



WORLDVIEWS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

A Monograph Series

American Foreign Policy on My Watch

A Conversation with Amb. Chas Freeman



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American Foreign Policy on My Watch

A Conversation with Amb. Chas Freeman

Q: Describe the world as it was when you embarked on an international-affairs career a half-century ago?

Amb. Chas Freeman: After finishing law school, I decided that I didn't want to be a lawyer, that I wanted to serve my country and that I wanted to do it as a diplomat. It was an inherently unstable environment. The world situation in the mid-1960s was framed by the bipolar competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. China was between the two of them and the enemy of both. It had been allied with the Soviet Union, and that alliance had failed. So I came to the conclusion that we would have to reach out to China.

Q: What was your first opportunity for direct involvement in that effort?

A: It came when I served as President Richard Nixon's principal interpreter during his visit to China in 1972, which broke the ice between the two countries. It was a remarkable event in which the president of the United States flew to the capital of a state we did not recognize, even as we continued to recognize the capital as being elsewhere under Chiang Kai-shek. We took the risk of moving in a novel direction and carried it off with enormous repercussions.

Q: Tell us how you became part of that history-making delegation.

A: I wanted to study Chinese. It turned out I was very good at it, and I learned both Mandarin and Taiwanese. While working at the State Department's China desk, I ended up writing a lot of material in preparation for Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's secret visit to China in 1971, as well as for the president's visit the following year. I was asked at the last minute not to go along with the presidential delegation as a policy advisor but as an interpreter. My first task as interpreter was to refuse to interpret.

Q: That sounds curious. What happened?

A: The president's staff asked me to interpret his banquet toast at his direction and claimed there was no text. Several times, I asked for the text. Finally, I was told there was no text and the president had ordered me to interpret. At that point, I said to Nixon's appointment secretary that I had drafted the toast and knew there was a text. Further, I knew somebody in the White House had put some of Chairman Mao Zedong's poetry into the text. I was not about to get up in front of the entire world and ad lib the chairman's poetry from an unknown English translation back into Chinese. It would have been an absolute disaster. A couple of days later, the president apologized and thanked me for saying no. I was 28 and figured I would never get a job in the federal government again.

Q: Fortunately, that wasn't the case, and the China overture opened many doors. What did we accomplish?

A: Nixon changed the world in ways we didn't understand at the time. We thought we were building a cold-blooded geopolitical alignment with China against the Soviet Union, and we did that. What we didn't understand was that we were laying the basis for opening China to the world and transforming it into the great economic power it has become.

Q: Did that change accelerate the end of the Cold War?

A: The changes in China had a great deal to do with the end of the Cold War and ultimately the collapse of the Soviet Union. First of all, China was part of our containment strategy, which was proposed by American diplomat and political scientist George F. Kennan and adopted after World War II. His basic premise was if the Soviet Union were walled off, the defects in its system would eventually bring it down. It had a system that in the long run could not work. And he was right. By the time the Soviet Union actually did come down, though, we had forgotten what the premise of containment was. And it was a bit of surprise that our policy actually worked.

Q: In what other ways did China play a part in ending the Cold War?

A: It helped check Soviet expansion in its last phase by supplying weaponry and cooperating with us against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan – a very large, little-known program of cooperation that was extremely effective. We had Saudi money, U.S. management, Chinese weapons and Pakistani intermediation. And finally, China, by deciding that its ideology was an obstacle to economic development, not a motor for it, called into question the very framework of Soviet political economy. From the Chinese perspective, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev was wrong in that he attempted political reform before doing economic reform. Their view, and it may be correct, is that the basis for political stability is economic success, and that political reform without a strong economy is a recipe for disaster.

Q: Let's fast-forward to 2015. We have Russia in a more active capacity and tensions resulting from its resurgence, China rising rapidly with questions about its intentions, and a significant focus on the Middle East as a result of the Arab Spring and political violence. There seems to be more problems, challenges and maybe even opportunities than ever. What are your thoughts?

