

The International Landscape Awaiting the Biden Administration

By Chas Freeman - January 11, 2021

John Torpey 00:00

Hi, my name is John Torpey, and I'm director of the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Welcome to International Horizons, a podcast of the Ralph Bunche institute that brings scholarly expertise to bear on our understanding of a wide range of international issues.

John Torpey 00:20

Today, we examine the international scene at the end of the Trump administration. In order to explore that landscape, we're fortunate to have with us today Charles Freeman, currently visiting scholar at the Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown University. Mr. Freeman was Ambassador of the United States to Saudi Arabia in 1990 to 1992, and during 1993-94, he was Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs. Ambassador Freeman was Nixon's translator when he went to China in 1972, opening the door to improved relations between the US and China. He's a past President of the Middle East Policy Council and Co-chair of the US China Policy Council, as well as a lifetime Director of the Atlantic Council. He graduated from Yale and received a law degree from Harvard. Thank you so much for taking the time to be with us today, Ambassador Chas Freeman.

Charles Freeman 01:25

It's very much my pleasure.

John Torpey 01:27

Great to have you. So this is kind of about the landscape of International Affairs as the Trump administration winds down and of course, we've just had a series of events in the last few days that have shocked and, in some quarters, saddened the world. The descent of a Trump's inspired mob on the US Capitol as the Congress was in the process of certifying the election of Joe Biden as President of the United States seems a kind of fitting end to the Trump presidency, which has often seemed paradoxically like an insurgency orchestrated from the Oval Office. So how would you say the rest of the world looks at the United States after four years of turbulence in Washington?

Charles Freeman 02:14

I think they have very mixed feelings. There are some who see this as the end of the American pretension to be a shining city on a hill. That image has now been replaced with that of a right wing rabble sacking the United States Capitol. And there are others who see this in a sense as a sort of payback for what they had come to regard as hypocritical American preachiness on democracy and the rule of law and other issues, where the United States itself was arguably falling very short of the ideals it was espousing. In other words, this may be the end of any credibility for the idea of American exceptionalism. And the question now is how the United

States will regain the respect of the world that its sad trajectory over recent years has costed, culminating in this terrible scene on January 6. And the key to that is obviously a degree of introspection by Americans, which has not been seen for some time: a return to trying to learn from the world rather than dictate to it, to discover best practices abroad, and adapt them to American circumstances.

Charles Freeman 03:49

And to return to the traditional American strength of aspiring to be better, to improve, to overcome problems that we all recognize we have, whether these are endemic racism, or disorder, or political gridlock, or the emergence of what can only be described as a plutocracy on top of our democracy. So we need to get our act together at home in order to be able to be effective abroad, and to be seen that way by foreigners.

John Torpey 04:35

That sounds like an important and large challenge. And I wonder how you envision it happening? I mean, who would be the initiator, what kind of institutional framework might that be carried out in?

Charles Freeman 04:50

It would have to be led by the President. This President is bringing with him a great number of people who are in effect rethreads from the Clinton and Obama administrations, that the good news is that they're experienced. The bad news is that they may not have the new ideas and the will to lead a debate in the country about how to correct the obvious failings we've developed.

Charles Freeman 05:22

So, I think the chances that we will actually engage in that sort of renewal, through debate, true reform, learning from abroad, behaving with greater humility, and focusing on trying to get our act together is not terribly good. But we have to hope that we will try it. And we have to hope that we will rise to the occasion, as we have done in the past.

John Torpey 05:59

So as I indicated in my introduction, you've had an unusually broad kind of trajectory in the foreign policy apparatuses of the United States. So I want to go back to some of the areas in which you've served most distinguishedly over that period. And I'm reminded to start with that you were Ambassador to Saudi Arabia some 30 years ago. And I wonder if you might reflect a bit on our relation; the ways in which our relationship with the Middle East has changed since that time, how the Middle East itself has changed in the meantime, and in particular, how you see the roles of Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey in the Middle East.

Charles Freeman 06:46

Well, I was ambassador to Saudi Arabia during the first Gulf War; the war to liberate Kuwait. That marked a turning point in the region. The Soviet Union was in the process of disintegrating. That liberated Saddam Hussein's Iraq, to move without the constraints that the Soviet

relationship had placed on Iraq, to try to take Kuwait to try to dominate the Gulf as a whole. And everything has changed since then.

Charles Freeman 07:22

The Middle East at that time was very much the playground of great powers - the former colonial powers, the United States - pretty much were the dominant influences on events, the countries of the region maneuvered to curry favor with these external powers. That's all gone. The region now drives its own events. It has players like Saudi Arabia, like the United Arab Emirates, like Iran, like Israel, like Turkey, which are determining its future.

