



## **Chomsky on the 'joke' of 'Russian interference' & the savagery of US sanctions**

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**Aaron Maté** [00:00:03] Welcome to Push Back I'm Aaron Maté. Joining me is Noam Chomsky. His latest book is called “Chomsky for Activists”. Noam, welcome to Push Back.

**Noam Chomsky** [00:00:14] Glad to be with you.

**AM** [00:00:16] I want to start by asking you about the latest in US-Russia relations.

[00:00:20] Joe Biden entered office. His first major foreign policy decision was very welcome, I think, he immediately renewed the new START treaty, which Trump had almost killed. We were just weeks away from it expiring. But then we've seen a return to the traditional bellicose rhetoric, new sanctions on Russia. Recently, the US intelligence community came out with this report accusing Russia of waging an interference operation in 2020, similar to what it accused Russia of in 2016. Then Joe Biden gives this interview where he calls Putin a killer, says that he has no soul.

**Joe Biden** [00:00:57] I wouldn't be a wise guy. I was alone with him in his office. That's how it came about. It was when President Bush had said, I've looked in his eyes and saw his soul. I said I will look through your eyes and I don't think you have a soul.

**ABC Reporter** [00:01:09] So, you know, Vladimir Putin. You think he's a killer?

**Joe Biden** [00:01:12] I do.

**ABC Reporter** [00:01:13] So what price must he pay?

**Joe Biden** [00:01:15] The price he's going to pay? Well, you'll see shortly.

**AM** [00:01:18] And Russia has responded by now recalling the Russian ambassador to the US. I'm just wondering your thoughts on all this and the role that Russia has been playing in US domestic politics for a long time now.

**NC** [00:01:33] Well, of course, since the 1940s, the alleged threat of Russia has been the core element of US foreign policy, will go through the record. We all know it, but the idea, the charges against Russia today don't really amount to much. And it was an important move to renew the new START treaty. Russia, in fact, had been calling for a renewal for some time. Trump had been evading it by one or another, mostly frivolous excuse. That was about the last major piece of the arms control regime that had survived. Trump's wrecking ball had eliminated most of the rest. Biden just saved it literally almost by hours, it was due to expire on February 5th. That was a step forward. The continuation of provocative measures where diplomacy and negotiations are obviously required is very threatening, but even more so in the case of China. Fortunately, Russia and the United States have agreed to move forward on broader negotiations about an arms control, it's very significant. And I hope that the other tensions will be eased. The last thing we need is to increase the growing and serious threat of nuclear war, it should be a prime concern everywhere. And that does require looking for opportunities which always exist for diplomacy and negotiations instead of confrontation and provocation.

**AM** [00:03:57] The fact that Biden declared that Putin has no soul. What struck me about that is that 20 years ago, George W. Bush was saying that he looked into Putin's soul and he saw something there. And I just found this overlapping psychological analysis by US presidents kind of amusing and I'm wondering what changed, you think, in the eyes of the US establishment from declaring that Putin does have a soul to now all of a sudden under Joe Biden, he does not have a soul?

**NC** [00:04:23] Well, I don't usually praise Donald Trump, but his response to a similar question, which elicited great condemnation, was, in fact, quite sensible. You'll recall there was some similar question that he was asked, and his answer was something like, are we so innocent?

**Donald Trump** [00:04:50] Will I get along with him? I have no idea.

**Fox News Reporter** [00:04:53] Putin's a killer.

**Donald Trump** [00:04:55] A lot of killers. We got lots of killers. Why do you think our country's so innocent?

**NC** [00:04:59] Well, that's the right answer. I mean, let's take the charges of interfering with American elections. I mean, first of all, the kind of interference that the new document talked about is undetectable. But do we interfere with elections? I mean. It's a joke to even ask it. We interfere up to the point of overthrowing countries where we don't like their elections. Take the case of Palestine. They had the first free election in the Arab world in January 2006. From the US point of view, the wrong people won, how did the US react? - as did Israel - at once by increasing sanctions and punishments and setting in motion an effort to carry out a military coup to overthrow the government, the elected government. Then when the government of Hamas preempted the coup, the United States and Israel reacted very sharply by increasing the attacks on Gaza. I mean. That's the norm. 1996, when the Russian elections were taking place, Clinton not only interfered, but took pride in interfering sufficiently to ensure the victory of the US candidate, Boris Yeltsin. I mean, there's no point running through the cases that are so rampant and overwhelming that they ought to be everyone's

second knowledge, background knowledge. So, yes, Trump's response was correct. We can't talk about those things. We're champions in this regard.

