

Resisting AUKUS and War on China Webinar

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Edited transcript of Noam Chomsky's contribution

DAVID BROPHY: Welcome everyone to this public meeting organised by the Sydney Anti-AUKUS Coalition that came into being in the wake of the Federal government's September 2021 announcement of a new security partnership between Australia, UK and US featuring a plan to purchase nuclear submarines. We see this as part of a wider escalation of militarism in Australia and a drift towards war ...

Our meeting coincides with the gathering of Quad [a strategic security dialogue between the United States, India, Japan and Australia] foreign ministers here in Australia which again has seen much talk of war preparations, scaremongering headlines and security agencies playing an increasingly political role ...

Our coalition is united by the view that simply sitting back and waiting for good sense to prevail is not enough at this point in time. We aim to tap into and mobilise the sentiment that exists in Australian society against warmongering and confrontation with China and this meeting is a step in that direction ...

Let me turn immediately to our first panellist who needs very little introduction. Professor Noam Chomsky is legendary for his generosity towards causes and activists worldwide ... Again we in the Sydney Anti-AUKUS Coalition are immensely grateful to him for sharing his thoughts on AUKUS and the state of the world ...

NOAM CHOMSKY: Thank you. As the Winter Olympics opened, Presidents Putin and Xi met in Beijing to form a new axis, the [New York Times](#) reported. The principle announced by this reincarnation of Hitler and Mussolini, the report continued, I'll quote it, is "that a powerful country should be able to impose its will within its declared sphere of influence. The country should even be able to topple a weaker nearby government without the world interfering" - an idea that the US has always abhorred, we are given to understand.

China is the more dangerous of the new axis forces on the march. The United States is preparing to defend itself from the awesome Chinese threat. Washington's current approach to the threat of China is called 'encirclement', 'containment' being out of date.

Encirclement includes the formation of the Quad, supplementing AUKUS and the Anglosphere's Five Eyes, and far more extensive strategic military alliances confronting China that are now being implemented. China can counter with a troubled hinterland.

The radical military imbalance in favour of the United States is being enhanced, as you know, by the latest AUKUS 'achievement' - the plan to provide Australia with a fleet of nuclear submarines to extend already overwhelming US military dominance in the seas that are critical for Chinese commerce.

Current US National Security strategy established by Trump, carried over by Biden, is designed to prevail in a war with China or Russia or both simultaneously. In order to achieve this objective, the military spending which of course dwarfs all others, was greatly enhanced by Trump, now even more so by Biden, and Congress added some extras beyond Biden's expansion of it.

If there is a better definition of insanity it would be enlightening to hear it. In fact we did hear it a couple of weeks ago. On December 27th, perhaps to celebrate Christmas, Biden signed the *National Defence Authorisation Act* described by military analyst, [Michael Klare](#), his words, it calls for an "unbroken chain of US armed sentinel states" - stretching from Japan and South Korea in the northern Pacific to Australia, the Philippines, Thailand and Singapore in the south, along with India, all meant to encircle China and, Klare adds, "ominously enough", Taiwan is included in the chain of armed sentinel states.

Klare's word "ominous" is well chosen. China, of course, regards Taiwan as part of China. So does the United States, formally at least. The official US One-China policy recognises Taiwan as part of China with a tacit agreement that no steps will be taken to forcefully change its status. President Trump and his Secretary of State, Pompeo, chipped away at that formula. It's now been driven to the brink.

China has a choice - the choice of either succumbing or resisting, and they're not going to succumb.

The core of the US-China conflict is in fact just that. China refuses to be intimidated. It is not like Europe which strongly objects to US policies, sanctions and so on, but adheres to them, because it obeys. China doesn't. That's the conflict.