Charles Freeman 08:07

In 1990, 91, 92, Iran was isolated. It was still in the grips of its theological revolution. It was attempting to export its model of government to the wider region, but not having any success. That Iran has been replaced with a more mellow Iran that is now engaged in a geopolitical rather than a theological struggle. Iran today is free of immediate enemies. United States, gratuitously, free of charge, knocked off its principal rival in Iraq. Iraq is now in many respects, associated with, even in some cases, a satellite of Iran. United States also overthrew the order in Afghanistan, the other flank of Iran and Iran now no longer faces the challenge from its traditional challengers. And the result is that it has expanded its influence throughout the Levant, throughout the region, and is in many respects, encircling the Gulf Arabs. The maximum pressure campaign that the Trump administration brought to bear has impoverished Iran; it has impoverished it, but it is not subdued it. And Iran is becoming more militarily assertive in the Strait of Hormuz as the United States seems to be backing away from his previous role as the guarantor of freedom of navigation and access to the region's energy supplies.

Charles Freeman 10:03

Saudi Arabia has also changed. There's been, in effect, a constitutional change in the Kingdom from the previous consultative government, in which the king presided but did not decide many questions. And in which change came slowly and was visible only in the rearview mirror, because it required extensive consultation with many many segments of Saudi society: the royal family, the merchant class of business, the religious authorities, and so forth. All of that power has now been concentrated in the hands of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. And there is a much harsher form of autocracy ruling than previously. This has its good side. It has resulted in real progress on the social front opening up affairs of state to women, making the Kingdom more open, more compatible with the outside world in many ways.

Charles Freeman 11:16

But it also has its bad side. Saudi realpolitik has now burst with open cooperation with Israel against Iran, and the Saudis have been learning from the Israelis. And unfortunately, they've learned some very bad things, which accounts in part for Saudi behavior that is unprecedented: assassinations of dissidents abroad; other activities, which are more typical of the Israeli intelligence services, than of the Saudis in the past. And finally I think Saudi Arabia is now - because power is so concentrated in a single person and his father - less stable, more vulnerable to political upheaval than it was. So it needs to be watched carefully.

Charles Freeman 12:12

And finally, you asked about Turkey. Of course, in 1990, 91, 92; 30 years ago, Turkey was the cradle of what appeared to be an emerging Islamist democratic movement to parallel the Christian democratic movement that took hold in Europe in the 19th century. It seemed to be thoroughly committed to an association with Europe. All that has changed. Mr. Erdogan's government in 30 years ago was committed to a zero problem with neighbors policy. Now, I should say that Turkey has problems with all its neighbors. It is engaged in an effort to achieve leadership of the entire Islamic world. In other words, restoring not the Ottoman Empire but the caliphate, when Turkey under the Ottomans was indeed most respects the leader of a broad swath of territory inhabited by the world's Muslims.

Charles Freeman 13:32

Turkey, in short, has been repositioning itself between Europe and the Middle East to take acquiring or more Middle Eastern identity: re-deploying itself between the United States and Russia and China, looking to the north and to the east; asserting itself militarily in the Caucasus, with assistance to Azerbaijan against Armenia; building bases in the Red Sea; and, reminding everyone that there is an extraordinary list of questions, issues of importance to the United States and Europe, which simply can't be addressed without Turkish acquiescence or support. These include matters relating to Syria to Israel, to Iraq, to Iran, to the Black Sea, to Ukraine, to the Caucasus, to Central Asia, to Russia, to NATO, to the European Union, to Greece to Turkey, to Cyprus, to the Balkans, to relations with the broad Islamic world, to Afghanistan, to the Gulf. It is an extraordinary list; no other country really can match it. And Turkey's centrality to global affairs is being reasserted by Ankara.

John Torpey 14:58

Turkey is indeed an unusual power, particularly, in the group that I've asked you to talk about, really is the only one that reaches well beyond its immediate neighborhood in significance. And you've mentioned in that regard the European Union, which is what I really want to talk to you about now. In the period that you've been active, you know, you've seen the world shift from the Cold War to the post Cold War, and more recently to the British departure from the European Union, better known as Brexit. How do you see our relationship with Europe changing as the Biden Administration assumes the reins of power? And how do you think Brexit will affect the future of Europe and of transatlantic relations more generally?

