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QI Panel:

The Trump Doctrine: A Conversation with Asli Ü. Bâli and Aziz Rana

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Trita Parsi

Welcome to the Quincy Institute's webinar titled The Trump doctrine, a conversation with Asli Bali and Aziz Rana. My name is Trita Parsi. I'm the Executive Vice President of the Quincy Institute, a foreign policy think tank in Washington that promotes ideas that move US foreign policy away from endless war and toward rigorous diplomacy. We favor a national security strategy that is centered on military restraints and diplomacy.

In the recent absolutely must read Boston review essay, and I should mention that this webinar is co hosted or co sponsored by Boston review the Quincy Institute's non resident fellows as lavalie and Aziz Rana argued that the emerging Trump doctrine replaces multilateralism and international law with an open ended coercion, economic punishment and the normalization of dominance over weaker states. Crucially, they trace this framework back to the Biden administration's policy on Gaza and how it treats sovereignty as conditional and wield sanctions, blockades and force not as a last resort, but as a primary tool of policy.

Today, this doctrine reverberates from the Middle East to the Caribbean as Israel was permitted to impose a siege on Gaza and prevent food and medicine from reaching civilians. Critics warn that similar course of logics are resurfacing elsewhere. So for instance, in Cuba, the Trump administration is deepening shortages of food, fuel and medicine through a naval blockade on the island, prompting accusations of collective punishment in Iran the US and Israel are bombing universities, desalination plants and pharmaceutical factories. What came permissible in Gaza is now becoming employed elsewhere, eroding decades of international norms designed to protect civilians.

Asli and Aziz are with us to help unpack all of this. For those of you are joining us via zoom, please use the Q and A function to ask your questions. If you're watching this on Twitter, on on Facebook or YouTube, you can put your questions in the comment section, and we'll try to get to those as well. So with no further ado, let me introduce our speakers. Asli Bali is a non resident Fellow at the Quincy Institute and professor at Yale Law School. Her research focuses on two broad areas, public international law and comparative constitutional law, with a focus on the Middle East, her scholarship has appeared in all the major law journals in the world. I cannot go through all the full list here. Aziz Rana is a non resident fellow as well at the quince Institute and professor at of law and government at Boston College. His research and teaching center on American constitutional law and political development. He is the author of the two faces of American freedom from 2010 a book that situates the American experience within the global

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history of colonialism. His current book manuscript, *Rise of the Constitution* explores the modern rise of constitutional veneration in the 20th century. So Asla and Aziz, we're delighted to have us with you. I would like to give you all both three minutes or so to just lay out the key thesis that you're putting forward in your Boston review article, and from there, we'll go into deeper questions.

Aziz Rana 3:47

Well first, thank you so much, Trita for that lovely introduction. I should say that my second book ultimately titled *The Constitutional Bind*, how Americans came to idolize a document that fails them recently was published, and so it's out there as well.

But it's wonderful to be here and to be able to have an opportunity to engage with the Quincy Institute and the all of the folks that are watching as well. So what I thought I would do for just a couple minutes, maybe up front, is give a bit of an overview about how we were thinking about this moment in American foreign policy. And you'll notice that in thinking about this last year, up to and including the US is war on Iran, there basically been two approaches. Approach number one is to say, Wait a second. All of this is a break. The US was the guarantor of a global international order that was based on rules, and that Trump is a violation of a basic premise of American life. Another approach, and you see this maybe more extensively on the left, is to say all of this is basically the same. There was gunboat diplomacy in the 19th century. We're seeing gunboat diplomacy. See now Empire is continuous.

And what we wanted to argue was that we could really understand the US in this moment as a story of both continuity but also rupture. And so I'll just maybe very quickly trace a bit of this in broad strokes from post 45 and then maybe turn it over to Asla to talk a little bit more specifically about some of the elements of the piece. The way in which you can think of American power, especially in the period between 45 and the fall of the Soviet Union, is that the US established a set of norms post World War Two based on multilateralism and rule. Following that, it understood as essential to its own global authority. So it read constitutionalism domestically as part of what the US provides to the global stage and what's different than, let's say, the Imperial orders that preceded it. But the thought behind this was that for this system to work, there would have to be a single hegemon American primacy, a single country that could step outside of the rules to ensure that there were no rogue nations, that folks were basically engaged in rule following, and that the world did not collapse into something like World War Three.

And the thing that you'll notice about that dynamic is it meant that the US basically viewed its own obeying of the rules themselves as something that was dependent on its assessment of national security, because how it understood its own national security interests were essentially coterminous with the world's interests. And so the period from 45 to 90, if you just look at us, violations of the norms incredibly extensive the US backed what you know amounted to and what scholars refer to as a genocide in Indonesia, various coup attempts, illegal bombing campaigns, context of Vietnam, covert operations, the assassination of elected officials, including, for instance, in Iran in 53 so you have a continuous violation of norms.

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But the idea is that this, this violation, is part and parcel of sustaining an overall system. And so the basic story, in a way that perhaps is surprising, is rule defection, but at the same time, a commitment by the US, both in terms of domestic stories of legitimation, but also how it interacts with other actors globally, for the rules themselves. And this is also reinforced by the fact that there is another global power in the Soviet Union. And so the US has to win hearts and minds vis a vis the Soviet Union. That means massive investments in elements of the Global South. It means a commitment to making good on ideas of rule following. And so that's this, this back and forth that defines the era. And then what happens, essentially, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, is that the external constraints on the US, to say that there are these reasons globally why the US really needs consensual buy in, start to disappear.

