart – to try to tell them that Fred Hampton was going to go after them, so they'd react. But they didn't. The FBI had implanted an informer, who was Hampton's bodyguard. They gave false information to the Chicago police about guns in the apartment. At 4 AM the police broke in, really a Gestapo-style raid, and just murdered him in his bed.

That act alone just swamps all of the Watergate exposures. Interestingly, it was barely reported. And that's only one. They did a lot of other things under COINTELPRO, which was far more serious than Watergate, and I think more serious than the NSA.

Conor Gearty

Is this, in its modern form, the use of drones to kill people abroad? The drones, is that a modern equivalent? And I want to ask a sub-question about that, which is: the nature of American public opinion. You paint just now, you do in your writings, a picture of a kind of really easily led, amorphous community which can be misled by this and led by that and so on.

Noam Chomsky

Take, say, COINTELPRO. It's hard to say that people were misled – they didn't know about it. There is something called journalism, which is supposed to have the task of presenting to the public things that are significant and important for them to play a role in a democratic society. But that role is sometimes fulfilled – I wouldn't say zero, but to a very limited extent. In the case of COINTELPRO there was virtually no coverage. The Hampton assassination, people couldn't protest because they didn't know about it.

Take drones. The drone campaign is a global terrorism campaign run by the Obama administration which has absolutely no counterpart. There used to be some notion – lawyers will remember this old thing called the Magna Carta, which we'll be commemorating its death in the next year, 800 years.

Conor Gearty

Don't let Sir Robert Worcester hear you, he'll be very enervated.

Noam Chomsky

But it established – in a narrow form, but it established the notion of presumption of innocence. Pretty narrow and it was extended over the years. That's been torn to shreds. By now, guilty means that Obama decided on Tuesday morning to kill you. That's the definition of guilty. On Tuesday morning there are these sessions in the White House where they read a little St Augustine on just wars and then decide who we're going to murder today. They're recognized to be suspects. It's massive. All over large parts of the world.

Conor Gearty

And they can be American, as they have been.

Noam Chomsky

It's interesting. There are a few cases, I think four, where American citizens were killed. That has caused a lot of debate and discussion, which is curious. The tacit assumption is if you want to kill a non-American, it's free – do whatever you like. But murdering American citizens raises some constitutional questions, so that's debated. But suppose that Iran, let's say, had the capacity to murder people in the United States and Israel who they regarded as a threat – and they have good reason to regard them as a threat. Leading figures and top leaders in the United States and Israel are regularly saying that all options are open, which means if we want to carry out a nuclear attack against you we'll do it. John McCain during the last campaign, when he ran, his line was: just bomb, bomb, bomb, don't wait, let's bomb them. So there's plenty of people they could regard as a threat. Suppose they decided to assassinate them. Would we sit here quietly and say it's fine? They're not Iranian citizens so why shouldn't they assassinate them? But when we do it, it's considered legitimate.

It's pretty striking that the US government recognizes two things that are important. One is, they're not only killing suspects, they're generating terrorists. They know very well that these campaigns are generating terrorists. When you start murdering people in tribal societies which have a culture of defence and revenge, they respond. Take 9/11. Turns out that 11 of the 19 apprehended hijackers were from a tribe in Yemen that had been bitterly repressed and attacked, first by the centre and then by the international supporters of it. They were taking revenge. There's a very important book on this by Akbar Ahmed, a Pakistani anthropologist in the United States. He's one of the leading experts on tribal societies. He just calls it a war against tribal Islam and tribal societies generally, which react.

The other thing is that it is really massive terrorism, large-scale terrorism. The fact that we accept it is pretty remarkable. The acceptance is limited. The former head of the CIA, Michael Hayden, pointed out recently that there isn't a single government in the world which accepts Washington's legal basis for the drone campaign, with two exceptions: Israel and Afghanistan. I suspect he's wrong about Afghanistan. That's the support.

So you generate terrorists, you kill whoever you like, and there's no support for it. But it continues.

Conor Gearty

What about the argument that yeah, we're going to alienate a few guys, but we take out the leaders, to use that sort of military image. And secondly, you may call it terrorism, but it's our terrorism – the famous 'clash of civilizations' stuff that was copyrighted in the American think tanks, and books about lesser evils and so on. We have democracy, we have rule of law – we're the good guys in this. You have absolute contempt for that, but I wonder whether it isn't at its core some basic truth in the fact that these societies are different.

Noam Chomsky

Sure. We're much more violent and aggressive. In fact, when this happens in a more or less democratic society, citizens are much more culpable than when it's done in an authoritarian state. Suppose Iran was murdering people who were threatening it in the United States and Israel and probably Britain. Iranian citizens couldn't do very much about that. It's a harsh, authoritarian state. It's different here. We're pretty free. If we accept that and tolerate it, that is morally very culpable.

