Noam Chomsky: Biden's Foreign Policy Is Largely Indistinguishable From Trump's

President Joe Biden's domestic policies, especially on the economic front, are quite encouraging, offering plenty of hope for a better future. The same, however, cannot be said about the administration's foreign policy agenda, as Noam Chomsky's penetrating insights and astute analysis reveal in this exclusive interview for Truthout. Chomsky is a world-famous public intellectual, Institute Professor Emeritus at MIT and Laureate Professor of Linguistics at the University of Arizona.

C.J. Polychroniou: Noam, two months after being in the White House, Biden's foreign policy agenda is beginning to take shape. What are the signs so far of how the Biden administration intends to address the challenges to U.S. hegemony posed by its primary geopolitical rivals, namely Russia and China?

Noam Chomsky: The challenge to U.S. hegemony posed by Russia and particularly China has been a major theme of foreign policy discourse for some time, with persistent agreement on the severity of the threat.

The matter is plainly complex. It's a good rule of thumb to cast a skeptical eye when there is general agreement on some complex issue. This is no exception.

What we generally find, I think, is that Russia and China sometimes deter U.S. actions to enforce its global hegemony in regions on their periphery that are of particular concern to them. One can ask whether they are justified in seeking to

limit overwhelming U.S. power in this way, but that is a long distance from the way the challenge is commonly understood: as an effort to displace the U.S. global role in sustaining a liberal rule-based international order by new centers of hegemonic power.

Do Russia and China actually challenge U.S. hegemony in the ways commonly understood?

Russia is not a major actor in the world scene, apart from the military force that is a (very dangerous) residue of its earlier status as a second superpower. It does not begin to compare with the U.S. in outreach and influence.

China has undergone spectacular economic growth, but it is still far from approaching U.S. power in just about any dimension. It remains a relatively poor country, ranked 85th in the UN Human Development Index, between Brazil and Ecuador. The U.S., while not ranked near the top because of its poor social welfare record, is far above China. In military strength and global outreach (bases, forces in active combat), there is no comparison. U.S.-based multinationals have about half of world wealth and are first (sometimes second) in just about every category. China is far behind. China also faces serious internal problems (ecological, demographic, political). The U.S., in contrast, has internal and security advantages unmatched anywhere.

Take sanctions, a major instrument of world power for one country on Earth: the U.S. They are, furthermore, third-party sanctions. Disobey them, and you're out of luck. You can be tossed out of the world financial system, or worse. It's pretty much the same wherever we look.

If we look at history, we find regular echoes of Sen. Arthur Vandenberg's 1947 advice to the president that he should "scare hell out of the American people" if he wanted to whip them up to a frenzy of fear over the Russian threat to take

over the world. It would be necessary to be “clearer than truth,” as explained by Dean Acheson, one of the creators of the postwar order. He was referring to NSC-68 of 1950, a founding document of the Cold War, declassified decades later. Its rhetoric continues to resound in one or another form, again today about China.

NSC-68 called for a huge military build-up and imposition of discipline on our dangerously free society so that we can defend ourselves from the “slave state” with its “implacable purpose… to eliminate the challenge of freedom” everywhere, establishing “total power over all men [and] absolute authority over the rest of the world.” And so on, in an impressive flow.

China does confront U.S. power – in the South China Sea, not the Atlantic or Pacific. There is an economic challenge as well. In some areas, China is a world leader, notably renewable energy, where it is far ahead of other countries in both scale and quality. It is also the world’s manufacturing base, though profits go mostly elsewhere, to managers like Taiwan’s Foxconn or investors in Apple, which is increasingly reliant on intellectual property rights – the exorbitant patent rights that are a core part of the highly protectionist “free trade” agreements.

China’s global influence is surely expanding in investment, commerce, takeover of facilities (such as management of Israel’s major port). That influence is likely to expand if it moves forward with provision of vaccines virtually at cost in comparison with the West’s hoarding of vaccines and its impeding of distribution of a “People’s Vaccine” so as to protect corporate patents and profits. China is also advancing substantially in high technology, much to the consternation of the U.S., which is seeking to impede its development.

It is rather odd to regard all of this as a challenge to U.S. hegemony.