Charles Freeman 15:47

Mr. Biden is inheriting a severely deteriorated relationship with Europe. This reflects several things. First, perhaps a failure to adjust to post Cold War conditions. There was a chance that NATO could be repurposed, after the end of the Cold War to become a cooperative security organization, meaning one focused not on external enemies, but on managing the security problems of Europe, like those in the Balkans. That chance passed unexploited. There was a possibility that Europe could exist, as it must, with a good relationship with both the United States and with Russia, which is part of Europe and which historically has been essential to maintaining order in Europe. And that moment also was not exploited.

Charles Freeman 16:53

The Ukraine issue, which should have been seen, I think, as an opportunity to construct both a bridge and a buffer between Russia and the rest of Europe, got caught up in neoconservative dreams of a renewed confrontation with Russia. It's very strange that if we could neutralize Austria and guarantee its democracy, as we did, in the 1950s, at the height of the Cold War through the Austrian state treaty, we could not do the same for Ukraine. In terms of transatlantic relations, there has been a collapse in common values, mostly from - I'm sorry to say - as a result of American cynicism, and departure from the Enlightenment values on which we were founded. So we have seen the United States engage: in torture, in official kidnapping or extraordinary rendition, as it's called; in opening a Neverneverland prison camp in Guantanamo, in Cuba, which we have never been able to close; in treating our opponents on the battlefield not under the Geneva agreements, with dignity, but as criminals, who can be detained indefinitely, without charge, and interrogated with the most brutal methods possible. These issues now divide the United States from Europe. I hope we will come home to our own heritage and find a common ground with Europeans again.

Charles Freeman 18:50

You asked about Brexit. And that, too, is a fundamental shift because Britain historically acted, in some respects, as the voice of the United States by proxy in Europe's European councils. Britain's now gone. And we've just seen the European Union do an investment treaty with China, on the eve of Mr. Biden taking power in Washington. I think had Britain still being part of the EU, this kind of independent action undertaken without consultation with the United States and indeed, contrary to much American advice, would not have occurred. So we're watching a Europe that is less dependent on the United States, more independent-minded, gradually emerging.

John Torpey 19:53

So Angela Merkel argued in the course of the Trump Administration that this was simply something the Europeans finally had to do - that had been talked about for a long time, and indeed, it's been talked about on the American side since before Donald Trump assumed office - I mean, to what extent would you say that's actually already happened? In what areas do we see Europe going its own way? And it sounds like you think that's more or less a good thing. But is that a good thing or a bad thing?

Charles Freeman 20:26

Well, I think we have to start by acknowledging that the events of January 6 have greatly reduced European respect for the United States. But it is clear that some degree of difference, some degree of disrespect for our leadership, a loss of followership for us, if you will, in Europe has been in progress for quite a while. It's not the case that the Europeans are under spending on defense, by the way; they're spending four times as much as the Russians, if the Russians are the enemy of choice, that is telling. They would be far more effective were they to coordinate their efforts better; NATO is a way to do that. I think many in Europe would like to see an independent European defence capability, perhaps accomplished through NATO with the

appointment of the European commander, in place of the American Supreme Allied Commander for Europe (SACEUR) that has been there for the past 75 years.

Charles Freeman 21:42

I don't think anybody in Europe wants to disassociate with the United States, and entirely, they want us, over the horizon, they want to be able to aid them, then I think both Americans and Europeans need to recognize that we're part of the same geopolitical zone. If the United States is not maintaining an active role, consultative role, with Europeans as they manage their affairs, the 20th century suggests they may botch that management, which requires us to come to their rescue. We did that World War One, World War Two and during the Cold War. We should not have to do it again. And the best way, not to have to do it again, is to stay engaged with Europe.

Charles Freeman 22:28

I think NATO is important for us, not as a force for the projection of American power to other regions, but as a symbol and a forum for cooperation with people of like mind in the Atlantic community. But Mr. Biden is going to have his work cut out for him. We can't just show up and say we're back, follow us. Europeans will not do that. We're going to have to lay a very careful groundwork, we're going to have to be more respectful, we're going to have to listen more to the Europeans, we're going to have to go in not with a plan, but with a question when we speak to them.

John Torpey 23:19

So, your career in some ways began in China; I mentioned that you were Nixon's translator when he went to China in 1972 to open up the relationship between the two countries. And, in those days, it was an impoverished, inward looking country developing its relationship with the West. And of course, in the meantime, it's become utterly transformed, it's become a substantial power with a growing and substantial middle class. How should we think about China in the years to come? Is it a competitor or an enemy? Or what is it exactly?