And so post 89 it's not that the US just absolutely decides to defect entirely from a premise about rules, rules. And indeed, the US invests in new multilateral institutions, like, for instance, the World Trade Organization, efforts at international economic integration, and then a commitment to, like, various kinds of multilateral and regional organizations, especially when it comes to the global north places in Europe. But what also happens is that the Middle East in particular becomes a testing ground for a new set of policies, where precisely because of the fact that the US is now globally unconstrained, and it increasingly views events in the Middle East as effectively part of its near abroad, because of the desire for access to energy, issues about containing Iran, commitments to Israel and Israeli security. That what ends up happening in the Middle East, really, from the 90s to the present, is a steady and systematic defection from the rules themselves, including, relatedly, to internet, new international agreements, the US plays a central role in drafting the ICC, the Rome Statute, but then, effectively, because of its own actions in the Middle East, refuses to end up committing to signing it.

And then we can see this play out fairly continuously, with some limitations. For instance, in the context of the Obama nuclear deal, 2015, up through the Biden administration, and then post October 7, the Biden administration's absolute complicity in Israel's actions, including what scholars, human rights activists, international organizations end up calling a genocide in Gaza, essentially speaks to the extent to which the rules themselves have been utterly swallowed by the willingness of the US to engage in systematic defection. And that's the circumstance under which Trump takes over. And what Trump effectively does is he engages in a continuation of that rules defection in a way in which.

Now the vision that's being presented is that multilateral institutions themselves are a constraint on American power, and that the only way to actually defend the US is to re entrench a commitment to regional hegemony in its near abroad. So Latin America, this is the emphasis on Venezuela, on Cuba, et cetera, with the treatment of the Middle East as effectively still part of its near abroad, and a view of multilateral constraint and international law as what actually undermines the US global position, so a commitment to coercion, to the to the exclusion of a previous framework of consent, and moreover, to an approach now that treats really the international rules themselves, precisely because they're a threat as a site for direct assault. So

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the US is now engaged in effectively taking apart the rules that established American hegemony in 45 and so this is a long story of continuity, but also rupture.

Asli Bali 10:58

So yeah, let me just jump in, and maybe, you know, Aziz did a beautiful job of providing, really, the long history of the moment that we've arrived at. So I think, like, the best thing I could do is maybe just punctuate a couple of points, and then we can move to thinking about how our piece applies to the present conundrum. Because, of course, we wrote this before the Iran war, and actually it was a culmination of a series of pieces we've been writing in the Boston review over basically, beginning with the Trump administration, at least in this line. So we had, you know, America's Imperial unraveling, our piece that was on sanctions in 2020 and now this Trump doctrine and what's and exactly as Aziz says, These are stories of continuity, but also that keep applying our argument in an updated fashion to new expressions of the ways in which the United States is positioning itself in this global order.

So I mean, the first thing I would say that's continuous is, as Aziz says, Through the Cold War, and then after the Cold War, the US is engaging in forms of aggressive unilateralism across the board, but they were presented at one time as being justified in the service of multilateralism, and now instead, it's a kind of aggressive unilateralism that's literally at war with multilateralism, so it's going directly after the institutions themselves. And this just to bring us up to the present, you just got the long Duree. But it's really important to understand the continuities of the Biden administration and the degree to which and we can talk about this more as we get into the conversation. But key decisions made, and key decision makers beyond Biden himself, people like Jake Sullivan, people like John beinner, that are now being turned to as kind of responsible statesmen capable of stewarding wise choices were themselves authors of these decisions, right?

So that these are the kinds of things that we saw expanded executive discretion, which is a is a secular story, but that the Biden administration absolutely doubled down on, including around war powers or including around insulating administrative choices by the administration from meaningful legislative scrutiny or any kind of interrogation, including in moments where those choices were deeply unpopular. And Gaza is a really fundamental expression of this increasing, ever increasing increments of military and financial support for essentially direct and indirect expressions of US military policy never justified, never pursuing any of the either internal constitutional constraints or complying with international law, the instrumental use of international law to selectively legitimate particular projects, for example, in Ukraine, and requiring a sort of, sort of compulsory participation in the economic statecraft that the United States decided to pursue, to isolate Russia, while completely abandoning International and international frameworks when it came to when they became inconvenient, in assessing Gaza or other engagements that the United States was willing to support Yemen and elsewhere, Trump amplified, rather than inventing these trends.

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So then we titled our piece, you know, using this phrase, the Trump doctrine, not because we think Trump has a coherent doctrine which he absolutely does not have, but rather because all of these approaches crystallized latent tendencies already present in US policy, but express them in the most extreme ways. So open rejection of international institutional constraint, totally transactional approach to alliances, where it's like explicitly made to be pay to play, but because of those earlier defections in which the United States increasingly was willing, at its own discretion, to abandon both the rules and the institutional constraints and the interest of other allies, on its own judgment, this is not a new I mean, obviously the degree of its transactionalism, the attempt to extort literal financial kickbacks and payment to the individuals within the administration, is a novel dimension, but the transactional approach to alliances is not and the use of economic coercion, tariffs sanctions as primary tools, these are on a continuum with choices.

That the Biden administration and administrations prior to the Biden administration had long been using, what is maybe most clear in Trump is the total abandonment of normative claims about the purposes of US power used in this way, not only is it not tied to an agenda of the you know, now antiquated language around democracy promotion, human rights, etc, that you still heard sort of limping along under the Obama administration, less and less so in the Biden administration, but it's not even tethered to normative claims about the ways in which this is a stabilizing force for the international community writ large.

So it really what we tried to highlight in the essay is the degree that the legal constraints on unilateral action had already been stretched to the breaking point, well before Trump, certainly before Trump too, but already even at the end of the Obama administration, because of the normalization of these choices of defection, many of which were made most visible in the War on Terror context. And what, what the global implications then, of this are, and I'll just end here, is not just the weakening of alliances and institutions, but certainly that also the normalization of increasing increments of unilateral coercion to pursue policy ends. And all of this accelerates, not just a multi polarism.