The US-China conflict is real but sharply asymmetrical. Its nature was captured eloquently, if inadvertently, by headline in the *New York Times* a couple of days ago. Here's the headline, I'll quote it: "As the United States pulls back from the Mideast, China leans in, expanding its ties to Middle Eastern states with vast infrastructure investments and cooperation on technology and security." That's the *New York Times* headline and quite unintentionally the headline captures quite accurately what's happening all over the world. The US is withdrawing military forces that have battered the Mideast region for decades in traditional imperial style. In sharp contrast, China is expanding its influence with what's called 'soft power' – investment, loans, technology, development programs. Of course not just in the Mideast. The most extensive Chinese project is the huge Belt and Road initiative that's taking shape within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Corporates, all the Central Asian states, India, Pakistan, Russia, now Iran - it's reaching to Turkey - clearly with an eye on Central Europe. They will include Afghanistan if it can survive its current catastrophe.

The Belt and Road initiative have offshoots in the Middle East, even including Israel. There are accompany programs in Africa and now even Latin America over strenuous US objections. A few weeks ago, China announced that it's taking over the manufacturing facilities in São Paulo, Brazil that Ford recently abandoned and intends to initiate large scale electric vehicles production for Latin America, an area in which China is far ahead.

The United States has no way to counter these efforts. Bombs, missiles, special forces raids in rural communities just don't work. Actually it is an old dilemma. Sixty years ago in Vietnam, US counter-insurgency efforts were stymied by a problem that was despairingly recognised by US intelligence, by US province advisors. The problem was that the Vietnamese resistance - it's called the Vietcong in the United States - were fighting a political war, a domain in which they were strong and the United States was weak.

The United States was responding with a military war, the arena in which it is strong and the Vietcong were weak. But that couldn't overcome the appeal of Vietcong programs for the peasant population. It was the dilemma 60 years ago. The only way the Kennedy administration could react to the VC political war was by US Air Force bombing of rural areas, authorising napalm, large scale crop and livestock destruction, other programs to drive peasants to virtual concentration camps

where they could be 'protected' - the terminology of the day - protected from the guerrillas who US intelligence knew perfectly well that they were supporting. Well, the consequences we know.

That's not unlike the dilemma posed when China leans in to the global South by, quoting the *Times* again, by expanding its ties with vast infrastructure investments and cooperation on technology and security. That's one central element of the China threat that is eliciting such fears and anguish.

The prevailing view in the United States for some years, is that China is a rising superpower confronting the United States and may - in fact, it's been widely predicted for many years - maybe be poised to surpass the United States and dominate world affairs. For what it's worth, I'm sceptical about this prediction, unless the United States contributes to this end by persisting in its current course of self destruction.

There's a recent study by [Harvard University's Belfer Centre for Science and International Affairs](#) which concludes further that the so-called Thucydides Trap is likely to lead to a US-China war. That cannot happen. A US-China war simply means: game over. There are critical global issues on which the United States and China must cooperate. They will either work together or collapse together, bringing the world down with them.

DAVID BROPHY: Thank you very much Professor Chomsky for getting us off to a start with those comments. I'll put some questions to you now that have come through in the Q&A box ... There have been a couple of people wanting to ask questions about the anti-war movement ... Given the rightward shift of official liberal political parties worldwide, what role do you see protest playing in the anti-war movement to build awareness and to place pressure on the state to yield to demands? ... A slightly simpler question - Do you have any advice on how we go about building such a movement?

NOAM CHOMSKY: Well, the question has been asked for centuries in one form or another. It always has the same answer: work harder. We don't have a lot of means but the ones we have are effective: education, organisation, pressures, activities as appropriate to the situation.

There is a rightward shift but there's plenty of resistance to it. The rightward shift is a struggle to try to contain growing resistance. In Britain, for example, the [Jeremy] Corbyn movement was a powerful movement to try to recreate a Labor Party that would respond to the interests of its working class constituents and they would become a participant party. That caused furore in the British establishment across the board. They were terrified of that possibility. If you look at the votes in 2017, it turned out it was a very popular position. Well they were able to beat it back with outrageous lies, dredging up the easy way to attack anyone, anti-Semitism, mostly fabricated, and they were able to beat it back. Now the Labor Party is back to Tony Blair style [politics], what was called Thatcher-lite, but the forces are still there.

