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The Crimes of ‘Intcom’

Noam Chomsky

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The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein readers to attend to the use of a phrase in order to determine its meaning. Adopting that suggestion, one regularly discovers that terms of political discourse are used with a doctrinal meaning that is crucially different from the literal one. The term “terrorism,” for example, is not used in accord with the official definition but is restricted to terrorism (as officially defined) carried out by them against us and our clients. Similar conventions hold for “war crime,” “defense,” “peace process,” and other standard terms.

One such term is “the international community.” The literal sense is reasonably clear; the U.N. General Assembly, or a substantial majority of it, is a fair first approximation. But the term is regularly used in a technical sense to describe the United States joined by some allies and clients. (Henceforth, I will use the term “Intcom,” in this technical sense.) Accordingly, it is a logical impossibility for the United States to defy the international community. These conventions are illustrated well enough by cases of current concern.

One does not read that for 25 years the United States has barred the efforts of the international community to achieve a

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diplomatic settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict along the lines repeated, in essence, in the Saudi proposal adopted by the Arab League in March 2002. That initiative has been widely acclaimed as a historic opportunity that can only be realized if Arab states agree at last to accept the existence of Israel. In fact, Arab states (along with the Palestine Liberation Organization) have repeatedly done so since January 1976, when they joined the rest of the world in backing a U.N. Security Council resolution calling for a political settlement based on Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories with “appropriate arrangements ... to guarantee ... the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence of all states in the area and their right to live in peace within secure and recognized borders”—in effect, U.N. Security Council Resolution 242 expanded to include a Palestinian state. The United States vetoed the resolution. Since then, Washington has regularly blocked similar initiatives. A majority of Americans support the political settlement reiterated in the Saudi plan. Yet it does not follow that Washington is defying the international community or domestic opinion. Under prevailing conventions, that cannot be since, by definition, the U.S. government cannot defy Intcom, and as a democratic state, it naturally heeds domestic opinion.

Similarly, one does not read that the United States defies the international community on terrorism, even though it voted virtually alone (with Israel; Honduras alone abstaining) against the major U.N. resolution in December 1987 harshly condemning this plague of the modern age and calling on all states to eradicate it. The reasons are instructive and highly relevant today. But all of that has disappeared from history, as is customary when Intcom opposes the international community (in the literal sense).

At the time, Washington was undermining Latin American efforts to bring about a peaceful settlement in Central America and had been condemned for international terrorism by the International Court of Justice, which ordered the United States to termi-

nate such crimes. The U.S. response was escalation. Again, none of this history nor similar episodes since bear on Intcom's attitude toward terrorism.

Occasionally, Intcom's isolation is noticed, leading to perplexed inquiries into the psychic maladies of the world. Richard Bernstein's January 1984 New York Times Magazine article "The U.N. versus the U.S." (not the converse) is an apt example. Further evidence that the world is out of step is that after the early years of the United Nations, when Washington's writ was law, the United States has been far in the lead in vetoing Security Council resolutions, with Great Britain second and the Soviet Union (later Russia) a distant third. The record in the General Assembly is similar—but no conclusions follow about the international community.

A major contemporary theme is the normative revolution that Intcom allegedly underwent in the 1990s, at last accepting its duty of humanitarian intervention to end terrible crimes. But one never reads that the international community "reject[s] the so-called 'right' of humanitarian intervention" along with other forms of coercion that it perceives as traditional imperialism in a new guise, particularly the version of economic integration called globalization in Western doctrine. Such conclusions were elaborated in the declaration of the South Summit in April 2000, the first meeting of the heads of state of the G-77 (the descendant of the former nonaligned countries), which accounts for nearly 80 percent of the world's population. The declaration merited a few disparaging words in elite media.

The 1990s are widely considered the decade of humanitarian intervention, not the 1970s, even though the latter decade was bounded by the two most significant cases of intervention to terminate horrendous crimes: India in East Pakistan and Vietnam in Cambodia. The reason is clear. Intcom did not carry out these interventions. In fact, it bitterly opposed them, imposing sanctions and making threatening gestures toward India and

harshly punishing Vietnam for the crime of terminating Pol Pot's atrocities as they were peaking. In contrast, the U.S.-led bombing of Serbia stands as the great moment of the new international enlightenment—no matter that such action was strongly opposed by India, China, and much of the rest of the world. Here is not the place to review the humanitarian intervention undertaken to preserve Intcom's "credibility" and, for public relations purposes, to terminate the crimes that it precipitated. Nor is this the place to examine Intcom's refusal to withdraw from its long-standing participation in comparable or worse crimes and what that implies about Intcom's operative values.

Such topics do not enter the extensive literature on the responsibilities of the self-declared enlightened states. Instead, there is a highly regarded literary genre inquiring into the cultural defect of Intcom that keeps it from responding properly to the crimes of others. An interesting question no doubt, though by any reasonable measure it ranks well below a different one that remains unasked: Why does Intcom persist in its own substantial crimes, either directly or through crucial support for murderous clients?

It is all too easy for me to continue, though it should be recognized that such practices are no innovation of Intcom. They are close to historical universals, including analogues that are not pleasant to recall.