So the irony here is these are, in many cases, self inflicted wounds to the US is own capacity to wield credibility, legitimacy, and ultimately soft power in an international system in which it's no longer got the same sort of uncontested monopoly on forms of hard power, because it faces actual regional competitors in a variety of arenas. So it's an acceleration of multi polarity, away from unipolarity, but not towards, you know, a multipolar order that is within some kind of global, international institutional framework, but rather that is increasingly unconstrained, altogether less rule bound in every conceivable way, less capable of being held within a single set of global institutions, and more likely to devolve into precisely what the so called dunroe doctrine imagines, which is regional silos no longer capable of being put together in any multilateral format.

Trita Parsi 17:13

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Thank you so much. Both you Asli and Aziz for a fantastic explanation of this. I want to go deeper. I had some questions in mind, but I'm going to, before I go into those, I want to stress test one thing, because you're laying out a history in which the actual assault on the multilateral institutions tend to come somewhat late in the game. That prior to this, even though there was a lot of defections from international law, etc, there wasn't a real systematic assault.

As you were talking, I pulled up this article from Richard Perle on the very same day that the United States invades Iraq in 2003, 20th of March in The Guardian. The title of the article is, Thank God for the Death of the UN. And he goes on to say that, you know, Saddam is terrible, but what will die with Saddam's regime is the fantasy of the UN as a foundation of a new order. And he essentially makes the case for getting rid of all of these type of UN constraints on the United States, and says that what is needed is a coalition of the willing to put to govern the world going forward.

And then, of course, you have famously John Bolton becoming UN ambassador, and his goal is to go there and essentially say, no one would notice if the entire UN building was burnt down the very profound view that these multilateral institutions do nothing but constrain American power, and as a result, they are of no particular value. How would you, and this is the neoconservative movement, this was not a parenthesis. How would you fit that in this larger arc of history and evolution of these this approach towards norms and the multilateral system.

Asli Bali 19:03

If I could, I'll maybe take this very quickly and then Aziz, I'll turn over to you. But it is, I think it's an interesting moment. First of all, like it's, it's so curious to think about like Richard Perle, who was once described as the prince of darkness, writing in the pages of guardian, that, in and of itself, is like reason to preserve that as an artifact of a particular moment. But I do think, like there were many people around the Bush administration during the Iraq invasion that understood themselves in these terms, right, that they were going to war also to free the US Gulliver held back by the Lilliputians et cetera, to really express at a moment when the war on terror was at its, you know, in its earliest phases, you know, sort of naked capacity to coercively reshape the world in an image that was stamped by American understandings of what security required, et cetera.

But I would say, within a year, in a way, Bush and his entourage learned the chastening lesson that Trump may be on the press of. Of learning himself at this moment to begin with, there's a huge difference between and a difference that was at the time decried by Richard Perle and John Bolton and others right the US spent two years or a year and a half trying to build a literal international legal case for the war in Iraq, claiming that prior UN Security Council resolutions already authorized it, that Iraq represented this major threat, et cetera. And they were, of course, frustrated, because the council, and surprisingly enough, not just Russia and China, but France, fundamentally rejected those arguments.

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And in fact, we later learned within the UK Government itself, their own legal office was saying no, but the degree of concern around UN and getting that imprimatur was really clear. It was only the failure of that that led them to now express this contempt. Well, within less than 12 months, they were back at the UN Security Council asking, essentially saying, we couldn't assemble a large enough coalition to distribute the costs of this disastrous conflict that we elective war that we launched now we've suffered these self inflicted wounds, and we need assistance. And they had to get a UN Security Council resolution to essentially approve the post invasion infrastructure. Bring in the UN, force them to, you know, burden share around the humanitarian and regional security costs of what they had unleashed. And so the UN becomes implicated again.

And of course, the UN is not able to avoid this, because the US remains a hegemonic power that is capable of destroying the institution when it doesn't engage in this kind of action, and the allies were willing to do it, Trump is not going to have this available to him. I think the universe in which the UN or Europeans are going to go along with a cleanup project for a grotesque use of American unilateral coercive force without international legal and premature in Iran is zero, and that's in part because of the loss of credibility that that very moment that you described represents. But it is worth understanding the distinction what's continuous and what's different, right? What's continuous is exactly the kinds of logics you just described, in which at least one cohort of people in forming American policy view international law and international institution as a kind of irritant and constraint that prevents the United States from exercising the full expanse of its powers.

The lessons that were learned in that moment, including by that very coterie of people, is that it's extremely costly, unsustainably so, even for the most powerful state in the system and the US, was far more powerful in 2003 2004 than it is today, as a relative matter, that it is unsustainable through pure coercion and hard power to actually see through the strategic objectives that they have, whatever they think they can achieve by coercion, very quickly they realize that they are not in control of the outcomes that they set in motion by engaging in that initial act of coercion, and they actually need to distribute those costs. The UN was still available as an actor to facilitate that project in 2004 and the Bush administration abandoned that way of speaking. And you know, the Bolton ambassadorship notwithstanding, the US as a practical matter, actually engaged systematically with the UN under kofi, Annan, Ban, Ki Moon, etc. And return to its previous view of the UN as an element of its own arsenal of statecraft, rather than as an external constraint.

Trita Parsi 23:14

Very interesting, Aziz you want to add to that?

Aziz Rana 23:16

I mean, so I think the thing that I would say is that it's, it's really important to appreciate that in the post war period, the US is dealing with bipolarity, and it's dealing with global decolonization,

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and it's also dealing with the rest of domestic population. So this is the era of the civil rights movement, labor unrest, and one of the things that American national elites have to essentially develop is an argument about like, well, what makes the us different? Like, why is it that the US should have global primacy and it won't necessarily operate the same way that these other Imperial hegemonies have behaved in the past and the law? The idea of the US is committed to a vision of constitutional democracy, both domestically, but then also internationally.