**AM** [00:07:15] I want to ask you about another area of Joe Biden's foreign policy. It was recently reported in The Wall Street Journal that Israel has been carrying out a series of targeted attacks on vessels bound for Syria carrying Iranian oil. And this comes as Syria is in the midst of a massive crisis, including a shortage of fuel while under US sanctions. I presume that Israel could not be doing this without at least tacit US backing. And this coincides with Joe Biden after pledging to return to the Iran nuclear deal, dragging his feet and refusing that commitment and actually threatening even new sanctions on Iran, threatening China recently about sanctions if it continues to trade with Iran. What do you make of Biden's refusal so far to live up to his own campaign promise to return to the Iran nuclear deal?

**NC** [00:08:08] Well, his campaign promises were suitably ambiguous, said he would return to it, but he didn't say on what terms. And in fact, he's made it very clear that he has no intention of returning to it, not to the original agreement. On Iran, Biden has pretty openly adopted the Trump administration position fully. We have to recall what happened, there was an agreement, the JCPOA the joint agreement under Obama. It was verified by the U.N. Security Council, which passed a resolution unanimously ordering all countries to abide by the agreement. Iran did abide by the agreement. The United States actually never did it. All part of the agreement was not to interfere with Iran's economic progress and development. And under Obama, the U.S. did continue to interfere. Nevertheless, the agreement more or less continued. Trump dismantled it, a violation of Security Council orders, he said it is finished and we destroyed it. And of course, if the United States says we're out of it, then imposes sanctions as it did. Everyone has to obey. Europe doesn't like it. They wanted to maintain the agreement. But there's nothing you can do if you don't obey the Godfather's orders, you're thrown out of the international financial system. So these are third party sanctions which other countries have to adhere to. So Trump imposed harsh third party sanctions, devastated the Iranian economy – went right through the covid period when the sanctions blocked even minimal efforts to try to deal with the overwhelming growing catastrophe. Biden came along, simply took it all over the same sanctions, same demand that Iran abandon the treaty. Iran is now being accused of moving towards violation of the treaty in retaliation to US moves. But the US, and Biden, is insisting that before they adopt, they must adopt the US position. That's crucial. The US position is abandon the JCPOA and insist on a different treaty with much harsher conditions on Iran. And unless Iran makes moves to accept the US violation of the treaty, we will continue to maintain harsh sanctions, third party sanctions, and that includes things like criminal activities, like piracy on the high seas to block Iranian ships carrying oil from Syria to Venezuela. Wherever. All of this is

legitimate in the hands of a rogue state which obeys no laws, just makes the laws and forces others to adhere to them. The fact that under these conditions, which are the real world conditions, we even dare to talk about Russian violation, interference with elections. It doesn't even rise to the level of a sick joke.

**AM** [00:12:07] There's a recent article in Foreign Affairs by an Iranian economist, and it's called "Maximum Pressure Hardened Iran against Compromise". It says this: quote, "Trump's maximum pressure campaign altered the social class structure of Iran by moving a significant portion of the middle class to the poverty level. The result has been to stigmatize the idea of engagement with the West as a solution to Iran's economic woes." When the US imposes sanctions on countries like Iran or Syria or Venezuela, we always hear that it's in the name of some strategic goal or to protect human rights. What is the actual goal of sanctions policy that, as this article says, pushes the middle class, a portion of the middle class, into poverty?