U.S. policy might help create a more serious challenge by confrontational and hostile acts that drive Russia and China closer together in reaction. That has, in fact, been happening, under Trump and in Biden's first days – though Biden did respond to Russia's call for renewing the New START Treaty on limiting nuclear weapons at the last minute, salvaging the one major element of the arms control regime that had escaped Trump's wrecking ball.

Clearly what is needed is diplomacy and negotiations on contested matters, and real cooperation on such crucial issues as global warming, arms control, future pandemics – all very severe crises that know no borders. Whether Biden's hawkish foreign policy team will have the wisdom to move in these directions is, for now, at best unclear – at worst, frightening. Absent significant popular pressures, prospects do not look good.

Another issue that calls for popular attention and activism is the policy of protecting hegemony by seeking to harm potential rivals, very publicly in the case of China, but elsewhere too, sometimes in ways that are sometimes hard to believe.

A remarkable example is buried in the Annual Report for 2020 of the Department of Health and Human Services, proudly presented by Secretary Alex Azar. Under the subheading "Combatting malign influences in the Americas," the report discusses the efforts of the Department's Office of Global Affairs (OGA)

to mitigate efforts by states, including Cuba, Venezuela and Russia, who are working to increase their influence in the region to the detriment of U.S. safety and security. OGA coordinated with other U.S. government agencies to strengthen diplomatic ties and offer technical and humanitarian assistance to dissuade countries in the region from accepting aid from these ill-intentioned states. Examples include using OGA's Health Attaché office to persuade Brazil to reject the

Russian COVID-19 vaccine, and offering CDC technical assistance in lieu of Panama accepting an offer of Cuban doctors. [Emphasis mine].

In the midst of a raging pandemic, according to this report, we must block malignant initiatives to help miserable victims.

Under President Jair Bolsonaro's grotesque mismanagement, Brazil has become the global horror story of failure to deal with the pandemic, despite its outstanding health institutes and fine past record in vaccination and treatment. It is suffering from a severe shortage of vaccines, so the U.S. takes pride in its efforts to prevent it from using the Russian vaccine, which Western authorities recognize to be comparable to the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines used here.

Even more astonishing, as the author of this article in the EU-based Brasil Wire comments, is "that the US dissuaded Panama from accepting Cuban doctors, who have been on the global front line against the pandemic, working in over 40 countries." We must protect Panama from the "malign influence" of the one country in the world to exhibit the kind of internationalism that is needed to save the world from disaster, a crime that must be stopped by the global hegemon.

Washington's hysterical dedication to crush Cuba from almost the first days of its independence in 1959 is one of the most extraordinary phenomena of modern history, but still, the level of petty sadism is a constant surprise

With regards to Iran, also there do not seem to be signs of hope as the Biden administration has named Richard Nephew, an architect of sadistic sanctions against Iran under Barack Obama, as its deputy Iran envoy. Right or wrong?

Biden adopted Trump's Iran program with virtually no change, even in rhetoric. It is worthwhile to recall the facts.

Trump withdrew U.S. participation in the JCPOA (the nuclear

agreement), in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 2331, which obligates all states to abide by the JCPOA, and in violation to the wishes of all other signers. In an impressive display of hegemonic power, when the UN Security Council members insisted on abiding by 2331 and not extending UN sanctions, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told them to get lost: You are renewing the sanctions. Trump imposed extremely harsh new sanctions to which others are obliged to conform, with the goal of causing maximum pain to Iranians so that perhaps the government might relent and accept his demand that the JCPOA be replaced by a new agreement that imposes much harsher restrictions on Iran. The pandemic offered new opportunities to torture Iranians by depriving them of desperately needed relief.

Furthermore, it is Iran's responsibility to take the first steps towards negotiations to capitulate to the demands, by terminating actions it took in reaction to Trump's criminality.

As we've discussed before, there is merit in Trump's demand that the JCPOA can be improved. A far better solution is to establish a nuclear weapons-free zone (or WMD-free zone) in the Middle East. There is only one barrier: the U.S. will not permit it, and vetoes the proposal when it arises in international forums, most recently seen by President Obama. The reason is well-understood: It's necessary to protect Israel's major nuclear arsenal from inspection. The U.S. does not even formally acknowledge its existence. To do so would prejudice the vast flood of U.S. aid to Israel, arguably in violation of U.S. law, a door that neither political party wants to open. It's another topic that will not even be discussed unless popular pressure makes suppression impossible.