You may recall, I hope you've read, Orwell's introduction to *Animal Farm*. As you probably know, it was not published, it was found 30 years later in his unpublished papers. But it's interesting. In it, he addresses himself to the people of England, 'free England'. He says: you shouldn't feel too self-righteous about this satirical denunciation of the totalitarian enemy, because in England unpopular ideas can be suppressed without the use of force. One of the mechanisms that he mentions is a good education. If you've gone to the best schools – LSE and so on –

Conor Gearty

Thank you for that plug. A rather ambivalent plug.

Noam Chomsky

– then you have instilled into you the understanding that there are certain things it wouldn't do to say. I think we can add: it wouldn't do to think. That's a significant element in free societies and carries with it severe moral responsibility, much more so than people who suffer in authoritarian or totalitarian states. I think that's something we pay much too little attention to.

Conor Gearty

Does it mean you end up watching, with something like, say, the Russian taking of Crimea, what's going on with Syria, possibly people might take China and Tibet – you end up a kind of spectator, because you've taken away the power to intervene. Is that a logical position that you go to?

Noam Chomsky

Take Crimea, it's an interesting case. The Russian takeover of Crimea is undoubtedly a criminal act. It violates the UN Charter, it violates specific treaties in which Russia agreed with others to observe the boundaries of Ukraine. So it's a criminal act. Is it the only such act in the world? For example, how much have you read about a much more severe case: the US takeover of southeastern Cuba 110 years ago. The US took over southeastern Cuba at the point of a gun – technically there was a treaty but under military occupation, you know what that means. There was a treaty on what we call Guantanamo, which includes Cuba's major port. The US has absolutely no claim to it. Whatever one thinks about Crimea, there is a claim: popular support, the history, Khrushchev's handing over of Crimea to Ukraine without even asking the population. The referendum in 1991 which came out with about the same results as the recent one. The major Russian water port, naval base. There are considerations.

In the case of the US takeover of southeastern Cuba, there is nothing. Since Cuban independence in 1959, the Cuban government has been trying to get it back. The US, of course, refuses. The only justification is this severely hampers the economic development of Cuba. For 50 years the United States has been engaged in a significant war against Cuba. Under Kennedy it was a large-scale terrorist campaign. We don't talk about it here but it was a very serious terrorist campaign, which continued. A crushing embargo. Taking over southeastern Cuba of course severely hampers Cuban development, that's the point. This is much worse than the Russians, who although their actions are criminal have a much stronger case. How much have you read in the press about this? It's not the only case.

Conor Gearty

I'd probably take that one, but I met the guy – the China guy who is the equivalent of our press guy, Alastair Campbell it used to be. They used to publish this report about how dreadful America was, all the people who died, were killed, the rapes, the race killings. Whenever you raised human rights with them, they'd say, with respect, kind of what you said: America, look at all the violence, look at Rodney King. Is it always an appropriate response? Because it seems to me that all that happens is you just say: what Russia does is bad, what China does is bad, but my goodness, look what America does. It seems to me a kind of dodge of the criticism, isn't it?

Noam Chomsky

I don't see why it's a dodge. We accept that principle uniformly with regard to enemy states. So for example, if Shirin Ebadi criticizes Iran but doesn't criticize Israel, or if Ai Weiwei criticizes China but doesn't denounce the United States, or Sakharov, Havel, anyone – we admire them for that. That's what they should be doing. They should be concentrating on the crimes of their own countries. For us that's even more significant, for the reason I mentioned. We can influence these policies. Ai Weiwei can't do much about the policies of China. We admire him for condemning them. Nobody wants him to write about the US and British crimes, it's a waste of his time. He should be doing exactly what he's doing. We have a far greater responsibility to do it because we are responsible for these policies in a way which dissidents in harsh states are not, and we can influence them. It's pretty striking that we recognize this principle reflexively with regard to enemy states and we can't see it with regard to ourselves, where it's much more significant.

Conor Gearty

If you take, say, that example of critiquing from the inside, Mearsheimer and Walt made a huge splash with a book about the power of the Israeli lobby in the United States. In a way it resembles what Piketty is doing at the moment with the book on capital. Do these books gain traction in American society? They are published in America, they are talked about in America. Or do they disappear? What happens to strong dissent within the American political tradition?

Noam Chomsky

The Piketty book has been well received, lots of comment on it, mostly by economists and the business press. It's undoubtedly an important book, no reason why it shouldn't be.

Mearsheimer and Walt is a little bit different. For one thing, there's a number of questions to ask about their – you know the book, I'm sure. One thing has to do with the quality of their claims. The other is about its reception. I think it is well received. I think the reason is it exculpates the US government. It says: look, we're fine, but what can we do? There's this powerful Jewish lobby that's controlling us. So we'd be delighted to be benevolent and helping people, our natural instincts, but we're trapped by the Jewish lobby. That's a pretty good reason why I think it is accepted.