And with the international system becomes really central to its self definition. And then when the Soviet Union collapses, there's a real question about, well, to what extent have the types of constraints that the US has imposed on itself, should they remain in effect? And basically, I think what you see is a steady, decades long defection from really the bipartisan foreign policy establishment, of which neocons are a part of the kinds of constraints that had seen been seen as justified. And so when, when Pearl has comments like this, or the language that you see in the early 2000s it's an indicator of already a decade long process of defecting from the idea that these systems actually sustain American interest.

But I think it's really noteworthy two things. First, the point that Asli made, which is in the context of the first Gulf War, in the context of the Second Gulf War, in the context of Afghanistan, American elites, even those that are affiliated. With neoconservatism are still committed to the idea of laws providing legitimacy for the use of force, domestic uses of force authorizations. So you have a domestic conversation about it, the turn to the UN Security Council as a way of providing international legitimacy from for the use of force. That's still part of the story. And secondly, that even the neoconservative argument about why you should abandon international institutions is still grounded in a claim about the exceptional American role in establishing a global community committed to something like constitutional democracy. The thought is that these international constraints precisely because you have dictatorships that are involved in like the UN's Human Rights Council.

These are the kinds of arguments that were made. They actually undermine the ability of generating something like local democracy. There's a claim about other directed interest that's connected to American intervention, and basically, I think one of the things that we've seen now this is not to say that the actual violence that ended up being perpetrated in places like Iraq weren't incredibly destructive for the region. Produced failed states and collapsed regimes, countless death, intense human suffering, but it is to say that the through line that we trace is not just the defection from the commitment to international norms and law, but increasingly the lesson that, let's say, the folks now invested in regime change and war on Iran. The lesson that was learned is that that entire kind of vision of American exceptionalism, of a kind of moral frame for American power that itself was the problem that actually you can't promote something like democracy in the Middle East.

This is the investment in the idea, basically of an ethnonational, civilizational vision of the world that's divided between distinct communities. It's not a surprise that the folks that are prosecuting a war on Iran right now also are backing immigration policies, for instance, that would have 70

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plus countries either totally or partially banned from entering all in the Global South, overwhelmingly in Africa and the Middle East. This is to say, the assault now is on the very idea of nation building, the very premise that US power is supposed to be connected to a vision of spreading democracy. And so it's a rejection of international law. It's a rejection of the underlying premises of immoral authority, and a reconstruction of the globe, really, around a very harsh Manichaeus us versus them, in which the US has its own sphere of influence that it's supposed to dominate, including through extractive resource practices, and through the imposition, through coercion, of its own needs and ends.

Trita Parsi 27:51

So this is not a scenario in which you can turn against the idea of America playing a role as a nation builder, as the force that has to push for democracy in various places, whether they asked for it or not, in general, because, you know, you can take that position without necessarily believing that the reason you should be against that is because these other people are simply, culturally or civilizationally not fit for democracy. You're essentially saying that there is a view that is actually quite popular, in the sense that the US should step back from these different things.

But the ones that are running the show right now are coming to this view from a completely different angle, from, as if civilizational standpoint, in which, essentially it is not that it's good or bad for the US. This is just an impossible task, because there are profound differences in civilization and American power is not sufficient to be able to overcome that. Do I understand you correctly?

Aziz Rana 28:45

Yeah. So this is part of the misreading in my view of Trump as anti war, or even like anti Imperial, 2015 2016 which is the thing that Trump was able to give voice to, was that there was intense kind of within the conservative Republican Party base, opposition to the Iraq War and in particular to the projects of nation building. And the way that Trump, I think, ultimately gave voice to this, was that the reason why these wars failed, and this is the politics of race that plays out with the Republican Party and Trump's politics.

Now, the reason why these wars ultimately failed is because of, you know, limitations, cultural limitations within the societies that the US was attempting to transform, and so that the lesson that's learned is that we should not be engaged. It's not that the US shouldn't engage in aggressive, extractive, coercive practices, including like overthrowing regimes, et cetera, et cetera. It's that the US should not be engaged in the kind of forever wars that are attempting to transform other societies into variations of the US. So that it's not a surprise. In 2015 2016 that he both attacks the, you know, Jeb Bush, because of Jeb Bush's continuity with like, the Bush Dynasty and the Iraq War, and calls for a Muslim ban. And that this is a moment in time, if you you know, if you look at the charts of like, the rise of hate crimes, that you see a spike in hate crimes with respect to Muslim people in the United States.

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Trita Parsi 30:23

On top of that, criticizes Bush for not taking the oil.

Aziz Rana 30:29

Exactly the problem. So the thought is that precisely because they're these quote, unquote, inherent flaws in in societies that are not like us, we need to have a fortress wall that limits their ability to come in, and we have to have a posture of basically xenophobic belligerence. And that posture of xenophobic belligerence may well include the use of extreme forms of violence as a way of imposing dominance, extracting resources and assets, but what it's not supposed to do is engage in transformational efforts to actually alter those states in ways that would be consistent with the practices associated with the United States. And so it's setting the stage effectively for a vision of the world that's divided ethno racially, that that imagines the US as a, you know, as an ethno national state, and that treats enemies, you know, outside of the fortress as appropriate sites for, you know, profound acts of violence, inconsistent with both a theory of law So lawless, both domestic and international, that's out the window.

But also, as you're not interested in necessarily, like altering the terms of the leadership. So if you can find a delsi Rodriguez, that's great. If what you have instead is state collapse, that's fine, so long as you're able to exercise control over the primary assets and maintain your own sense of security and dominance behind the fortress wall. This is an extension of elements within the rights coalition that really comes to the fore with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the limitations on constraints on a kind of post war politics. But it's also the victory, let's say, of one element within right wing politics with respect to how to relate to the rest of the world.