**NC** [00:12:56] I think that, if you look at the discourse about this topic in the media and the international relations literature, the Trump policy is described as a failure because Iran didn't come back to the agreement, didn't bend to the US pressure. Why is that a failure? That's a success. It was a success in devastating the Iranian economy, harming the population and continuing to impose US policies which have been in process without a break relentlessly since 1979. The Iranians have memory. We prefer not to look back, but let's look back. Let's go back all the way to 1953 when the United States carried out a military coup to overthrow the parliamentary regime, install a dictator, the Shah, who went on to implement some of the worst human rights records in the world all with firm US support right until the end. We now have even new documents which just recently appeared which enrich the record of what happened, which was suspected before. But now it's much better established. 1979 the Shah was overthrown. There was a new government which later was taken over by Khomeini. The reaction in the United States and Israel was quite astonishing. Israel was technically at war with Iran, but actually had very close relations. All of this came out after the Shah was overthrown. Israel had a de facto ambassador in Iran, Yaakov Nimrodi. He came out publicly stating that the army should restore the Shah's regime and what it would require, he said, is for officers to be willing to shoot down 10000 people in the streets if the army was willing to do this, could overcome this uprising. Zbigniew Brzezinski, who was the national security adviser, made somewhat similar statements. He said the military should use- he wasn't as vulgar as Nimrodi, but he said the military should intervene to prevent this. What about Carter? Well, that's where the new documents are revealing. Turns out that Carter was an extreme hawk on this issue. It was known that he had sent a NATO general, Robert Huyser, to Iran for reasons that you could speculate about. But now we know, because they're documented, the purpose was to encourage the Iranian military to act at once, to use force to put down the uprising and restore the dictatorship. That's Carter. Military wouldn't go along.

They realized it's not going to work. They refused. Then the United States turned at once to supporting its friend, Saddam Hussein, who was a friend and who immediately attacked Iran with a bitter, brutal war. Hundreds of thousands of Iranians were killed using, often chemical weapons, full support by the United States. The US went so far as even to deny Saddam's merciless attack on Kurdish Iraqi civilians with the chemical warfare attacks in Halabja that Regan claimed that Iran was responsible, which was ridiculous, and blocked congressional efforts even to issue a condemnation. Finally, the US entered the war directly, naval vessels supporting Iraqi shipping, protecting them from Iranian counter reactions in the Gulf. Last thing that happened was a US destroyer, the USS Vincennes, shot down an Iranian commercial airliner, killing 290 people in very clear commercial airspace, and then finally went back to Harbor Norfolk, where it was the commander and the deck officer in charge of shooting down the plane were given Medals of honor. President Bush by then said he's never going to apologize for anything Americans do. By then Iranians had basically capitulated. They recognized they can't fight the United States.

[00:18:41] We're now in the Bush administration. The Bush administration provided agricultural credits to its friend, Saddam, which they needed after his merciless destruction of Iraqi agriculture with the chemical warfare attacks. They invited Iraqi nuclear engineers to the United States for advanced training in nuclear weapons production, a very severe threat against Iran. Bush sent a delegation to his friend Saddam, headed by the leading Republican and Senator Robert Dole, later presidential candidate. They were to present Bush's warm greetings to his friend Saddam to inform him that he shouldn't be concerned about protests in the American press. We don't have any way to stop those because of this First Amendment business, but just disregard them. This is April 2000. Well, a couple of months later, Saddam disobeyed orders, invaded Kuwait. We know what happened after that. Meanwhile, harsh sanctions on Iran continuing, never broken, come all the way through into the Obama years. Obama finally recognized that Iran was increasing its development of centrifuges moving forward on its nuclear programs it claimed for peaceful purposes, maybe correctly. He recognized that we've got to do something and he did agree to the JCPOA, which is described here as a very munificent act. So the JCPOA was established. Then comes what I described. Now Biden is continuing to insist on US violation of it and by demanding a new agreement with harsher demands than this one in violation of Security Council orders, the other countries object, but they can't do very much and the sanctions continue.

[00:21:05] We saw a pretty remarkable power play about this in the last weeks of the Trump administration. The UN sanctions, which the US had pretty much forced, were terminated and the US wanted them to be renewed. The Security Council was approached – refused to renew them. At that point, secretary of State Pompeo returned to the Security Council and informed the Security Council, you are renewing the sanctions, period. Well, it was almost

unanimous opposition. Every US ally opposed but there's nothing they can do as long as the United States controls the international financial system it can impose harsh punishments on anyone who violates US orders.