The second question is about the thesis. Can it really be that a small ethnic lobby controls US policy? If anybody believes that thesis, there's a tactical suggestion that follows immediately: put on your tie and jacket, go to the executive offices of Lockheed Martin, General Electric, Goldman Sachs, JPMorgan Chase, and explain to them that your interests are being harmed by a little lobby which you can put out of business in five minutes. That's the tactical suggestion that follows. Does anybody pursue it? No, because it's absurd.

Mearsheimer and Walt are very good scholars. They're called realist IR scholars. According to realist scholarship, states pursue what is called the national interest, primarily security. It's an anarchic world and states try to preserve their own security and the wellbeing of their own populations, the national interest. There's a lot of questions that are open there. First of all, what is the national interest? Is the national interest of the CEO of General Electric the same as the interest of the janitor who cleans his floors? No, their interests are quite different. So what's the national interest? In practice, it turns out it's the interests of state power and concentrated economic power. Take a look at the formation of policy, that's what it defends.

Is the national interest, in that sense, harmed by US policy toward Israel? Pretty hard to argue that. Certainly, centres of American power don't think so. Take Lockheed Martin or the military industry all together, a big lobby. They think it's great. When the United States gives Israel a couple of billion dollars to buy advanced armaments, that's a gift to Lockheed Martin. In fact, it's a double gift, because it's what within the retail trade is called a teaser. It means that Saudi Arabia comes along and says: wait a minute, we want \$60 billion worth of second-rate equipment which we don't know how to operate. So the defence industry can sell it to them. So that's wonderful. Furthermore, Israel tests the high-tech equipment on live targets. You learn things from that.

There are very close relations of intelligence, very close. It goes way back. Actually this is one of the interesting Snowden revelations. Israel is the only country that gets raw data – not what's called minimized. Most data in the NSA is supposed to be kind of checked so things that are really improper and illegal are thrown out. That's the way it's given to the so-called 'five eyes' (England, Australia, the close allies). Not Israel. They get straight data. The intelligence relations are extremely close.

Military relations are so close. One of the interesting Wikileaks exposures was a list of super-strategic sites, sites that are so important the United States has to defend them at all costs. There are not many of them. One of them was right outside Haifa: Rafael military industries. That's one of the super-significant US sites that has to be defended. It's a military industry, high-tech military. It's one of the places where they did a lot of the drone technology. Their relations with the Pentagon are so close that they actually moved their management offices to Washington, where the money is.

Take a look at US investors like Warren Buffett, Intel. They're investing in Israel all over the place. Buffett recently spent a billion dollars or something to acquire some Israeli company and announced that Israel is the best place for US investors outside the United States. Intel set up their biggest new factory for new-generation chips in Israel. Do these people think that their interests are being harmed by this relationship?

Conor Gearty

John Kerry rings you up tomorrow and says: this two-state thing, it's failed, Noam. I'm fed up with you telling me what to do – I'll do whatever you tell me. He's only got a minute, the aides are circling. What's next? One state?

Noam Chomsky

I'm sorry to be a minority of one again but I think the entire discourse on this is highly misleading. The usual discussion, almost universal, on the part of Israeli authorities, Palestinians, international commentators, almost everyone, is that there are two options: either two states or, if that's gone, one state. In fact a lot of Palestinians support that. They say: okay, let's have Israel, let's give them the keys. They take the whole place over, we'll run a civil rights struggle, a kind of anti-apartheid struggle.

That's all pie in the sky. Those are not the two options. There are two options: one is the international consensus on two states; the second option is Israel continues doing exactly what it is doing now, with US support. Israel doesn't want to take over the Palestinian population. In fact, what they're doing, right before your eyes, is carrying out settlement and development programmes which carve up the West Bank -- Gaza is kept as a prison – in a way which integrates into Israel the parts of the West Bank that they want: the pleasant suburbs of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv; the Jordan valley, where they are kicking out Palestinians; the corridors that go through the east, Ma'ale Adumim in the south, Ariel in the north. Break up the region into sort of cantons. Take over the major resources, including the water, but leave out the population. It's designed so that there will be very few Palestinians in the regions which are integrated into Israel, ultimately annexed to it.

So in fact there won't be what's called the famous demographic problem, too many Arabs in a Jewish state. It's not going to happen. What will happen in fact is that the proportion of Jews in greater Israel will go up when they bring in the settlers. First of all, there aren't a lot of Palestinians in those areas, and the ones who are there are being kicked out. That's the second option. So if you don't have a two-state solution, this is what's going to happen. As long as the US and Britain support it, of course. That's crucial.