Asli Bali 32:30

I want to come in on just one. First of all, I agree absolutely with everything that, as you said, and the whole like asylum for white Afrikaners only, et cetera, is just like there are so many ways that we can trace the connections to AI today. That vision of a world in which this form of white nationalism, like, who are we actually connected to civilizationally, whose interests matter, etc, is expressed very nakedly and clearly through the Trump administration.

But I want to think about the other corollary, the places where we don't have those civilizational stakes and where that are outside of the fortress walls, etc. There's another element of, let's call it the doctrines premises, which is a kind of doubling down on asymmetry, building a kind of controlled asymmetry that rests on a very specific bet. And this, too, is an extension of earlier views that were present, not just amongst conservatives, that really reflect a bipartisan understanding of US power, as it became less and less constrained in the 21st Century, that the US can just apply intense economic and selective military pressure to shape outcomes and bend geographies to its will. Willy nilly, whether or not you're going to try nation Bill, you can

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drop all of that, but still have the desire to have this kind of extractive, transactional relationship, and where places resist coerce them into participating in that scheme.

And this is especially expressed in the Trump administration, as we point out in the piece against adversaries that are assumed to be structurally weaker and also rationally are therefore believed to be escalation averse meaning, because they're in a weaker position, we're going to use this overwhelming force, and they're going to bend to our will. And Venezuela is the best example of a success for those who believe in this method, that you can avoid full scale war, you can get your ends, and you can do it purely through coercion. And Iran is almost the ideal stress test, to borrow your phrase again, Trita for this logic. I mean it was treated as, you know, economically vulnerable sanctions, dependent, facing a significant pressure point, both through sanctions and the internal unrest that economic conditions in Iran had produced. January, you know, protest in Iran, militarily inferior in conventional terms, with that important American ally that has qualitative military advantage as a consequence of a long term, again, bipartisan American foreign policy commitment to preserve its qualitative military superiority, namely, Israel and Iran is more regionally constrained. Its proxies have taken a knock, etc.

So this is a place where coercion will should be able to be applied exactly in the straightforward way, to bend actors to the will and without really facing any meaningful retaliation. Because Iran is another classic example of punching down. And of course, what it has done is exposed the total limits once more, and here are the echoes again of the Iraq war, of this kind of a strategy, because the current war shows all the ways that these premises break down. First of all, asymmetry cuts in more than one direction. Iran may not be able to match the United States conventionally, but it doesn't need to do that. It can respond. They've underestimated regional proxies, they apparently, which is astonishing given the amount of American intelligence on specifically this issue, failed to anticipate maritime disruption.

And also Iran is capable of incremental escalation of its own that stays well below the war threshold of conventional war that they were thinking of, while ratcheting pressure in a way that means that coercion turns into a feedback loop that they're not at all escalation averse in the ways that the United States imagined, even though they are asymmetrically positioned. And so it's not the one sided campaign that Trump imagined he would be punching down to, and that's so first, asymmetry cuts both ways. Second, sanctions and pressure don't always produce lack of resistance or compliance, quite the opposite, as we pointed out in an earlier piece, in the sanctions piece we wrote in The Boston review. Actually, this kind of selective coercion can harden. Instead of softening the target, we can harden the regime. We're seeing that in real time right now. It can expand risk tolerance or pain tolerance, right by forcing countries into more and more resilient posture, which is exactly what the effect has been long term on set of sanctions in the Iranian context, at great cost, of course, to the target, but not in a way that's also not costly for the strategy continued on the part of the US, and it might shift incentives towards escalation rather than concession, because you've already taught the lesson that concession breeds more coercion, which, again, the United States has done in spades in Iran.

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So it's exposing the limits. Asymmetry cuts both ways. Sanction and pressure do not necessarily produce compliance. And finally, escalation ceilings are totally illusory. Your belief that you're punching down, you engage in a selective, coercive act, and you can calibrate the pressure precisely and stay in control of the dynamics you've unleashed are just absolutely false. And so each step is met with a counter step. The line between so called limited strikes or an operation and not a war erodes and erodes in ways that has nothing that is totally outside of the control of the United States. And this is also what happened in the Iraq context, right? This is the story of how the US ended up having to distribute the cost of its fundamental error in the first place.

So what was meant to be this kind of controlled coercion, another application of the US, asymmetric power to shape the world in its own preferred manner, becomes an open ended conflict with a kind of drift that is tied, and I'm going to stop here, but this is really like, I'm telling you, the chain of our work mind and diseases. It's tied right back to Imperial unraveling. This is coercion without control, without an image of, you know, the US, of course, is still able to wield overwhelming tools of commercial coercion, but it has absolutely diminished its ability to shape outcomes predictably, in part as a consequence of the its own dismantling of institutions that help channel political disputes in particular ways, and also the fundamental structural overreach that's necessary when you abandon the logic of institutions that embed and entrench a kind of legitimate or consensual structural organization of the globe in your favor, which is what the original multilateral UN model was, and instead rely on pure coercion, then you have a kind of structural overreach in which you know the Trump doctrine fails on its own terms, its own relative power asymmetry that favors the United States not only can't guarantee control over escalation, but may actually work in the advantage of its adversary in a fragmented, networked regional order in which pain can be distributed quickly and at low cost by an asymmetrically weaker rival.

Trita Parsi 39:19

Thank you. So I want to one more question on this, and then I and then I we do need to get to, you know, the specifics of Gaza and how that's influencing the situation today. But one thing that comes out of this is that there is a continuity, but there is a significant escalation with Trump and his doctrine, because he's now going completely against multilateral institutions, whereas even the Biden administration, which I was very critical of how they approached the UN was looking for this RBI, or rules based international order, as an alternative to a law centered order. But could there, as a result, be simply that?

