

There are plausible regional settlements for Ukraine and China

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United States anti-war activist Professor Noam Chomsky was the keynote speaker at an online meeting organised by the Sydney Anti-AUKUS Coalition on February 12, a day after the Quadri-lateral Security Dialogue (Quad) foreign ministers from India, Japan, Australia and the US met in Melbourne. Below are his comments, slightly abridged.

As the Winter Olympics opened in China, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping met in Beijing to form a new axis. *The New York Times* reported that the principle announced by this reincarnation of Hitler and Mussolini was that a powerful country should be able to impose its will within its declared sphere of influence. According to the *NYT*, it should even be able to topple a weak nearby government without the world interfering.

China is the more dangerous of these new axis forces and the US is preparing to defend itself from the Chinese threat. Washington's current approach – “encirclement” – includes the formation of the Quad, AUKUS and the Five Eyes, and other strategic military alliances.

The military imbalance in favour of the US will be supplemented by the plan to sell Australia a fleet of nuclear submarines to patrol seas that are vital for Chinese commerce.

Current US national security strategy is designed to prevail in a war with China or Russia or both. To achieve this, military spending has been greatly increased.

US President Joe Biden signed the *National Defense Authorisation Act* on December 27, which calls for an unbroken chain of US-armed sentinel states stretching from Japan, India and South Korea, to Australia, Thailand, The Philippines, Singapore and, ominously, Taiwan, to encircle China.

Yet, the official US one-China policy recognises Taiwan as part of China with the tacit agreement that no steps will be taken to forcefully change its status.

China has a choice: it can either succumb or resist. It isn't going to succumb and that is at the core of the US-China conflict. China refuses to be intimidated. It's not like Europe, which strongly objects to US policies, but adheres to them.

The US-China conflict is real, but asymmetrical. Its nature was captured by the *NYT*: “As the US pulls back from the Middle East, China leans in, expanding its ties to Middle Eastern states with vast infrastructure investments and cooperation on technology and security”.

The US is withdrawing military forces that have battered the Middle East for decades. In contrast, China is expanding its influence with “soft power” – investment, loans, technology and development programs. Its most extensive project is the huge “Belt and Road” initiative.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation framework coordinates all the central Asian states – India, Pakistan, Russia, Iran and Turkey – with an eye on Central Europe and Afghanistan. It has off-shoots in the Middle East, including Israel, and Africa. It has also moved into Latin America, over strenuous US objections. China has just announced it is taking over Ford's recently-abandoned manufacturing facilities for large-scale electric vehicle production.

The US cannot counter these efforts: its usual tactics of bombs, missiles and special forces' raids do not work on rural communities. Sixty years ago in Vietnam, US counter-insurgency efforts were stymied by the Vietnamese resistance, who were fighting a political war. The US was fighting a military war; its firepower couldn't overcome the appeal of the Vietcong programs to the peasant population, so its reaction was to bomb rural areas, use napalm and large-scale crop and livestock destruction.

That is not unlike the US's dilemma when China "leans in" to the Global South by providing infrastructure and technology investments.

Rightward shift & resistance

The US has viewed China for some years as a rising superpower that may be poised to dominate world affairs. This could lead to a US-China war. But there are critical global issues on which the US and China must cooperate: they will either work together or collapse together, bringing the world down with them.

There is a rightward shift in many countries, but there is also resistance. The shift struggles to contain the growing resistance. In Britain, for example, the movement around former leader Jeremy Corbyn tried to recreate a Labour Party that would respond to the interests of its working-class constituents and become a participant party.

That caused a furore in the British establishment; across the board they were terrified of that possibility. The vote in 2017 showed it was a popular proposition. The establishment was able to beat it back with outrageous fabricated antisemitism lies. Now the Labour Party is back to Tony Blair-style "Thatcher lite", but the forces of resistance are still there.

In the US, the Bernie Sanders campaign was bitterly attacked by the media, and despised and ignored by the Democratic political establishment. Nevertheless, Sanders nearly won the Democratic presidential nomination because of massive popular support, particularly among the young. He now has an important position as head of the Budget Committee, which allows him to put forward positive programs, which are being cut back by a Republican opposition and the Democratic establishment. His policies, if followed, might bring the US into conformity with most of the world on social justice issues, where it lags far behind.

