
Contradictions in U.S. Foreign Policy

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Contradictions in U.S. Foreign Policy

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An Interview with Solomon Eppel and Tushar Khadloya
Cambridge, MA, 19 December 2007

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***Brown Journal of World Affairs*:** Tell us a bit about yourself first. How did you, as a linguistics scholar, become an authority on international politics?

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Noam Chomsky: Well, actually, my political interests long precede any awareness of the existence of linguistics. I grew up as kind of a young radical and political activist and only later learned about linguistics. But I didn't start writing and wasn't active in the general public sphere until the early 1960s. The 1950s were a pretty quiescent period; there was nothing much happening. But by the early 1960s—with the anti-nuclear movement, the rise of the Civil Rights Movement, and especially the Vietnam War in 1962—I just became more active. I didn't really intend to write on politics. Actually, a lot of my articles were just written-up talks, including my first article, which was on the responsibility of intellectuals. It was, believe it or not, a talk for the Hillel Foundation at Harvard.

***Journal*:** How have the theoretical approaches in linguistics influenced your views on international politics and vice versa? Do you ever play the two disciplines off one another?

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NOAM CHOMSKY

Chomsky: Not really. I'll tell you the honest truth—I don't really think that international relations theory should be called a theory. A theory has some non-obvious principles, from which you can deduce some unexpected consequences, and a theory can be verified. I really don't think that's true of international relations theory. It's no criticism—human affairs are just too complicated for the kinds of theories we have in the sciences.

International relations theory has two major approaches: one is realism and the other is idealism, sometimes called Wilsonian idealism. I think there are several problems



with both of these approaches. One problem is that they are substantially refuted by the facts, and that's even recognized by some of the leading exponents of the theories. For example, Hans Morgenthau, a prominent realist, has a book called *The Purpose of American Politics*. This is mysticism, of course, because countries don't have purposes. But Morgenthau states that the purpose of the United States is to bring freedom and justice and so on to the rest of the world. Morgenthau is a good scholar, and he recognizes that the historical record completely undermines this thesis. But he says that to deny that the United States has a purpose merely on the basis of the empirical facts would be like what he calls the error of athe-

ism, which denies religious belief on the same grounds. So the existence of a purpose is a religious belief refuted by the facts.

If you look at idealism, on the other hand, it's almost a bad joke. One problem is that every great power toys with the rhetoric of benign intentions and sacrificing to help the world. If you look at the actual record of say, Woodrow Wilson, you'd notice he was one of the most brutal interventionists in modern U.S. history. He destroyed Haiti and the Dominican Republic, not to mention his interventions in Mexico and Nicaragua. His famous principle of self-determination did not really apply to the colonies. Where is the idealism?

Journal: What do you envision the broad framework of what U.S. policy should be?

Chomsky: On a broad scale, I'd probably subscribe to the same aphorisms and truisms: that we should be in favor of peace and justice, and economic growth, and ending poverty, and so on. But you can say that about any other country as well. The interesting questions arise when you ask what we should do in this case and that case and the other case.

So for example, take what is probably the major current policy issue now, attenu-

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ated slightly by the latest National Intelligence Estimate—U.S. relations with Iran. What should U.S. policy be? Well, there are some very substantive proposals you can make. A sensible policy towards Iran, in my opinion, would be for the United States to end any threats against Iran, threats that themselves happen to be illegal—they are in violation of the UN Charter. Furthermore, Iran should have the rights of any signatory of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT): it should have the right to have nuclear energy and not nuclear weapons. There should be a nuclear weapons-free zone in the Middle East—that applies to Iran and Israel, and U.S. and other forces deployed there. And the United States should actually make progress in fulfilling its own legal obligation under the NPT, which is to make good faith efforts to eliminate nuclear weapons altogether, including its own. Independently of U.S.–Iran relations, there should be some international institution for developing fissile materials to which states could apply if they satisfy conditions of an international agency. Steps like this might overcome the U.S.–Iran confrontation. Well that sounds very radical, except that it happens to the position of 75 to 80 percent of the U.S. population. But that's not the position of any political candidate, and certainly not of the media—in fact, the media wouldn't even report the polls, which means the people who are answering the question this way probably think they are totally isolated. That's one striking example of what is called the democratic deficit—a society that has formal democratic institutions that don't function.

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Commonly political analysts argue that policies should not be “poll-driven.” By overwhelming majorities, the public disagrees. That divide is probably one of the reasons why 80 percent of the public believe that the country is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves. Incidentally, one of the questions that should be raised about realist international relations theory is how its core notion, the abstract and rather obscure concept national interest, relates to the domestic sources of foreign policy and the public's perception.