Same in the United States. Bernie Sanders was bitterly attacked by the media - condemned, either ignored or attacked - despised by the democratic political establishment. Nevertheless, he virtually won the nomination because of massive popular support ... and right now has a very important position as head of the Budget Committee. In that position, he's putting forward very positive programs which are being cut back, of course, by 100% Republican opposition, but also opposition from the Democratic establishment. Policies that might bring the United States in conformity with most of the world on social justice issues that the US lags far beyond. Well, those are the struggles that are underway. Power systems do not abdicate without a struggle. We know that and the weapons of popular organisation, activism, can make a difference. They do ...

It is a regressive period in the United States. Nevertheless it is a far more civilised country than it was say 60 years ago. In the time of the Kennedy escalation of the Vietnam War, you could find no opposition to that policy in the United States - overwhelmingly supported. I remember very well trying to organise a little bit of opposition. The only way you could do it is by meeting a couple of people in somebody's living room or maybe in a church with four people, most of whom wanted to kill you. That's when the war was escalated.

Well, it changed. Look back to the 1960s - the United States had anti-miscegenation laws that were so extreme that the Nazis refused to accept them. Women were legally regarded as property, not persons, still taking over old British common law - didn't change until mid 70s. Lots of other things have changed, not by magic, but by use of the means that are available to us. We now start from a much higher plane thanks to the work that was done by dedicated activists over many years. The same is true in Australia. Seems true elsewhere. That's the way we can proceed.

DAVID BROPHY: Thank you ... There is a question that is often a topic of debate in Australia among anti-war activists ... How do you appraise Australia's posture vis-a-vis AUKUS, US bases, the Quad and so on? Is it the case that Australia has been dragged into this by the U.S. or is Australia itself a ... champion or be it a minor one? ...

NOAM CHOMSKY: Well, the question begs a question. It assumes that US encirclement with Australian support is an effort to address China's human rights breaches. That's what is assumed. So we can start by asking: Does that have any credibility? Well there is an easy way to check. Take a look US and Australian concern for human rights breaches where they can directly affect the consequences because they are complicit in the human rights breaches.

So take US military spending – it's a good index ... take a look at it. In a category by itself, way above anyone else are two countries: Israel and Egypt. With regard to Israel's human rights breaches, it's sufficient now to turn to the recent detailed studies by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch on what they describe as the second apartheid state - the first one, South Africa, having disappeared. Look down the rest of the list, you find the same thing: extensive documentation showing that US military aid is closely correlated with human rights abuses of the most severe kind: torture, massacre, aggression, and so on. If you look at other indices, it's the same.

With regard to Australia, you can fill it in for yourselves. Take a look at Australia's immigrant policy for example. It's a hideous scandal – I don't have to tell you. One of the times I visited Australia a couple years ago was at the invitation of the East Timor Refugee Association. I was giving talks on Australia - talking about Australia's direct contribution to probably the worst slaughter relative to population since Second World War ... What's more, Australia was collaborating with Indonesia to try to rob East Timor of its sole resource - the oil of the Timor Sea. You can continue without my help on this.

The United States and Australia have no concern for human rights. Repeat - no concern. That's evident from how they treat human rights violations in the areas where they can immediately deal with them, because they are complicit and they have the power to end them. US and Australia of course are much concerned with human rights violations somewhere else where they can't do anything about them. That's cheap and easy.

Chinese human rights violations are severe. They are within the limited range of Chinese reach ... We don't help end them by encircling China, increasing provocations and so on. Nuclear submarines in the South China Sea don't help people in the western provinces of China. Quite on the contrary.

They will help powerful repressive forces, partly in reaction to the provocative actions, and that of course leads to more repression within. That's a familiar dynamic.

So, yes we should certainly protest human rights violations everywhere and we should also follow a very elementary moral principle, so elementary that it's embarrassing to repeat it. You focus your efforts on where you can do most good. It's no use condemning the crimes of Genghis Khan – you can't do anything about it. It makes a lot of sense to condemn an act in our own human rights violations which are enormous and extreme. I think that's how we should deal with it.