Charles Freeman 23:56

It is a great power, perhaps destined to become the greatest power in the world by virtue of its population, its economic dynamism. It is not a power with a tradition of conquest abroad. It is a former empire which contains minority people, so as the United States does, whether they're the Native American population now greatly diminished or the diverse ethnicities that populate our country. It has serious problems, as all countries seem to have with harmonizing relations between, in our case, the European American majority and now vanishing majority and with other ethnicities. Chinese have the same issues. They also have a problem as we do of domestic terrorism. They're very inward focused, rather than externally focused.

Charles Freeman 25:03

But I think the major thing that you need to bear in mind is there has been a trajectory. When we opened relations with China, we feared that it might suffer a conquest, occupation or humiliation of some sort from the Soviet Union. President Nixon believed accurately, I think, that that would constitute a fundamental shift to the global balance of power, very detrimental to American

interests, and he extended protection to China. We didn't have an alliance, we didn't even have the limited partnership that countries that have an entente enjoy until Afghanistan challenged our common interests. And we developed programs of cooperation that very few people in the United States actually know about. We set up listening posts in China with the Chinese that replace those we had lost in Iran with the fall of the Shah. These were the essential monitors of Soviet weapons development and deployments. They put pressure on the Soviet Union that helped ultimately to bring it down. In Afghanistan, we became the major purchaser of Chinese weaponry and in 1987, which was the peak year, we bought \$630 million - back when that was really a lot of money - from the Chinese, for the Mujahideen, the resistance to the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan. And the Chinese manufactured Soviet style equipment to order for us and help teach us how to how to defeat it. We became a major importer of MiG 21s built in Chengdu, and have some ground equipment as well for use in such training.

Charles Freeman 27:06

So that was the beginning, in the middle, and now we're in a different era, where our concern is not about Chinese weakness and vulnerability, but about China's strength. And more particularly about China's startling success in the capitalist world. China has adopted a quasi-capitalist system of economics, it seems to be terribly competitive with us, and we are concerned that we may not be able to compete. But when all is said and done, I think the major challenge for China is economic and technological. We're not handling that well. Mr. Biden will inherit a relationship with China that is very hostile, not just on the military front, where we continue to back the losing side or the heirs to the losing side in the Chinese Civil War, which has never ended. The Taiwan issue is a product of the Cold War and the Chinese Civil War. In our intervention in that Civil War, at the time of the Korean War, we have, in effect, volunteered a protective commitment to one Chinese party against another that is now a rising great power with nuclear weapons. That is very dangerous if we do not manage it well.

Charles Freeman 28:38

Similarly, of course, China during the Cold War was effectively barred from asserting its claims in the South China Sea. These are very old claims. They've been joined by newer claimants from Vietnam from the Philippines from Malaysia. We are engaged in playing naval games of chicken in that sea with Chinese, also quite dangerous, although not as dangerous I think as the Taiwan issue. Then, of course, we have assumed a commitment to preserve Japanese administration of the Senkaku or Diaoyu Islands, which are essentially barren rocks inhabited only by goats with no strategic importance. We basically are committed to go to war in defense of Japanese interests there. I don't think many Americans have really thought that through.

Charles Freeman 29:37

So handling the Chinese militarily is very important, but I think we need to remember that we're in their face. They're not patrolling off San Diego, we're patrolling off Qingdao. They are not off Puget Sound, we are off Shanghai. They are not in our waters in the Caribbean running operations that get us to turn on our radars and exercise our defenses. We're doing that to them in the South China Sea and on their coastline. So, they are in a defensive mode, we are in an offensive mode. I would argue that is not in our long term interest.

Charles Freeman 30:23

The other elements of the competition are also not being well handled. Decoupling from the Chinese economy when it is the fastest growing large economy in the world costs us markets. The mercantilist experiments that the Trump administration engaged in - politically manipulating trade trying to push it all through government management - has made the United States seem a very unreliable supplier to the Chinese and to other foreign economic partners. And to the extent they can, they will avoid becoming dependent again on our food exports or other things. That brings me, of course, to the issue of the technology war we've begun, which I think is likely to be more destructive of our interests, more harmful to us than it is to them. China now has one-fourth of the world's STEM workers - scientists, technologists, engineers, mathematicians - and it is increasing that proportion. It is graduating well over 2 million people in these fields each year from what are now very, very good universities. It has, of course, been heavily invested in American universities, but the atmosphere in US-China relations is draining the American university system of that foreign presence, especially the Chinese. So, science [and] technology advance through collaboration, not through decoupling. And we're cutting ourselves off from the largest pool of trained talent on the planet. I don't think that's wise. We also, by the way, when we prohibit the sale of semiconductors or other components of electronics that we have been the global leader in to the Chinese, we undermine the market of their companies, we reduce their profits, we arguably reduce their capacity to invest in new products that would be more competitive.