Journal: Are there any cases in which the majority opinion of the U.S. people would actually not be a good idea, in terms of foreign policy?

Chomsky: I don't necessarily agree with the general opinion on everything. For example, roughly half the population of the United States thinks the world was created ten thousand years ago exactly the way it is now. But that's really not the issue for me; the point is that on serious policy issues, there is a tremendous gap between public opinion and public policy, and public opinion is often quite sound, in my judgment. I've written about it, and there is work in the mainstream of political science on it. For example there is a recent book out by Benjamin Page and Marshall Bouton called

The Foreign Policy Disconnect, in which they show through extensive polling and studies that the division between public opinion and actual foreign policy extends over many issues. Furthermore, they point out, interestingly, that public opinion tends to be pretty coherent and consistent over time. So, there is a real problem of turning the United States into a functioning democracy. That would not solve every problem in the world but it would solve many. What I described above, a solution to the U.S.–Iran confrontation, would be in the national interest in the eyes of maybe three-fourths of the population—and for what it’s worth, I agree with the popular sentiment. But it’s not the national interest that is defined by elite sectors.

Journal: What is your take on the recent leftward shift in Latin American politics?

Chomsky: It’s pretty significant and broad. It’s happening almost all over Latin America with very few exceptions. Because of the leftward shift, now is actually the first time since the Spanish invasion that Latin America is beginning to confront two major problems. One is integration among the states—they have been quite separate from one another and each has been oriented toward the West, but not toward each other: you can see this in their transportation systems, export of capital, trade, and in other dimensions. They are finally beginning to move towards some sort of integration. Additionally, Latin America has close to the worst inequality in the world and there are some steps being taken to overcome that. These two changes go together, and they have a consequence—growing independence from the United States. Integration among the states of the region makes an obvious contribution to independence by enabling them to present a common front and to work together for mutual benefit. Internal integration—mitigating the huge inequality and marginalization of the vast majority—is a precondition for policy choices that are resistant to subversion, economic strangulation, and other forms of external intrusion that have plagued the hemisphere. These developments are very threatening to U.S. power.

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Journal: How do you think that the defeat of Hugo Chavez’s constitutional amendment will hinder the leftist shift? Do you think it will matter in the long run?

Chomsky: My view is, first of all, that the constitutional reforms were not particularly dramatic. Nevertheless, I think it’s actually a good thing that they were voted down. It was presented as a single package—a yes or no; it was personalized, associated specifically with Chavez, which it shouldn’t be; and there was not enough public participation. That’s not the right way to proceed. The fact that there was basically a tie in the vote reflects that. And I think it’s probably a healthy development that they weren’t accepted by a large majority, so the process can now be undertaken in a serious way.

There's near hysteria in the United States about Chavez. The party line of demonizing him is so intense that the topic can barely be discussed sensibly. Look at the actual elements of the proposed reforms that were voted down. For example, there was a big fuss about the fact that they allowed for the re-election of the president indefinitely. Was the United States a fascist country until 1951, when we had the same principle? Is every parliamentary democracy where the prime minister can be re-elected indefinitely a tyranny for that reason?

Chavez is bitterly condemned for not renewing the license for RCTV, the Venezuelan television channel. I think he should have renewed the license too, and I also agree with Western opinion that things like that couldn't happen in the West. But there's a reason for that: if there had there been a channel like RCTV in the United States, its owners and managers would have received the death penalty a long time ago. Everyone knew this is a channel that supported the U.S.-backed military coup that briefly overthrew the government and eliminated the supreme court, parliament, and every democratic institution. Suppose there was a military coup in the United States that was supported by CBS. After the coup was overthrown, what would happen to CBS? Would they be allowed to go on for the next five years?

Journal: Do you anticipate that the United States will become more interventionist in Latin America to prevent the leftist shift?

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Chomsky: The United States has traditionally had two primary mechanisms for controlling Latin America. One was debt, with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in recent years serving as the instrument of control. The other is military force, including subversion, counterinsurgency, paramilitary terror, and other devices. Both options have been significantly weakened. Many of the countries of Latin America have by now thrown out the IMF. Argentina paid off its debts with the help of Venezuela, and Brazil did the same. The IMF is basically an offshoot of the U.S. Treasury Department. It has been—as the U.S. executive director Karen Lissakers described—the “credit community’s enforcer,” but it’s losing its capacity to do that since it’s not being financed by debt to the extent that it has been. In general, economic controls such as economic strangulation have been weakened; the same is true with regard to military control and intervention. Take Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil. The general character of the Brazilian government and its programs 40 years ago wasn’t all that different from that of the current president, but the Kennedy administration organized a military coup that took place shortly after the Kennedy assassination and instituted the first neo-Nazi style national security state. The same happened to Chile and other countries. The last time the United States tried this was in Venezuela in 2002.