[00:22:07] And we should notice, incidentally, that the United States is the only country in the world that can impose sanctions that have any bite, and it does it in an extraordinary way. There's an overwhelming use of economic warfare. And it's used and the chief main victim target is Cuba. Cuba has been under unremitting US attack almost since the day of its independence in January 1959. Within a few months - I won't go through the details, but it's a harsh, brutal regime. First, a major terrorist war under Kennedy almost led to the Cuban missile crisis. Almost a disaster, then very harsh sanctions and very cruel ones. I mean, the cruelty is sometimes hard to believe. Like a couple of days ago, some documents were released which showed that the US government was trying to prevent Panama in the midst of a Covid crisis, trying to prevent Panama from using the help of Cuban doctors. The savagery is so extreme that we must prevent Panama from accepting the internationalist assistance that Cuba is providing to other countries. Same document says the US embassy in Brazil pressured the Brazilian government not to use Russian vaccines. Brazil is in desperate need of vaccines. It's a disaster in Brazil. Well, it may be the worst in the world, but the US embassy has to try to pressure them not to use Russian vaccines, which are recognized by the medical profession to be as effective as the Western ones, there is a long article in The Lancet about it, but no effort must be spared to punish people who don't live up to our demands no matter what it is. The smallest thing you can imagine and major things like the Iran sanctions. No, we shouldn't.

[00:24:37] We've talked about this before, but it's so important. I'll say it again. There is a solution. The easy solution to any possible threat that one might imagine Iranian nuclear programs pose. We can put aside the question whether there is such a threat. Let's pretend there is for the sake of argument, how do we end the threat? Easy. Impose a nuclear weapons free zone in the Middle East. There are such zones around the world. Not a single one can go into effect for one reason. The US refuses to remove nuclear bases, but they do exist and they are important. Could be one [nuclear free zone] in the Middle East. Verification can be very effective. We've seen that right through the period when the US adhered more or less to the JCPOA. Even US intelligence agrees the verification measures were very effective. So that's not a problem. So what stops it? Is it the Arab states? They've been pressing for it [nuclear free zone] vigorously for 25 years. Iran strongly favors it, calling for it. The global South [favours it]. The G77 so-called about 130 or so countries are strongly calling for it. There's no objections from Europe. There's one barrier. The United States won't permit it. Any time it comes up in a relevant international forum, US blocks. Most recent was Obama 2015 vetoed it at the review session of the Nonproliferation Treaty. Why does the US block it? Very

obvious, the US does not want Israeli nuclear weapons to be inspected. In fact, the United States does not recognize officially that Israel has nuclear weapons. Of course, everyone knows that they do, including the US government. Very substantial nuclear weapons, other chemical weapons, other facilities [as well]. But the US won't recognize it. And there's a good reason for that. If you recognize that Israel has nuclear weapons, US law comes into force. Symington amendment. Other legal provisions, which raises the serious question, whether US aid to Israel, roughly four billion dollars aid per year, whether that's even legal under US law, neither political party wants to open that door. There's no public pressure for it. So therefore, we refrain from carrying out a measure which could end any imaginable threat, if there is one, of Iranian nuclear weapons.

[00:27:57] Furthermore, the topic cannot be discussed in the United States. That's not literally true, of course we're discussing it. Yes, I can give talks about it and so on, but it can't enter the mainstream. It is discussed in arms control circles, but can't enter the mainstream. This is because of the lack of popular movement, which is actively pressing this and many other similar issues, for example, on Israel Palestine. There are other reasons. There are other steps that the US isn't taking but is legally required to take, which could have a big effect. Take say the Jewish National Fund. It has tax free status. That is, its actions are subsidized by the American taxpayer by various devious means. The JNF has been working in the occupied territories illegally, of course. Now it's public, the JNF has publicly announced that it is going to work on development programs, support for settlements in the occupied territories subsidized by the US taxpayer thanks to its tax free status. I think people in the United States ought to know that. The same that you, with your tax money, are subsidizing illegal activities, criminal activities that the US government pretends to be opposed to. Well, people should know that just as they should know that the US is raising serious threats of war, very serious war in the Middle East, imposing brutal, savage sanctions, all in order to protect Israeli nuclear weapons from inspection and to protect the huge, unprecedented US taxpayer subsidized aid to Israel to prevent it from being questioned. These are things that should be right in the front of attention in the United States, and they won't be unless popular movements pick them up and push them. There's a lot more like this. This is the kind [of actions] needed when we're talking about activism. These are the kinds of things that should be front and center for activists concerned about the state of the world. And instead we talk about whether Russia tried to help Trump in the last election. Who cares?