DAVID BROPHY: I'm very glad that you touched on that specific issue ... I might just, if I could, keep you for one more question ... Who's really driving American foreign policy today? Is it coming out of the White House and the advisors there or is it more decentralised driven by institutions like the Pentagon, the arms industry and so on. And then there's another possibly related question which is how we situate this increasing bellicosity in Western governments which we see [in] the contemporaneous phenomenon of the rise of the far right politics, what people sometimes referred to as right wing populism. Do you see a connection between this pressure for confrontation with China and those types of phenomena?

NOAM CHOMSKY: Well, the driving force in US foreign policy is a very familiar and traditional one, pretty much the same as the driving force in British foreign policy when they were ruling the waves. The goal is to ensure that the United States will be in command as far as possible and that shows itself case by case as it always has.

Take the two main confrontations today: Ukraine, China. In both cases there are possible plausible regional settlements. Take Ukraine. It's known on all sides what the plausible settlement is. Everyone knows that Ukraine is not going to join NATO - hardly an imaginable future. The plausible, feasible outcome for Ukraine is Austrian style neutrality. It worked very well throughout the whole Cold War. Austria was able to establish whatever connection it wanted to the West, to the EU, anything it wanted, no constraints. The soul constraint is don't have US military forces and bases on your territory. Not having them is good for Austria, is good for the world. That can be the case in Ukraine.

With regard to the internal problems of Ukraine, there is a framework - so-called Minsk 2 - set up by the Normandy powers – France, Germany, Ukraine, Russia. But notice something's missing from the Normandy powers - the United States. The regional settlement will take Europe out of the framework of US power.

Now this is a long battle. It has gone on since the Second World War. In US foreign policy, you may recall the old slogan about NATO – the point of NATO is to keep Germany down, keep Russia out, and keep the United States in, which means in charge. That's called the Atlanticist vision. It has always been in conflict with another vision - Gorbachev's vision - when the Soviet Union was collapsing - was what he called the European Common Home. It was a reincarnation of Charles De Gaulle's call for Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals. Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik was a move in the same direction. Macron's negotiations today are bitterly attacked in the United States because they go in the same direction – towards a European peaceful negotiated settlement which has a major downside – the US is out. That won't do. So therefore US is to try to block it, ensure that there's an Atlanticist solution that the United States runs.

It is very similar in China. Take the confrontations in the South China Sea. They're real. China is violating international law with the islands in the China Sea – there's no issue with freedom of navigation issue - that's a farce - but there are conflicts and confrontations. They can and must be

handled by regional groupings. That's where they belong. Easy to handle them regionally, but that has the same downside – the United States doesn't run it and that can't be accepted. So that's the core of the conflict - an old story, goes way back in imperial history.

The US isn't innovating anything. After the Second World War, the United States was so far in the lead, that it could actually establish and run the global order. Notice what happen with that. In the early years of Cold War the United Nations was very popular in the United States. Why? Because the other industrial powers had been devastated. The United States could give the orders. The UN was just a tool for US foreign policy. It did whatever the U.S. said.

Well, that was a passing phase. The industrial powers recovered. Worse still, decolonisation came along with its call for self determination, the Bandung conference (the non-aligned conference), the efforts in the UN to establish a New Economic Order that would be geared to the needs of the former colonised countries instead of just robbing and killing them, a new information order to give the Third World a voice in the international information system.

All of this was beaten back violently, including assassinations, overturning governments and so on. You can't have that and there's an interesting outcome which is discussed right on the front pages now. You go back to the Alaska summit meeting a couple of month's ago [with] the United States and China. Very rancorous, it broke up over a basic issue. China insisted on what it calls the 'UN based international order'. The US opposes that. The US calls for what's called the 'rule based international order'. Footnote - the US sets the rules. So we'll have a US based international order, called rule based.

Well, in US scholarship, commentary and so on, you're supposed to be in favour of the rule based order and opposed to the UN based order, because the UN is out of control. The UN is no longer favoured - just does too many things the US doesn't want. It even has policies like the UN Charter which the US flatly rejects. A core principle of the UN Charter is you cannot use the threat or use of force, accept under conditions that are relevant. Every US President violates that and simply won't be bound by that, so we don't want a UN based order.

Well, all of these things are in the background. It's much more important than arms contractors and other things. Yes, they have a role, but fundamentally it's just basic fundamental imperial policy ...