In U.S. discourse, Trump is criticized because his policy of torturing Iranians didn't succeed in bringing the government to capitulate. The stance is reminiscent of Obama's highly

praised moves towards limited relations with Cuba, because, as he explained, we need new tactics after our efforts to bring democracy to Cuba had failed – namely, a vicious terrorist war that led almost to extinction in the 1962 missile crisis and sanctions of unparalleled cruelty that are unanimously condemned by the UN General Assembly (Israel excepted). Similarly, our wars in Indochina, the worst crimes since World War II, are criticized as a "failure," as is the invasion of Iraq, a textbook example of the "supreme international crime" for which Nazi war criminals were hanged.

These are among the prerogatives of a true hegemon, immune to the cackles of foreigners and confident in the support of those whom an acerbic critic once called "the herd of independent minds," the bulk of the educated classes and the political class.

Biden took over the entire Trump program, without any change. And to twist the knife further, he appointed Richard Nephew as deputy Iran envoy. Nephew has explained his views in his book Art of Sanctions, where he outlines the proper "strategy to carefully, methodically, and efficiently increase pain on areas that are vulnerabilities while avoiding those that are not." Just the right choice for the policy of torturing Iranians because the government that most of them despise will not bend to Washington's demands.

U.S. government policy towards Cuba and Iran provides very valuable insight into how the world works under the domination of imperial power.

Cuba since independence in 1959 has been the target of unremitting U.S. violence and torture, reaching truly sadistic levels – with scarcely a word of protest in elite sectors. The U.S., fortunately, is an unusually free country, so we have access to declassified records explaining the ferocity of the efforts to punish Cubans. Fidel Castro's crime, the State Department explained in the early years, is its "successful

defiance” of U.S. policy since the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, which declared Washington’s right to control the hemisphere. Plainly harsh measures are required to stifle such efforts, as any Mafia Don would understand – and the analogy of world order to the Mafia has considerable merit.

Much the same is true of Iran since 1979, when a popular uprising overthrew the tyrant installed by the U.S. in a military coup that rid the country of its parliamentary regime. Israel had enjoyed very close relations with Iran during the years of the Shah’s tyranny and extreme human rights violations, and like the U.S., was appalled by his overthrow. Israel’s de facto Ambassador to Iran, Uri Lubrani, expressed his “strong” belief that the uprising could be suppressed, and the Shah restored “by a very relatively small force, determined, ruthless, cruel. I mean the men who would lead that force will have to be emotionally geared to the possibility that they would have to kill ten thousand people.”

U.S. authorities pretty much agreed. President Carter sent NATO Gen. Robert E. Huyser to Iran to try to convince the Iranian military to undertake the task – a surmise confirmed by recently released internal documents. They refused, considering it hopeless. Shortly after, Saddam Hussein invaded Iran – an attack that killed hundreds of thousands of Iranians, with full support from the Reagan administration, even when Saddam resorted to chemical weapons, first against Iranians, then against Iraqi Kurds in the Halabja atrocities. Reagan protected his friend Hussein by attributing the crimes to Iran and blocking congressional censure. He then turned to direct military support for Hussein with naval forces in the Gulf. One vessel, the USS Vincennes, shot down an Iranian civilian airliner in a clearly marked commercial airspace, killing 290 people, returning to a royal welcome at its home base where the commander and flight officer who had directed the destruction of the airliner were rewarded with Medals of Honor.

Recognizing that it could not fight the U.S., Iran effectively capitulated. Washington then to turned harsh sanctions against Iran, while rewarding Hussein in ways that sharply increased threats to Iran, which was then just emerging from a devastating war. President Bush I invited Iraqi nuclear engineers to the U.S. for advanced training in nuclear weapons production, no small matter for Iran. He pushed through agricultural aid that Hussein badly needed after having destroyed rich agricultural areas with his chemical weapons attack against Iraqi Kurds. He sent a high-level mission to Iraq headed by the Republican Senate leader Bob Dole, later presidential candidate, to deliver his respects to Hussein, to assure him that critical comment about him would be curbed on Voice of America, and to advise Hussein that he should ignore critical comment in the press, which the U.S. government can't prevent.