Charles Freeman 32:49

So I'd sum all this up by saying that where China was a vulnerable, weak, isolated country, it is now a strong, prosperous, globally engaged country. And it represents a real challenge to the United States, which can only be met by our doing something we haven't traditionally done, and that is learning to compartmentalize issues. On some issues, whether climate change, for example, North Korea, non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, the management of the rules for trade, internationally, and many other matters, we have no alternative but to cooperate with the Chinese. On other matters, as I've indicated, we may be at loggerheads. We could even be at war. I hope not, because our military relationship does not include any controls on escalation, which means that the danger of a nuclear exchange is much greater than it was with the Soviet Union, when we were facing down Moscow internationally. So this is a complex relationship requires complex management. It requires us to do things that we have not traditionally done in our period of isolationism or the Cold War. And it requires a level of diplomatic agility and sophistication that is new to the experience of the group that's coming into office January 20.

John Torpey 34:26

It's a very valuable overview of the US-Chinese relationship. And you described China appropriately as a as a great power, and one that's globally engaged. And I want to kind of follow up on that point. It seems to me, I'm not a China expert certainly, but it does seem to me that it's unique in Chinese history that China is really projecting its influence, if not exactly its power, far beyond the borders of the Chinese state. They're buying ports in Europe, they're building infrastructure in Africa and South America and they're reducing them in some ways

debt hostages, if you like. And I wonder, is that something historically unique and unprecedented for China? And what does that say about how the Chinese now understand themselves?

Charles Freeman 35:26

Well, we're now in a globalized world; China's are very much part of it. It can't be contained, because it is part of our system globally. And it is projecting its economic influence, in particular, quite widely. The Belt and Road Initiative is essentially an extension to foreign policy of the industrial policy approach that the Chinese have invented for their domestic economics. Now they do not have a planned economy in the traditional sense. But they do have incentives; policy incentives, financial incentives, which they offer to state companies, to private companies, to fulfill the objectives that they've stated. And the Belt and Road initiative is an effort to connect everything on the Eurasian landmass from Portugal to the Bering Strait, and even to adjacent areas like East Africa, in one great open system. The Chinese believe that if the system is open, their dynamism, their size, will make them a natural leader in the group of nations that are part of that ecology. So that is new. And I think it's very interesting.

Charles Freeman 36:56

But note, it's an economic challenge, it's not a military one. The only time previously that China went abroad was in the 15th century, in the Ming Dynasty when Admiral Zheng He took his huge fleet into the Indian Ocean on multiple visits. He was a Muslim, he spoke Arabic, it was not a voyage of discovery. His father had made the Hajji, the pilgrimage, that it was on a voyage of discovery so much as a show of the flag, and a series of scientific expeditions to collect exotic animals and plants, and make contact with exotic cultures. That was a military move into the world, but China's not moving into the world militarily.

Charles Freeman 37:47

Although, as the United States backs away from providing the naval guarantees of freedom of navigation that we traditionally did, issues of piracy arise off in the Gulf of Aden off the Somali coast, the question of passage through the Strait of Hormuz, over sometime Iranian opposition, is not met with a forceful American response. China, like other countries, is having to build its own navy farther and farther afield. There is an evolution going on, which resembles that in the early years of our republic, when the Barbary pirates created circumstances that forced us to create a large navy and deploy it far from our shores. And I think that's happening to the Chinese. I think we're going to be living in a world where - perhaps I won't because I'm already a certified geezer - but some will be living in a world, my grandchildren will be living in a world, in which the international oceans are not dominated by the United States but by coalition which will include the Chinese. So yes, they are coming out of their shell, not in a way that I think we should find threatening, although many seem inclined to do that.

John Torpey 39:21

Thank you very much. Really appreciate your insights. That's it for today's episode of International Horizons. I want to thank Ambassador Chas Freeman for sharing his insights about the future international affairs as they confront the Biden Administration. I also want to

thank Hristo Voynov for his technical assistance and the Otto and Fran Walter Foundation for their support of our Europe related endeavors. This is John Torpey, saying thanks for joining us and we look forward to having you with us again for the next episode of International Horizons. Thanks again.

Charles Freeman 39:59

Thank you.