It's not that the United States is abandoning the hope of military action. The number of Latin American military officers being trained by the United States has increased sharply, and training has shifted from the State Department to the Pentagon. When the training is under State Department control, at least theoretically, there is some supervision and conditionalities concerning human rights and democratization—conditions that at least in theory have to be satisfied for aid and training to proceed. When training programs are in the hands of the Pentagon, there are no conditionalities. The purpose of these programs is explicit. The programs are designed against what they call “radical populism.” In the Latin America context radical populism means priests organizing peasants, human rights activists, labor leaders, and so on. Well, now we are training the Latin American military to take over essentially police functions and erase radical populism. In recent history, the number of military officers being trained has increased I think maybe 50 percent.

The United States is losing its military bases, however. One of the reasons for U.S. opposition to President Rafael Correa in Ecuador is that he has indicated he may not permit the United States to keep its military base in Manta, Ecuador. In fact, during the election campaign he said he would allow the United States to keep its Manta base if the United States allows Ecuador to set up a military base in Miami. That is the kind of comment that would have led to military intervention to overthrow the government not many years ago. But this time, the United States has to back off. These are all parts of the slow, complicated move towards integration and dealing with internal problems—many of which, though deeply rooted, were exacerbated by U.S.-imposed economic programs in the last 20 years.

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Journal: To move to another policy topic, what is your view on the United States and Israel's role in the continued division between Fatah and Hamas and their division of Gaza and the West Bank?

Chomsky: It's interesting. Over the last thirty years or more the United States has been the primary barrier to a negotiated diplomatic settlement of the Israel–Palestine conflict. Again, that is not something you are supposed to talk about.

But if you look at the record it is very clear: in 1971 Egypt offered a full peace treaty to Israel if Israel would withdraw from the occupied territories, in particular the Sinai Peninsula, President Sadat's main concern. Israel rejected it—they wanted to settle in the northeast Sinai. There was a bureaucratic battle in the U.S. government as to how to react. Kissinger won, and Washington adopted the policy he called “stalemate”—no negotiations, just force. That led to the near-disastrous 1973 war. After that near catastrophe, the United States began to move toward accepting Egypt's proposal, as it

finally did, in essence, in the Camp David agreements of 1978–1979. It is regarded as a diplomatic triumph for Jimmy Carter but was in fact a diplomatic disaster. The fact is that Washington accepted pretty much the Egyptian proposal of 1971 after a very dangerous war and much needless suffering.

Anwar Sadat's proposal in 1971 offered nothing to the Palestinians, but by the mid-1970s, Palestinian national rights had become an international issue. In 1976, the United States vetoed the Security Council's resolution—proposed by the Arab states—calling for a two-state settlement based on the growing international consensus. It did the same in 1980. The debate shifted to the General Assembly and if you look at the record, year after year, the votes were something like 150 to 2 calling for the recognition of Palestinian national rights. The dissenters would be the United States and Israel, and maybe a small state they'd pick up. U.S.–Israeli rejectionism took quite extreme forms. One example was in 1989, in reaction to the formal acceptance by the Palestinian National Council of the international consensus on a two-state settlement. In reaction, the Israeli coalition government, Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Shamir, issued a declaration rejecting any “additional Palestinian state” between Jordan and Israel—additional, because in their view Jordan already was a Palestinian state. That's about like saying that Jews don't need a state because they already have New York. The U.S. fully endorsed Israel's declaration, in the Baker Plan of December 1989.

Today the United States remains a barrier to a settlement. That's not the way we're supposed to look at it—we're supposed to look at the United States as an honest broker between these crazies. But the facts are unequivocal.

Let's turn to the Hamas–Fatah division. In January 2006, Palestine had a free election that was closely monitored and recognized to be fair, but the wrong people won. So the United States and Israel immediately—within days—turned to savagely punishment of the population for the crime of having voted the wrong way. Israel instituted sanctions, withheld funds it is legally obligated to provide, and stepped up violence; it even cut off the supply of water to the Gaza Strip. Since then it's gotten much worse. All of this with full U.S. participation and support, and EU backing as well. It isn't easy to imagine a more dramatic illustration of hatred and contempt for democracy.