**AM** [00:30:54] On the question of sanctions and a lack of attention, I wanted to ask you, the UN special rapporteur on sanctions, Alena Douhan, has put out reports recently talking about what you discussed earlier about how the US declares this self professed right to impose sanctions on whoever it wants. And Douhan called these sanctions on Syria and Venezuela in particular illegal – said that they're imposing massive suffering on the civilian populations of

both countries. I looked and could not find any reference to this in the US media. We covered it at the Grayzone, but I think we were one of the few exceptions. I'm just wondering your comments on that, the fact that something so serious as destroying other people's countries in the case of Syria, a reconstruction from a 10 year war that we were a part of, that having that called out, having the sanctions called out, can't even be discussed or mentioned in US media.

**Noam Chomsky** [00:31:52] Yes, what you describe is quite correct, but the most extreme example is Cuba. I mean, take the fact that US sanctions against Cuba not only are brutal, savage and criminal in every respect, but are opposed by the entire world. This comes up at the UN general Assembly annually. The vote on the sanctions is by now unanimous. Israel is the only country that votes with the United States, and that's because it has to. So essentially unanimous opposition that will sometimes get a line and somewhere in the press. It's particularly dramatic right now when Cuba is the one country in the world that is taking a genuine internationalist position in response to the pandemic. The United States, Canada, European countries, the rich countries are basically monopolizing the vaccines for themselves. The United States today magnanimously headline in The New York Times, "The United States is providing vaccines to Canada and Mexico from a store that the United States cannot use because they haven't been approved by the FDA". The Oxford vaccines, AstraZeneca. Oh, that's a wonderful act. Vaccines we can't use, we're providing to Canada, which already has far more vaccines than it can possibly use, but not send them to the poor countries of the world. Well, Cuba's doing it and when they try to help not only with their own vaccines, which are not allowed to mention in the United States, but by sending doctors to help people, we have to try to prevent them from doing it and force the recipient countries to refuse. Meanwhile, keep punishing Cuba. Now we know the reasons. One nice thing about the United States is that it is a relatively free country, more so than others. We have a lot of released internal documents, so we know the reasoning. The reasoning was stated very clearly by the State Department back in the early 60s when these torture programs were initiated. They said the threat of Castro is his successful defiance of U policy going back to the Monroe Doctrine in the 1820, when the US declared its intention to dominate the hemisphere. [The US] Couldn't carry it out then, Britain was too powerful, but finally, the US was strong enough to do it. Cuba is successfully defying US policies going back to our demand to dominate the hemisphere. Therefore, they have to be punished. Essentially the same with Iran. Iran is carrying out, since 79, successful defiance of US policies. Therefore, we have to carry out the kinds of actions which I ran through before, continuing currently with brutal, harsh sanctions to try to crush the people of Iran. Successful defiance is not tolerable. International affairs is in some ways rather like the Mafia, if some small grocery store keeper refused to pay protection money, the Don isn't going to accept it. One doesn't need the money, doesn't amount to anything, but you cannot accept successful defiance, can't rule the world that way. These are near truisms about international relations, which should be understood by everyone. In a free educational system all of this would be spelled out in