But Trump is actually an exception. He is a continuation, but he's also an exception because he takes that extra step that the previous administrations didn't do, and as a result, the US will revert back to still a highly problematic approach, where it's continuing to erode a lot of these different norms, continuing to undermine the multilateral system as a whole, but without this type of naked assault on the system per se, or the, you know, the rejection of the very idea that these laws even should exist or should be given any reference to whatsoever.

Asli Bali 40:35

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I'm going to come in very quickly and then pass on to Aziz to say that was a story that could have been told in Trump one. I think that this is an exception, that there's an underlying norm. There's a bipartisan consensus the US will return to form, et cetera, that requires an international order that's willing to subscribe to institutions that it believes are backstopped by a form of us, power in which the US is believed to be capable of resuming a guarantor role, etc.

I do think at this point that that is no longer an available option, that I don't think any future US administration is going to be able to offer the assurances that would be needed or suggest that they are subject to the constraints that are relevant to make others in the international system accept the idea that the US can play a stabilizing role, it's just proven itself too unstable internally and too much of a rogue now no longer, as I said, using it once upon a time, states went along with American unilateralism, even when it involved forms of coercion that they fundamentally disagreed with secondary sanctions, all kinds of things, because they believed that, at base, the US was continuing to subscribe to an underlying commitment to multilateralism.

I think the capacity to elicit that belief in others is now broken. That isn't to say that there's no path back to international or international institutions, because I do think ultimately a world ordered, the alternative to that model is not a different multilateral system that also is of global scope, et cetera, but rather, as I said, that really nightmarish scenario of regional silos, et cetera, which is going to be worse overall for all states, right? It's much more conflict prone, much likelier to devolve into a world war three rapidly. So other states have an incentive in preserving the rules and the institutions, but they don't any longer have a reason to believe that the United States would serve as a guarantor.

So the problem is, how do you then overcome the collective action problem, which is, how do you get those states to act collectively in a way that is in all of their interest but involve, you know, may, you know, first of all, internalizing some costs, and second of all, bearing a much larger share of responsibility for preserving the order. So the UN is a great test case. In this moment, the Trump administration is on the brink of bankrupting the United Nations. We may face a situation in which it literally can no longer keep the lights on pay its basic staff as it is. It's devolving in many respects at this moment, we're talking about a ludicrously small sum of money, which is a rounding error on the daily cost of the war on Iran at this moment.

And yet, somehow we have yet to see overcoming of the collective action problem of just, you know, adding this tiny, tiny increment of capital to sustaining a multilateral system in order to get through this Trump period and then have it still in existence for whatever comes after, which is never going to be a return to a US authored system as such, but at least a system in which the US can be one amongst a series of players. But even this very tiny, tiny, tiny hurdle is being difficult to overcome, so it's hard to see exactly how it's going to happen.

Aziz Rana 43:47

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so, I mean, just totally agree that you could tell a story. In fact, this was the Biden story in 2021 about a return to normalcy that Trump as a kind of exceptional moment that's been defeated, and actually Trump himself might be prosecuted and convicted for an effort to overturn a democratically elected president. The problem basically is that Trump's return has essentially scrambled calculations about long term U.S. credibility, and in particular, the idea that you can count on the US as both a global security backstop and a global backstop for international legal arrangements that you know in the past, even if the US was defecting precisely because it saw the system itself AS in its own interests, that you can assume that the US would behave in ways that were thinking about long term, long term commitments.

The problem, of course, now is if there's a growing recognition of fundamental American instability, then that essentially suggests that the only way that you can get to a path that looks like even a commitment to the old fashioned set of norms is through some new multi lateral, excuse me, multi polar arrangement that's not premised on American primacy. So. There's that. The other thing that I would just note, that I think is a really significant issue, is the fact that all of these dynamics that we're talking about at the global level have their own parallels domestically within the United States, because we can tell this exact same story about how the post war period in the US established a basic set of constitutional practices that were supposed to define what amounted to an American constitutional compact, from racial liberalism to a limited social welfare state, to a commitment checks and balances, to regulation of market capitalism with administrative infrastructure, and then internationally, to the promotion of all of these different elements, including civil liberties, human rights norms, through a set of international arrangements.

And basically, you can argue that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, one of the things that it did is it meant that the types of pressures that constrained not just the left. So we think of the Cold War is a period of crackdowns on socialist politics, left politics in the US, but also constrained the far right by creating incentive structures for the center right to understand this compact as consistent with its own partisan objectives. That stuff was removed, and effectively what's happened is that the right has increasingly embraced a brand of politics that we can read as fundamentalist in lots of different ways. So rejection of racial liberalism, rejection of constraints on the markets, a rejection of checks and balances, including a defense of an incredibly aggressive form of executive authority, so that we're at a moment in time where Trump also embodies an assault on the basic premises of American Constitutionalism that had been chipped away, frankly, in a bipartisan mode for decades, but now is experiencing a kind of collapse where it's possible that Democrats might take over in 2026 and that you might have a Democratic president in 2028 presumably, President in 2028 presuming that we have more or less functional elections. That's likely to happen.

But there is no presumption that you can put the genie back in the bottle, that you can either return to an earlier historical moment, or that you can assume transformation on behalf of something that's more genuinely a practice of constitutional democracy, and instead, you have this combination of paralysis and uncertainty and of one new incumbent perhaps being replaced by another incumbent that again, even more aggressively attacks the premises of law. And so

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these internal dynamics are interplaying with the International dynamics in ways that make it very hard to imagine a stable international order that would view the US as one of the pillars of that stability.