This was April 1990. A few months later, Hussein disobeyed (or misunderstood) orders and invaded Kuwait. Then everything changed.

Almost everything. Punishment of Iran for its "successful defiance" continued, with harsh sanctions, and new initiatives by President Bill Clinton, who issued executive orders and signed congressional legislation sanctioning investment in Iran's oil sector, the basis of its economy. Europe objected, but had no way to avoid U.S. extraterritorial sanctions.

U.S. firms suffered too. Princeton University Middle East specialist Seyed Hossein Mousavian, former spokesman for Iran nuclear negotiators, reports that Iran had offered a billion-dollar contract to the U.S. energy firm Conoco. Clinton's intervention, blocking the deal, closed off an opportunity for reconciliation, one of many cases that Mousavian reviews.

Clinton's action was part of a general pattern, an unusual one. Ordinarily, particularly on energy-related issues, policy conforms to Adam Smith's comments on 18th-century England,

where the “masters of mankind” who own the private economy are the “principal architects” of government policy, and act to ensure that their own interests are foremost, however “grievous” the effect on others, including the people of England. Exceptions are rare, and instructive.

Two striking exceptions are Cuba and Iran. Major business interests (pharmaceuticals, energy, agribusiness, aircraft, and others) have been eager to break into Cuban and Iranian markets and to establish relations with domestic enterprises. State power bars any such moves, overruling parochial interests of the “masters of mankind” in favor of the transcendent goal of punishing successful defiance.

There’s a good deal to say about these exceptions to the rule, but it would take us too far afield.

The release of the Jamal Khashoggi murder report disappointed almost everyone, save Saudi Arabia. Why is the Biden administration taking such a soft approach towards Saudi Arabia, and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in particular, which prompted New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof to write that, “Biden … let the murderer walk”?

Not hard to guess. Who wants to offend the close ally and regional power that the State Department described during World War II as “a stupendous source of strategic power, and one of the greatest material prizes in world history … probably the richest economic prize in the world in the field of foreign investment.” The world has changed in many ways since, but the basic reasoning remains.

Biden had promised that, if elected, he would scale back Trump’s nuclear weapons spending, and that the U.S. would not rely on nuclear weapons for defense. Are we likely to see a dramatic shift in U.S. nuclear strategy under the Biden administration whereby the use of these weapons will be far less likely?

For reasons of cost alone, it is a goal that should be high on the agenda of anyone who wants to see the kinds of domestic programs the country badly needs. But the reasons go far beyond. Current nuclear strategy calls for preparation for war – meaning terminal nuclear war – with China and Russia.

We should also remember an observation of Daniel Ellsberg's: Nuclear weapons are constantly used, much in the way a gun is used by a robber who aims his gun at a storekeeper and says, "Your money or your life." The principle in fact is enshrined in policy, in the important 1995 document "Essentials of Post-Cold War Deterrence" issued by Clinton's Strategic Command (STRATCOM). The study concludes that nuclear weapons are indispensable because of their incomparable destructive power, but even if not used, "nuclear weapons always cast a shadow over any crisis or conflict," enabling us to gain our ends through intimidation; Ellsberg's point. The study goes on to authorize "preemptive" use of nuclear weapons and provides advice for planners, who should not "portray ourselves as too fully rational and cool-headed." Rather, the "national persona we project" should be "that the US may become irrational and vindictive if its vital interests are attacked and that "some elements may appear to be potentially 'out of control.'"

Richard Nixon's "madman theory," but this time not from reports by associates but from the designers of nuclear strategy.

Two months ago, the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons went into effect. The nuclear powers refused to sign, and still violate their legal responsibility under the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons to undertake "effective measures" to eliminate nuclear weapons. That stance is not carved in stone, and popular activism could induce significant moves in that direction, a necessity for survival.

Regrettably, that level of civilization still seems beyond the range of the most powerful states, which are careening in the

opposite direction, upgrading and enhancing the means to terminate organized human life on Earth.

Even junior partners are joining in the race to destruction. Just a few days ago, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson "announced a 40 per cent increase in UK's stockpile of nuclear warheads. His review… recognised 'the evolving security environment', identifying Russia as Britain's `most acute threat'."

Lots of work to do.

This interview has been lightly edited for clarity and length.