highschool, if not earlier, certainly in any discussions at the college level, and should be all over the press. There's other interesting things about Iran and Cuba, very striking, by and large, a major private capital concentration. [goes mute] That's easily demonstrated, but not always. There are cases where the state interest in crushing defiance actually overwhelms private capital. And two striking examples are Iran and Cuba. It shows the intensity of the US effort to smash and destroy those who defy orders. The US agrobusiness, pharmaceutical corporations have been quite interested in breaking the Cuba sanctions. They want to invest in Cuba. They want to use Cuban resources. Cuba has a very advanced pharmaceutical industry. There's some market for US agrobusiness. The US won't permit. It won't permit its own major corporations for doing what they want. Same with Iran. US energy corporations have been eager to exploit Iranian resources to gain some foothold over them. US companies want to export to Iran, Boeing or other major companies. The US government says no. Our interest in crushing successful defiance overrules even the interests of the multinational corporations, which largely dominate the government. These are very interesting cases which tell you quite a lot about how the international order works and about what kind of country we're in and about our own failures to bring all of this not only to public attention, but to major understanding on the part of the general public and also the intellectual community, which doesn't discuss it. Well, that's very serious.

**AM** [00:39:12] In the short time we have left, I want to ask you one domestic question, which is about the \$1.9 Trillion Covid relief bill that Biden recently signed. The New York Times had a headline about this. It says, "With Relief Plan, Biden Takes on a New Role: Crusader for the Poor" and other prominent voices, like Joseph Stiglitz the former World Bank economist, who has called this plan transformational. There's talk that it will cut child poverty in half. Do you think that these responses match the actual content of this bill?

**NC** [00:39:49] Well, the accolades may be a little exaggerated, but I do think that this is a major accomplishment, particularly under the circumstances. Let's recognize the circumstances. Half of the Senate is in the hands of pure obstructionists who are committed to blocking anything. Mitch McConnell, most important figure in the Republican Party, is clearly pursuing the policy that he himself announced very clearly when Obama was elected, he said very clearly, our task is to make the country ungovernable, to ensure that Obama can achieve nothing. Doesn't matter how much the public suffers, that is necessary to render the country ungovernable, so we can then blame the Democrats and come back into power, which indeed is what happened, I should say, with Obama's help of his own betrayal [meaning: Obama betrayed his promise]. After 2 years in office, 2010, Obama lost Congress the way was opened that ultimately led to Trump. McConnell's doing exactly the same thing now. The situation is somewhat different. Trump is out there, hasn't gone away. He has the Republican Party voters in his pocket. Furious, angry, almost half of them think that Trump

was sent by God to rescue the country from evil forces. He and McConnell are at sword's points. They hate each other, but they're working together for a common aim: make sure that nothing is achieved. Make sure the country's ungovernable. That its people suffer as much as possible. You're not allowed to bring complete cranks on this. Every single Republican Senate and House voted lockstep unanimity against the stimulus. That's even though the representatives themselves mostly favor it. And they know very well that their constituents favor it. But you have to vote against it. Communist Party style unanimity when the maximum leader McConnell directs it. Biden is faced with that and the fact that he got anything through is pretty remarkable. If you look at what they go through, it has very positive elements. Unfortunately, they're temporary. So there's a very belated but significant attack on child poverty, which is a scandal in the United States. So there are measures to deal with it. There's some measures to deal with the lack of support for state localities and states. Interestingly, the Republican wrecking machine is so extreme that state attorney generals, Ohio is the first, are now attacking that. There's a provision in there which says that states cannot use stimulus funds for reducing taxes, meaning taxes on the rich. These Republican attorney generals are challenging that. They want to be free to use stimulus funds for their standard policy of serving the rich and the powerful with reducing their taxes. That's the kind of situation we're in. That on the one hand, Trump and his rabid army of supporters have him think he was sent by God on the other hand. The measures like the child poverty state support or other measures, are good measures in the stimulus bill. If they can be continued. If the temporary character can be overruled and they can be continued, that would make a substantial difference. It's not changing the country. It's not radically transformative. It would turn the country into more of a decent society, which has social justice provisions of the kind that are found elsewhere in the developed world. Shouldn't underrate that. I think it is an accomplishment. It's going to be a battle to carry it forward in the face of unanimous Republican opposition, no matter what harm it causes the population of the country. That's the situation we're in.

**AM** [00:45:00] The new book is called "Chomsky for Activists". Noam, thank you very much.

**NC** [00:45:05] A lot more to talk about, but afraid I have to go off to the next one.

**END**