Trita Parsi 47:54

We have a question from the audience, what role does Israel and its exceptionalism play in the Donroe doctrine, especially when Israeli actions become a wedge issue between the US and its NATO European allies. Does Israel have a specific place in the Donroe doctrine? And I would just like to add to that if you could give the examples of how the conduct of Israel in Gaza, which really appeared to look like a war on international law itself, trying to erase all of those different norms around the use of force. It's fascinating to see, in the beginning, was a denial that there was any bombing of hospitals. Later on, it was no denials. Instead of saying, Well, you know, obviously we're bombing the hospitals Hamas is there. There was a charade. Every time they killed the journalist saying, Well, this was accidental. We're going to investigate it.

Now, they actually announce it themselves. We got that journalist in which they just fundamentally changed the reality. And we see some of that also playing out in the war on Iran right now the United States with whatever flaws it had, and you know, the inceptional error of attacking and invading Iraq did not bomb Iraqi universities deliberately, but we are now seeing that that was absolutely deliberately done in Gaza, and it is now also being done in Tehran, what appears to be the Israelization of American form of warfare. So could you address Jim's question as well as give us the history of how Israel's conduct has come to play a role, whatever the role that is in the Donroe doctrine.

Asli Bali 49:38

Maybe I'll start again Aziz, if you want. So first of all, I think that this description is exactly right, particularly the sharply placed description you gave Chita of the ways in which we've seen constraints thrown off in real time as new interpretations are being promulgated by the Israelis, where they no longer even need to dissemble that they're not. Targeting directly, hospitals, universities, school systems, infrastructure, etc. I think that there's, this is not new. I think that this was a project as far back as the mid 90s, on the part of particular Israeli elites, at least. And Benjamin Netanyahu put, you know, put it in writing, essentially, that he had a vision for a kind of new American order for the Middle East, and Israel's place in that order.

And so just on the Donroe doctrine point, I would say, you know, as Aziz mentioned earlier, there's a way in which the Middle East itself is presented as part of America's near abroad, another sphere that must be within its own regional influence. And Israel is the, you know, kind of Garrison state, where the US has planted its flag more than any others, although it has a diversified structure of alliances, including the Gulf, and we're seeing the consequences of those alliances now. Arab Gulf countries, Israel is the core partner and articulation of the American Vision for the region, and we can see in the Iran war that it's also its interests, its understanding of strategic objectives is prioritized in a way that is all but coterminous with whatever the US is

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also itself pursuing in the region, whether that is sustainable, given the obvious underlying divergence of interest of the two countries, with Israel having a particular set of goals for outcomes that it wants to see in the region, including, apparently, the collapse of numerous states across the region. Whether that remains consistent with American strategic goals is a separate question, but for the moment, I would say fits pretty squarely in a Donroe doctrine. I'd be interested to hear if Aziz thinks of it in the same way. But on the other question, the one that you asked, Trita, I mean, the US as far back as immediately after 911 began embracing a set of new international humanitarian law, or use in Bello, like laws of war, doctrines that the Israelis had already introduced in the 90s.

So in there, so you get like, you know, Operation Grapes of Wrath in southern Lebanon under Shimon Peres, which basically is the breaking of the Rabin sort of model of labor governance in Israel, and it becomes the segue to Netanyahu, first turn as prime minister. And in that turn, the Palestinian question is turned from one that's going to be resolved through a diplomatic path or in any way in a peace process, to one that's entirely going to be securitized and is about increasing increments of repression and full militarization of the project, beginning in 96 I would say, with Netanyahu as first Premiership. And then you have the introduction of things like, for example, targeted killing as somehow different than extrajudicial killing, which is not permitted. And re description of civilians, civilian political leadership, civilian actors as somehow directly participating in hostilities. These categories existed in international humanitarian law, but they're expanded. They're expanded in ways that basically systematically blurs or eliminates the distinction between military and civilian targets in a series of incremental doctrinal moves that were Israel's alone, widely rejected ICRC and others in the 90s, even in the early 2000s until the US begins embracing them.

The idea that, you know there are irregular combatants of a variety of kinds that don't get the benefits of the privileges of belligerency under the Geneva Conventions in Afghanistan, that there are, you know, enemy combatants that are not or that don't get the benefit of being treated as actually participating in a regular combat force, even though they're waging war in the military of an organized state and so on. So like the israelification of or the adoption by the United States of various doctrinal let's call them innovations that emerge from the IDF, Legal Office has a long pedigree and is really like part of the story of the war on terror. And then, as the United States and Israel jointly announce more and more of these unable or unwilling, you know you can override the sovereignty of states and use force on the territory of a state without its consent on the grounds that you're going after a non state actor.

Again, there are arguments around this that crystallize into the explicit embrace of doctrine, and then the claim that this doctrine has now become customary international law. Why? Because there's so much state practice behind it. What state practice Israel in the United States. But of course, the United States is in so many theaters at once. Once it embraces some of these doctrines, it begins to try to generalize them, and as NATO allies and others concede to some of them, although even the UK is limited in its own conduct in Iraq, from embracing many of the reinterpretations that the US uses.

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Also, for example, enhanced interrogation and trying to fudge what constitutes torture, another doctrinal borrowing or expansion of an Israeli set of strategies. But there's a European Court of Human Rights. There are actual constraints of a kind that other actors face, that the United States doesn't face. The US unconstrained has a State Department, Defense Department, sets of lawyers that are in and out of academia. Kelley me as well, that continually insist that these are doctrines that are lawful somehow, or are meaningful reinterpretations of existing law, until you get to the point, as you say, where we're at genocide. We're at Gaza, we're at siege warfare, we're at collective punishment, we're at starvation of civilian populations. And still, arguments are being furnished such that Cuba can be presented somehow as some amalgam of the US has a unilateral right in its own trade relations to impose trade embargoes, et cetera.

