

Trump's DEADLY Israel Exception & Tariff Madness | Amb. Chas Freeman

What's the justification of Trump bombing one of the poorest countries in the world? What are the effects of using tariffs as a foreign policy tool? In the second part of this conversation, I'm once more to the outspoken Ambassador Chas Freeman, who among many other positions served as US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia and later became Assistant Secretary of Defence back in the 1990s. He also was Richard Nixon's principal interpreter during his 1972 visit to China, which led to the normalization of US-China relations.

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This is also maybe a good way to move to another topic that I want to ask you about, because the brutality of approaching world affairs by Donald Trump, not mincing his words so far, has been one of words. And now, yesterday, we've seen for the first time the Trump administration using bombs on Yemen, of all places, and telling Yemen to cease attacks on shipping, which they haven't been doing for months. We've got reports that about 30 people died, most of them civilians. It's unclear yet what exactly is happening, but this is the first time the Trump administration uses bombs, actual bombs. And it's using them against one of the poorest countries on the planet. How do you make sense of this one?

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Well, it's part of the Israel exception to everything. I mean, the United States has been complicit in genocide in Gaza. It is complicit in the ethnic cleansing that's now intensified in the West Bank. It was complicit in the invasion of Lebanon. It has been complicit in the Israeli refusal to honor the ceasefire and withdraw from Lebanon. Israel is occupying five bases in Lebanon, which it says it intends to keep. We have been complicit in the seizure of Syrian territory. We were complicit in the total disarmament from the air of Syria right after the fall of the Assad regime. However, I think we have been somewhat more responsible on the question of attacking Iran.

And I guess, given the Israel exception, the power of the Zionist lobby in the United States, and the extent to which Mr. Trump is beholden to Zionist donors and may have made commitments in return for campaign donations, I think we should be looking at the attack on Yemen as, you know, saying at least it isn't Iran. You know, people say, well, the Iran-backed Houthis—well, the fact that the Houthis have Iranian support has absolutely nothing to do with their program. And they actually, in the Arab world, in the Muslim world, in the world at large, are seen as serious people who have been willing to take risks and suffer casualties, put their lives where their mouths are in support of Palestine.

And as you said, when there was a supposed ceasefire agreed between Hamas and Israel under the auspices of the United States, the Houthis, who are basically the de facto government in most of Yemen, called off—you know, they're always called rebels, but they've actually been in power. They fulfill all of the normal requirements for recognition as a state. They called off their blockade of the Red Sea from land. They have apparently developed some new weaponry with which to intensify that blockade and strike Israel, but I think this is an exception to Mr. Trump's general posture, except in one sense.

He's been quite prepared to bomb Somalia or Yemen and other places that can't fight back, apparently. I think this is a very dangerous game because if you bomb people and they don't have an air force with which to respond, 9/11 should have taught us that they will find some other way to respond. So this is all an invitation to an expansion of terrorism, a return, if you will, to the 1960s when the Palestine issue became the cause of terrorist actions internationally. I think we're risking that now because there is apparently no path to peace.

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How do you think the rest of the world will react to this? I mean, so far, in my view, the Trump administration has been trying to mend fences, especially with Russia, obviously, right? And in my view, or from what I hear, China also received this rather positively, as a positive sign. But now, Yemen and West Asia are sending the opposite signal. As you said, if you're weak, then you will be bombed. That is, of course, a signal that to China means, well, OK, nothing has changed, and we are still very much under threat, especially also looking at the rhetoric coming out of the White House toward China.

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Well, I'm not sure about that in the case of China, but I'll return to that in a moment. But I think both Moscow and Beijing have a very good sense of the difference between strategic issues and tactical ones, or primary issues and secondary issues. This is an unfortunate secondary issue for them. And you saw this with the Russian failure to support the Assad government in Syria. The Russians are very clear that although they do have interests at stake in Syria, and they are trying to work out a relationship with Mr. al-Shara, the new president in Syria, a self-appointed president, in part because they don't want Syria to become a haven for jihadis. Fifteen percent of the Russian population is Muslim, and they've had terrible problems with the Chechens, Dagestanis, and others, and they don't want Syria to emerge as a haven, a springboard for this kind of activity.

The Chinese have somewhat the same issue with Syria because of the large presence of Uighurs in the ranks of the terrorist groups that now control Syria. And this isn't a joke, as we have seen in the Latakia area with a large-scale massacre of Alawites, revenge killings by the Sunni extremists, the so-called liberal democratic jihadis, who turned out to be not quite as liberal and democratic as some

would prefer. Anyway, I would note that in the case of Yemen, Chinese ships are not hit because China does not support Israel. The only ships that are hit are those that are supporting Israel, not just Israeli ships, the Zim line and so forth, but American and British warships, which have been engaged in trying to counter the Yemeni blockade and any cargo headed for Israel.

And this basically shut down the port of Eilat at the head of the Gulf of Aqaba and has really been quite successful as a blockade. So it has not been successfully countered by the U.S. Navy. And I'm not sure that what Mr. Trump has done is going to counter it effectively. So it's probably a gesture of support for Israel. It's seen as such by Moscow and Beijing. They don't want to get involved in the Arab-Israeli issue any more than they have to, especially the Chinese. So this is distressing. It's terrible. It's, you know, contrary; there's no declaration of war. There's no congressional approval. From a constitutional point of view, it is a travesty. Under international law, it's also a problem. But I don't think the broader implications are as great as your question suggested.