The United States and Israel immediately moved towards trying to arm their own faction, Fatah, to carry out a military coup. It wasn't concealed, and it was with Egyptian support. Well, Hamas carried out a preemptive action in the Gaza Strip and took it over, at which point U.S.–Israeli punishment of the population sharply increased to the point that now they are barely able to survive. This is the reaction to a democratic election.

The claim is that Hamas has to meet three conditions. First, they have to rec-

ognize Israel; second, they have to renounce violence; and third, they have to accept past agreements, in particular the Roadmap. Do the United States and Israel accept those conditions? I mean, do the United States and Israel recognize Palestine? Do they recognize Hamas as Palestine's political authority? The first condition is ridiculous. Did the United States and Israel renounce violence? We don't even have to talk about that. Did the United States and Israel accept the Roadmap? No, they rejected it. In fact, Israel formally accepted the Roadmap, but added 14 reservations that completely eliminated its content, and the United States backed that up.

Furthermore, Bush is the first U.S. president to officially authorize permanent Israeli retention of the settlement blocks behind the annexation wall—euphemistically called “the separation fence.” First of all, it is totally illegal. The World Court just ruled on it and unanimously agreed that the Geneva Conventions apply to the Occupied Territories, so any transfer of population there is in violation of the Conventions. Even the U.S. justice on the court said that any building of the wall to protect the settlers is *ipso facto* illegal because the settlers' presence is illegal. But their presence is supported by the United States, so it continues. Here is another case where the U.S. population supports the international consensus, in sharp opposition to the government.

To be fair, there has been one break in U.S. rejectionism, namely during the last month of Clinton's tenure. In December 2000, he recognized that the Camp David proposals were unacceptable and he proposed new parameters. He then pointed out that both sides had accepted the parameters, but both sides had reservations. The two sides then met in Taba, Egypt in January 2001 to work out the differences and they came pretty close to a settlement. In fact, in their last news conference they said that if they had a little more time they probably could have resolved them and reached a settlement. However the negotiations were called off prematurely by the Israeli government. Then Bush and Sharon came to office and that was the end of the story.

And U.S.–Israeli rejectionism is not just in words: the settlement and infrastructure programs in the West Bank—forget Gaza, that's just savage punishment—but in the West Bank, Israel, with U.S. backing, is continuing infrastructure and settlement programs that will make a political settlement impossible unless they are curbed and reversed.

Journal: So in the foreseeable future, do you envision any kind of shift in these policies and ideologies on the part of the United States and Israel? If so, would the process be very incremental, or could it be catalyzed by dramatic swings of opinion?

Chomsky: If the United States would abandon its rejectionism and join the international consensus, Israel would go along. For one thing, a large part of the population

is already fairly ready, and for another thing they would have no choice. When the United States insists on something, Israel goes along, no matter how much they hate it. So the real question is whether the United States will agree to join the international consensus, which is now overwhelming. The Arab League has a formal proposal for normalized relations with Israel along the terms of the international consensus. And the supreme leader of Iran accepts the Arab League position. Hamas has been publicly calling for a two state settlement now for years. The former non-aligned countries (G-77) obviously support this position. Europe supports it. If only the United States would agree, it could happen.

If there is sufficient pressure on the United States and Israel to accept something like the international consensus, what they'll probably propose is the plan of Avigdor Lieberman, the ultra-right, ultra-nationalist, racist Israeli parliamentarian. His proposal is that Israel should take over whatever it wants in the West Bank and in return, it would hand over to the new Palestinian state the parts of Israel that happen to have a dense Arab population. This proposal amounts to kicking Israel Arabs out into the Palestinian state. We wouldn't ask them of course—they're just Arabs. We'll just force them from the First World into the Third World.

I suspect that that quite vicious proposal would be accepted by Western opinion. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and his advisors are already indicating some support for it. It would mean Israel takes over the valuable land and resources in the West Bank, especially the water resources, and solves its demographic problem—the problem of non-Jews in a democratic Jewish state. Right now, Israel is establishing Jewish settlements in the Jordan Valley and depriving existing Palestinian ones of even the minimal ability to survive. The rest of Palestine will be broken up by infrastructure projects, like the ones that are being built right now: a big bi-national highway with a 16-foot barrier that blocks the Palestinians from Jerusalem. It's part of the process of creating what is sometimes called a matrix of control in the West Bank, in which the fragments left to the Palestinians will not be viable. All this will be called a two-state solution. That's what might happen unless the United States joins the international consensus, which is the crucial issue. There are alternative proposals, like the Taba proposals or the informal Geneva Accords that followed, which are not perfect in my view but are at least a step toward a reasonable settlement. But they were simply disregarded by the United States and rejected by Israel.