Power does not abdicate without a struggle and the weapons of popular organisation and activism can make a difference. This is a regressive period in the US, yet it is a far more civilised country now than it was 60 years ago. When President John Kennedy first escalated the Vietnam War, there was no opposition. That had changed by the late 1960s.

In the 1930s, the US had such extreme anti-miscegenation laws that even the Nazis refused to accept them. Women were legally regarded as property, not persons until the mid-1970s. These changes didn't happen by magic, but by the means available to activists. We start from a much higher plane, thanks to the work of dedicated activists over many years.

The US foreign policy of encirclement, with Australia's support, is posed as an effort to address China's human rights' breaches. But does that have any credibility?

Look at the US and Australia's concern for human rights breaches where they can directly affect the consequences. Both have no concern for human rights judging by how they treat violations where they have immediate jurisdiction. They are complicit because they have the power to end them; Australia's treatment of refugees is a hideous scandal.

US military aid to Egypt and Israel is higher than any other country. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have described Israel as a second apartheid state. There is extensive documentation showing that US military aid is closely correlated with human rights abuses of the most severe kind: torture, aggression and massacres. Other countries receiving US military aid show the same thing.

The US and Australia are only concerned with human rights violations where they can't do anything about them. Chinese human rights violations are severe. But we don't help end them by encircling China and having nuclear submarines.

China will build up powerful repressive forces in reaction to US provocation. We should protest human rights violations everywhere and we should follow the elementary moral principle of focusing our efforts on where we can do the most good.

The driving force in US foreign policy, and British foreign policy when they ruled the waves, is to ensure they are in command as far as possible.

Ukraine, China and US power

There are two main confrontations today: Ukraine and China. In both cases there are plausible regional settlements. Everyone knows the plausible settlement in Ukraine is to not let it join North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The feasible outcome for Ukraine is Austrian-style neutrality which worked very well throughout the Cold War.

Austria was able to establish whatever connections it wanted to the West and European Union. The sole constraint was that it did not have US military bases and forces on its territory.

That could also be the case for Ukraine. There is a framework — Minsk II — set up by the Normandy Powers: France, Germany, Ukraine and Russia, but not the US. A regional settlement would take Europe out of the framework of US power.

This is a battle that has gone on since World War II. The old Atlanticist vision of NATO was that its purpose was to keep Germany down, Russia out and the US in charge. That was in conflict with Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's vision. When the Soviet Union was collapsing, Gorbachev called for a European Common Home, a reincarnation of Charles de Gaulle's call for a united Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals. German chancellor Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* was a move in the same direction.

Today, French President Emmanuel Macron's negotiations have been bitterly attacked in the US because they go in the same direction — towards a peaceful, European-negotiated settlement.

For the US, it has a major downside: it cuts the US out and that won't do. The US must try to block it and ensure there is an Atlanticist solution that it runs.

It's very similar in China. The confrontations in the South China Sea are real. China is violating international law with the artificial islands it has built. There is no freedom of navigation issue — that is a farce — but there are conflicts and confrontations.

They can and must be handled by regional groupings. That is where they belong. But that has the same downside: the US doesn't run it and that cannot be accepted.

That is the core of the conflict: it is an old story that goes far back in imperial history. After World War II, the US was so far in the lead that it could establish and run global order. In the early years of the Cold War the United Nations was very popular in the US because the other industrial powers had been devastated by war. The US gave the orders and the UN was just a tool for US foreign policy, doing whatever the US said.

But that was just a passing phase. The industrial powers recovered. Worse still, decolonisation came along, with its call for self-determination at the Bandung Non-aligned Conference and the efforts in the UN to establish a new economic order were geared to the needs of the former colonies and to give them a voice in the international information system.

All this was beaten back violently, including by assassinations and overturning governments. There was an interesting outcome.

The rancorous Alaska Summit meeting last March, between the US and China, broke up over a basic issue: China insisted on what it calls the UN-based international order. The US opposed that and called for what it calls the “rule-based” international order – where the US sets the rules: in other words, a US-based international order. US commentary is in favour of rule-based order and opposes UN-based order because, it says, the UN is “out of control”.

The UN does too many things the US doesn't like. It even has policies such as the UN Charter, which the US flatly rejects because the core principle is that you cannot threaten, or use force, except under certain conditions.

Every US president has violated that principle: the US will not be bound by that, so it rejects the UN-based world order.

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