A: Well, containment provided a global strategy into which everything

that happened could be fit. Everything related in the end, in our view, to our contest with the Soviet Union – both as a country and as an ideology. Our interests and our values were both challenged. With the end of the Cold War, the strategy of containment became irrelevant. It turned out we had kind of forgotten how to do strategy. Containment was a diplomatic, political, economic, informational and military strategy. It integrated all of these elements.

Q: And now?

A: Now, we are confronted with a world with no theme, no contest of ideas apparently. Countries that are potential competitors as military powers, for example, offer no alternatives for our ideology. China doesn't have an ideology that it can explain to its own people, let alone export. India doesn't offer a challenge in the sphere of ideas, Japan, same thing. Germany, the European Union, no. Russia for a long time wanted to accommodate itself to our ways and build a relationship with Europe; it was frustrated in that effort for many reasons. So now, we confront a world in which there is no theme, no contest to focus our energies.

Q: Does that leave countries and regions to follow their own courses?

A: Yes, each region is moving in its own direction, often with a strong power at the center of it. Latin America is no longer our back yard. It is now mainly linked not to the north, but to the east and west. It's active in Africa. Its major trading partners are in Asia and Europe, and countries like Brazil are reasonably successful and are charting their own course, without reference to us or our ideas. Europe has integrated itself in ways we favor, but really without reference to us, and has had a civilizing effect on its periphery. For example, Turkey, even though it hasn't been admitted to the European Union, has undergone a process of accession that has caused it to reform, to become more compatible with the European notion of society. In Africa, we've never been truly engaged, except in combatting diseases.

Q: Which has given other countries an opportunity?

A: Yes, in Africa, it's been left to the Chinese, Indians and others to come in and form business, commercial and industrial partnerships. Many of the fastest-growing economies, in the last several years, can be found in Africa, but we are not the main factor, which is something new for us. In East Asia, a Sino-centric world is emerging. China is everybody's biggest trading partner. It's the place where all the world's supply chains converge. It is now the largest economy in the world in terms of purchasing power parity, and soon it will likely be the largest in terms of exchange rates and conversion rates. Japan has been a bit adrift, trying to become a normal country after 70 years of U.S. occupation and tutelage. And India has emerged as a half-reformed country reaching out to the world, but still constrained by some of the ideas of socialism and statism that it inherited from the earlier era.

Q: What about the Middle East?

A: The Middle East has collapsed into total disorder. It is the graveyard of all American projects. There hasn't been a peace process that worthy of the name in about 15 years between Israel and Palestine. Efforts under the current U.S. administration to start one ended ignominiously, to the great embarrassment of Secretary of State John Kerry and with the apparent indifference of the president. This is not a central project for the United States in the region. 9/11 from the point of view of its perpetrators was an act of reprisal for humiliation at the hand of the West. 9/11 estranged us from Muslim societies in fundamental ways. Islamophobia is now a very big factor in our own society. Their resentment of our drone program and so on has caused anti-American terrorism with global reach to metastasize and spread to the northern regions of Africa, as well as some parts of Asia. We have a global war on terror that went awry. We conducted a very justified and effective punitive raid into Afghanistan and somehow without further discussion transformed it into a campaign of pacification that has failed. We lurched into

Iraq for reasons which no one has been adequately able to explain. None of the stated objectives were accomplished: No weapons of mass destruction were found, no democracy was installed, no pro-American or pro-Israeli government was established, and in fact Iraq has collapsed into chaos.

Q: What is your assessment of the Arab Spring?