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Okay. Well, then that puts my mind a little bit at ease because it would be horrible if this was the next flashpoint of international relations. But you are actually interpreting this as a way for the Trump administration not to get directly involved with Iran. Is that one part of it?

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I think that may be part of this. I don't want to belittle the danger of a conflagration in West Asia. The point where this is most dangerous is the Philadelphia Corridor, which Israel has illegally occupied in violation of the Camp David Accords, which have kept peace between Israel and Egypt since 1979, a long time. And the expulsion of people from the West Bank, although there's now talk of sending them to Sudan or Somalia, two countries that are in the midst of civil strife and that are basically unable to manage their own affairs even without this additional burden.

You know, this kind of thing, while the Palestinians are being deliberately starved, deprived of water and food by Israel, and various plans are being hatched by people in the Israeli cabinet to remove the Palestinians, you know, 5,000 a day or whatever, 2,500 a day, or figures that have been mentioned, to go where? Nobody knows. So I assume that the mention of Sudan and Somalia is in part because it's imagined that they can be bribed into accepting a refugee population. I'm not sure that's the case. I know the Somalis have been quite firm on that. On the other hand, Somaliland, the breakaway area in the north of Somalia, isn't recognized internationally. We saw Mr. Trump hand the Western Sahara to Morocco as part of the Abraham Accords bribery. You can't put anything like that beyond us at this point.

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Right. Thank you for that assessment. And maybe as a last complex of issues, let's talk about the other big foreign policy move that the Trump administration brought: the tariffs. Tariffs are everywhere now for the Europeans, but also for the Japanese over here where I am, and they are extremely worried about this. How do you think the Trump administration is using this, not just to talk about tariffs, but also the actual implementation of them as a new foreign policy tool?

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Well, they are being used as a foreign policy tool to bludgeon people into concessions on other subjects, non-economic subjects. So, for example, the justification used against Canada and Mexico is fentanyl imports, which is a narcotic issue. It's not a trade issue. It's a law enforcement issue. And the allegation is that they have been inadequate in their control of the borders for drugs, and in the case of Mexico, for immigrants. So this is definitely being used as a foreign policy tool. On the other hand, it seems to be an ideological principle that Mr. Trump holds near and dear, that he and his advisers, people like Peter Navarro, who's back from jail where he spent some time for defying a congressional subpoena to produce evidence and testify, believe that tariffs will somehow magically reindustrialize the United States and that they will do all kinds of good things.

And Mr. Trump has said that his political hero is President McKinley, who was the president at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries and who raised tariffs, which actually hurt the economy of the United States. But anyway, that's not apparently understood. So the tariffs are having all kinds of ironic effects. For example, in the United States, one of the platforms Mr. Trump ran on was lowering the price of eggs. We have an avian flu pandemic in the United States, so even as he pledged in Denmark about Greenland and puts tariffs on the EU, he's asking the Danes to produce more eggs and fly them over to the United States. So if you look for consistency in all this, you won't find it. It is partly ideological, partly a sort of mafioso, extortionate means of bargaining.

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Yeah, I mean, create any kind of demand and any kind of allegations and then just say, like, you have to meet all of my demands, otherwise I'm going to use violence. But isn't this especially now when, you know, the development of alternatives to the United States with the BRICS, with new structures that are being built in front of our eyes? And Mr. Trump also said he dislikes them very much. I mean, this is just another one of these U.S. policies that are just going to speed up the development of alternative structures, isn't it?

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Well, this is self-vandalism. It is pulling ourselves down. It is not making America great; it is making us either despised or irrelevant. And so, I share the concern that you express about the effects on the world order and the United States of this kind of almost cultural revolution that's going on in the

United States, very similar to the Chinese Cultural Revolution in some ways. I mean, we have unelected people who don't understand the workings of government dismantling the government. The so-called administrative state is being pulled down. This is very much like the slogans of the Red Guards in the Chinese Revolution.

We have people in office who have no qualification other than loyalty to the emperor or loyalty to a political cause, with no demonstrated capacity to carry out the duties of the positions in which they've been placed. We have the permanent government, the civil service, being decimated unpredictably for no particular reason. This has caused the proliferation of a huge number of lawsuits against the government. And as judges rule against the government on constitutional grounds, very soundly in the view of most lawyers, they are treated as enemies of the state. So the court is no longer regarded as an instrument for the regulation of affairs through law. It is regarded as the home of a political enemy, "scum," Mr. Trump says, of judges.

I am sorry to say that all this is not unfamiliar from European history, if you think about it. You know, we have a strongman backed by a cult with a rubber-stamp command of the Parliament, our Congress, with a disdain for the courts, with an agenda of fundamentally reordering the state, doing it without regard to the Constitution or the laws. And his whole program is xenophobic. You know, it took Hitler 53 days to destroy the Weimar Republic. We're approaching that level of confusion. I think in our case, we still have a great deal more resilience than the Weimar Republic did. So one should never do this. But there's a word for this. It's called fascism.

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I do hope that that's not the path that things will take. But we have to talk about this again in the near future, I hope, because time is running out. And Ambassador Chas Freeman, you've been publishing a lot recently, and we are all grateful to you for doing so because your insights are really invaluable. So thank you very much for that.

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Well, I don't know whether they're invaluable, but I hope they are stimulating. And thank you very much, Pascal Lottaz.

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They are. And we'll talk again. Thank you very much.