Journal: You, in the past, criticized U.S. intervention in areas such as the Balkans. Do you believe that the United States should intervene in areas like Darfur, where there is clear evidence of genocide? And when do you believe that the United States should, if ever, violate international sovereignty for human rights purposes?

Chomsky: I think that abstractly, there could be such cases. I think a case could be made for Darfur intervention, but the United States wouldn't consider it. Let's take what's now regarded as the worst humanitarian crisis in Africa, worse than Darfur: Somalia. That's the judgment of the United Nations—officially it's now worse than Darfur. The United States did intervene. Just to keep to recent times, there was an Islamic government there, composed of Islamic clerics, that ran almost the entire country. Not a nice government by any means, but things were relatively peaceful. The United States didn't like it, so they rammed through Resolution 1725, a Security Council resolution which called on all states not to intervene in Somalia, and immediately afterwards the United States supported an Ethiopian invasion, in violation of the resolution. The Ethiopian invasion, of course, elicited resistance and now there is a total catastrophe. So yes, the United States intervened and helped create the worst humanitarian disaster in Africa. The United States intervened in other ways as well. One of the great triumphs of the war on terror was to close down an Islamic charity, al-Barakaat, on grounds that it was financing terror. The achievement elicited great acclaim, but silence was preferred when Washington conceded that it was all a mistake. The charity, however, was a primary source of income and economic life for Somalia, which suffered another severe blow.

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Let's take the Balkans. I thought (and wrote) that the United States should have intervened and put in ground troops. The United States didn't want ground troops. It wanted Europe to be on the ground and let them take the brunt of it. They said, "We'll bomb, that's what we do." I'm not in favor of that. So if the United States wanted to do something in the Balkans in the early 1990s, they should have thrown in the ground troops and stopped blocking a political settlement. There was a possible settlement in 1992, but the United States induced the Bosnian government not to accept it, leading to three years of violent war after which the U.S.-imposed settlement was pretty much like the one that was rejected in 1992.

If you go to Kosovo, there's a different story. Kosovo was an ugly place, but the atrocities that are bitterly denounced were almost entirely after the intervention. If you look at the Milošević indictment, it was almost entirely for crimes committed after the bombing. And we have a detailed record from the State Department, from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, from the international monitors, and so on about exactly what was happening in the months prior to the intervention. It wasn't pretty, but it was by no means out of the range of what the United States supports. Then NATO intervened, and there was a huge upsurge in atrocities—as anticipated: the commanding general, Wesley Clark, pointed out right away that if we were to start bombing it was going to increase atrocities. Well, it did.

There were diplomatic options on the table that might have succeeded. Further-

more, what's more striking, we now have evidence from the highest level of the Clinton administration as to why they intervened. It's kind of suppressed but it's there. There is a recent book by John Norris, *Collision Course: NATO, Russia, and Kosovo*, who was a subordinate of Strobe Talbott. Strobe Talbott was right at the top of the planning for Kosovo, and Talbott wrote the introduction to the book. In the introduction, he says that if you want to understand anything about the Clinton administration's thinking regarding Kosovo, this is the book to read. Well, what the book says is that the U.S. bombing was not out of concern for Kosovar Albanians, which was already obvious from the detailed record, but rather because Serbia was not carrying out the required social and economic reforms. That's the report from the top level of the Clinton administration, and one in favor of the intervention. But the intervention was disastrous.

There could be instances in which interventions are actually humanitarian, but if you look at history you can find very rare examples of these: Sierra Leone may be a recent example. But mostly, what is called humanitarian intervention is just aggression. In fact if you look at modern history, say post-World War II, there are actually two striking cases that could be called significant humanitarian interventions—they weren't intended to be humanitarian but they had important humanitarian consequences. They were both in the 1970s. The first one was the Indian invasion of East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, which put an end to huge atrocities. The second one was the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia which threw out the Khmer Rouge, ending atrocities that were just peaking at the time. So why aren't they called humanitarian intervention? Well, for a very simple reason; the United States formally opposed them. The Richard Nixon administration immediately threatened India—they sent out the aircraft carrier *Enterprise* into the Indian waters to threaten them because they were putting an end to massive atrocities and spoiling the photo-op that Kissinger was planning when he got to China. In the case of Vietnam, Vietnam was bitterly denounced for throwing out Pol Pot. The United States supported a Chinese invasion to punish the Vietnamese for this crime and it immediately turned to support for the Khmer Rouge, both diplomatically and militarily. Therefore, these can't be called humanitarian interventions. But that's just fanaticism, as is all too much of the discussion of this issue of humanitarian intervention. 