A: The Arab uprisings represented an effort at a popular level to assert control, a kind of self-determination directed both at their own governments and their Western patrons. The case of Egypt produced a series of coups that we have been unwilling to recognize as such and a strained relationship. In the case of Syria, the uprising has produced anarchy, with hundreds of thousands of dead Syrians and millions more displaced from their homes, including many now in refuge abroad. Finally, we have Iraq and Syria which incubated the Islamic State, and that is a three-dimensional object: an idea, a political structure that now governs more people than Israel or Jordan and an army that's quite effective. It has to be dealt with not in terms of a military campaign plan, which we sort of have, but also in terms of moral and theological refutation, which we are not capable of. We also need a political solution for the disintegration of Iraq and Syria, which eludes us. It would require cooperation, not just between Saudi Arabia and Iran, but between us and Russia.

Q: And the Russian piece has been made more challenging of late?

A: Yes, Moscow saw a counter-Russian coup in Kiev, and acted opportunistically by incorporating Ukraine's Crimean region by a process that was clearly illegitimate. It has also fostered resistance and rebellion by Russian-speaking Ukrainians against Kiev's authority in the eastern part of the country. The result of this – and the way we have dealt with it – has been to entrench differences through sanctions, and dig us deeper and deeper into a hole in U.S.- Russian relations. We've also caused structural hostility between Europe and Russia, in a sense, and we have unfortunately distanced ourselves

from our European allies. They don't agree with the mostly military approach that we've taken, rhetorically at least, to Ukraine and think we should be trying to define a political/diplomatic solution. This would answer the question of Ukraine's place between Europe and Russia and the question of Russia's relationship with Europe.

Q: In sum, where are we in today's world?

A: So, all in all, we confront a world in which there is no center, we are no longer in charge, there is no great contest that we are engaged in, there is no theme, we are not the representatives of an idea as we once were, and we have also corrupted the idea of America. In many ways, we have destroyed our liberty in order to save it by suspending much of the Bill of Rights and ignoring the Constitution. So, this is a dark period in our history in which dysfunctional government at home is producing dysfunctional foreign policy, in my view.

Q: Where do we go from here? Are you optimistic that at some point we'll emerge from this crisis, or do you think what we have will be the status quo for the foreseeable future?

A: I think the question really comes down to whether we can restore effective governance at home. A country that can't pass a budget, that has entrusted the economy to a secret committee of the Federal Reserve Board rather than elected members of Congress or the president, is a country that can't make decisions on foreign policy either, and that should not be surprising. So, if we can restore respect for the Constitution and a spirit of compromise between the parties, of course we can regain our role in the world. We have enormous strength in the country. We have 330 million or so people of immense diversity. Every kind of human being in the world is among us. We have two wide oceans between us and potential enemies. To our north we have the Canadians, who are delightful people, and in the south we have the Mexicans with whom we are very comfortable, as well. We have a huge quantity of the world's agricultural land, water and other natural resources. We have not exhausted the energy supplies of our continent; new technology is unlocking new supplies. We

are industrious, and we have been inventive. We have had and still have many of the world's great research universities, where ideas are incubated. We have everything going for us except ineffectual politics. If we can straighten out our politics, we'll be formidable.

Ambassador Chas Freeman is a senior fellow at Brown University's Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs. He was Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs from 1993-94. He earned the highest public service awards of the Department of Defense for his roles in designing a NATO-centered post-Cold War European security system and in reestablishing defense and military relations with China. He served as U. S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia (during operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm). He was Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs during the historic U.S. mediation of Namibian independence from South Africa and Cuban troop withdrawal from Angola. Freeman served as Deputy Chief of Mission and Chargé d'Affaires in the American embassies at both Bangkok (1984-1986) and Beijing (1981-1984). He was Director for Chinese Affairs at the U.S. Department of State from 1979-1981. He was the principal American interpreter during the late President Nixon's path-breaking visit to China in 1972. In addition to his Middle Eastern, African, East Asian and European diplomatic experience, he served in India. Ambassador Freeman is Chairman of the Board of Projects International, Inc., a Washington-based business development firm that specializes in arranging international joint ventures, acquisitions, and other business operations for its American and foreign clients. After his retirement from government, he served concurrently as co-chair of the United States China Policy Foundation, president of the Middle East Policy Council and vice chair of the Atlantic Council of the United States.