It can choose to trade or not trade, and then impose secondary sanctions, even in circumstances now thinking of the JCPOA, where it itself is in breach of the relevant international legal arrangement, JCPOA entered into and back with a series of other states, backstopped by the Security Council, but it imposes secondary sanctions on other countries' ability to trade, and now in Cuba, even going beyond that and interdicting, imposing a fuel blockade that involves a physical limitation of other countries' ability to trade with Cuba, all of which is presented as somehow within gray zones, or permissible or lawful, so that we see not just Israel imposing explicitly the Gazification of South Lebanon, announcing the use of the same doctrine that is targeting practices in Iran, but also the US, as you've indicated, embracing targeting strategies and others globally, beyond even the Middle East theater, that reflect this. So it's the culmination again. I just want to say this is again, our continuity and rupture story, both the culmination of a set of trends that we've seen now for, sadly, a quarter century, but also something that represents genuinely rupture because of its the qualitative difference of scale at this point.

Trita Parsi 56:38

Aziz, I know you want to come in, but if you don't mind, since we only have literally two minutes left, I'm going to ask a last question and give that to you, which is that at the end of your fantastic piece, you guys leave us with perhaps a little bit of a hope, because this is in all of the variations of American power since World War Two, There is one approach that remains genuinely untested multi polarity on inclusive terms, rather than through Imperial rivalry. Such an approach would ground itself, and I'm cutting a bit, a vision of a world organized around mutual self constraint, collective decision making and shared global commons. Aziz, is multipolarity in the US national interest?

Aziz Rana 57:21

So my own view is absolutely that one of the things that we've actually seen over the course of these decades is that the particular path that the US is pursuing internationally, so a world that's organized around a harsh divide between insiders and outsiders, that thinks of resources is not a matter of the commons, but as something to be hoarded that views law, purely instrumentally, as something that applies to our enemies, but we ourselves are lawless, has created

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domestically, a culture of impunity that benefits the few and that compromises our own basic system of democracy, and that in truth, I think the lesson to be learned here is that the post war vision of American primacy ultimately, in many ways, ate itself because of the fact that it was always, in some ways, built around a presumption of defection. In 1973 Arthur Schlesinger was talking about the Imperial president. We had investigations into the kinds of violence that was being opposed abroad, the forms of national security abuse that we saw domestically, with the intelligence surveillance of various kinds of civil rights and anti war organizations so that primacy didn't actually generate something like a national interest, and now what we're witnessing with Trump is that a vision of multipolarity that's really just about old fashioned Imperial rivalry, and whoever has the biggest stick in whichever neighborhood, if it's Israel in the Middle East or the US and the Americas, being able to assert A kind of extreme dominance.

Not only is that something that is bound to fail because people will inevitably reject, like their own condition of permanent suffering and the presumption that folks do not have a right to self determination, but it also produces societies internally, and we're seeing this within the US that are not built to actually address the basic prevailing social crises and problems that people face that can actually produce something like equal and effective freedom. So really multipolarity that presumes that a global commons should be a place for the sharing of wealth, that understands imposing constraints on oneself as a mechanism for creating a world in which constraint becomes a basic norm is essential, and maybe just as a way of saying as a final point, this is also why I think that the four elements of what we've seen tested out in Gaza post October 7 have to be named. Blamed and rejected.

One, the idea that you can just engage in assassination of folks that are not military figures, so just assassination of academics, journalists, politicians. Two, that you can imagine that the world can be organized as closed ethnonational communities. We're seeing this now in Lebanon, New York Times reporting the idea that that Israel is calling for Christian communities in the south to essentially remove Shia who have who have enjoyed something like safe haven there. So essentially demographically alter the terms of society so that each space is just for one ethnic community. The third is the idea that laws of war are really just opportunities for the imposition of extreme violence, including the attacking of civilian infrastructure and civilians. And then fourth that we can think of things like sanctions and blockades as a legitimate form of making economies screen. All of these have been generalized in ways that now the US is effectively pursuing globally, from Cuba to Iran, and that each one of these elements make it impossible to live in a world with others.

And so not only are the kinds of legal constraints essential to what we might think of as the US national interest, I'd say something else, which is that empire, ultimately, 19th century Empire was ultimately not only not in the national interest of the actual people in parts of the global north, but it was also a deeply morally corroded way of being in the world. And that at the end of the day, it doesn't just matter what realpolitik strategic interests are, or what the law says, But it matters what kind of ethical community we want to share with others. And to the extent that we've reached a place where, in the United States, we're not even able to have a full throated conversation about the kind of moral universe we want to inhabit, is an indicator both of the long

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trajectory that has brought us to this place, but also the particular forms of coercion that mark this moment.

Trita Parsi 1:02:07

Fantastic. Thank you so much. Asla and Aziz really recommend everyone to go to Boston review.net and find the article. It's also linked on our website, on the very invitation that you all saw when you signed up for this webinar. It's been a fantastic conversation. We look so much forward to having you back, hopefully a more hopeful article next time. But this is such an amazing contribution to our broader understanding of why we are where we are right now, before I let everyone go, and I'm sorry that we're a couple of minutes over, I just want to make sure I plug our next webinar, which is actually quite related to this. It is tomorrow at two o'clock. It is titled What is the new paradigm of US-Venezuela relations post Maduro, and it features Francisco Rodriguez, Julia Buxton and Orlando Perez. For those of you who are not signed up to the Quincy mailing list, please go to quincyinst.org sign up for the mailing list so you get invitations to all of our webinars events, as well as our publications. And with that, thank you all again, and hope to see you tomorrow. Thanks so much. Thank you so much, so much.

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