

Jacobin features Noam Chomsky and Vijay Prashad labeling Taiwan a “Rock”, again ignores Taiwanese voices

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JACOBIN'S LATEST confused foray into commenting on Taiwan proves to be a video on its YouTube channel, the Jacobin Show, featuring Noam Chomsky and Vijay Prashad. Following on the heels of [an article that labeled individuals that brought up the exclusion of Taiwanese voices from a conversation about their future as “warmongers.”](#) rather than get anyone Taiwanese to discuss the Pelosi visit, *Jacobin* seems to have gone with Chomsky and Prashad.

The video proves suitably bizarre, as well as factually wrong in many cases. While the moderator, Ariella Thornhill, begins by asking a question about how the US seeks to silence countries that step out of line, Taiwan's perspective never comes up in the conversation by either panelist, when Taiwan itself has historically been silenced by the US, which backed the dictatorial right-wing KMT's rule over Taiwan for decades. As recently as 2012, [the US sought to sabotage current President Tsai Ing-wen's then-presidential bid with a phone call placed to the *Financial Times* from the White House.](#) preferring that a KMT candidate take power again, never mind the party's authoritarian past.

See the video on the original article.

Absurdly enough, Chomsky quickly moves to frame China as also having been silenced—as though China were some small country abused by the much larger US. On the contrary, China is an imperial power that seeks to model its expanding power after the US, even directly taking from US rhetoric, such as with regards to how it justifies [its concentration camps for Uyghurs in Xinjiang using the discourse of the US War on Terror](#). Countries in Asia have dealt with China as the imperial power that threatened them for centuries, well before the existence of the contemporary PRC, as outlined in the work of James Scott, among others. But for Chomsky and Prashad, it is apparently only the US that ever sets the global conversation on the world, as though there are simply no other actors in the world.

Chomsky frames the US as having taken the first step to precipitate Chinese military responses directed at Taiwan through the Pelosi visit, which he labels an egomaniacal move on Pelosi's part. Perhaps, but one wonders why China's military threats directed at Taiwanese civilians are considered by Chomsky a reciprocal response to a US politician simply taking a plane to Taiwan. Chinese politicians, such as Chen Yunlin, had visited Taiwan in the past, and the US hardly responded with military threats directed at Taiwan.

In particular, Chomsky claims that the US violated the One China Policy, the longstanding bedrock of cross-strait peace, and that this is what justifies Chinese responses. First, one wonders why Chomsky seems a fan of deciding the fate of 23 million Taiwanese on the basis of fifty-year-old agreements that were negotiated between two imperial powers that they had no say in themselves, as well as why he or Prashad see this as a leftist political position.

Nevertheless, Chomsky is also simply incorrect on this point. There has never been agreement between the US and China on Taiwan, [with the US acknowledging but not recognizing China's position. China's position is not even the same as the US One China Policy, but is instead referred to as the One China Principle.](#)

Next, Chomsky moves to referring to Taiwan as a “rock”, [never mind that Taiwan is geographically small, but has a population comparable to Australia, and is one of the world's 20 or so largest economies out of 200 polities in the world.](#) Chomsky seems to be taking a cue from Thomas Friedman [in his reference to Taiwan as simply a rock.](#) Ironically, Chomsky has actually been to Taiwan, [was critical of the KMT in the 1970s,](#) and [during comments made not long ago during an interview New Bloom did with him last year,](#) he spoke sympathetically of Taiwan's plight caught between major powers. But it seems that for him, now Taiwan is merely a “rock”. Though he may not be mean to, this is condescending at best.

Chomsky says this in context of the utterly bizarre claim that China can undercut and dismantle Taiwan's economy through its recent ban on sand exports to Taiwan. This is a claim that [even pro-unification media outlets](#) in Taiwan have themselves dismissed, citing that the recent ban by China will have little impact. That is, to justify this claim, Chomsky says that “Taiwan is a rock, if they need to build something, they need concrete.”



TAIWANESE PRESIDENT TSAI ING-WEN. PHOTO CREDIT: TSAI ING-WEN/FACEBOOK

Ironically, [Chinese vessels often dredge sand from Taiwanese outlying islands,](#) and while Taiwan does import sand from China, it also mines sand used for cement and concrete itself domestically, and it can pivot to other markets. Taiwan is hardly wholly reliant on China for sand and it is hard to know where Chomsky got a notion from as though cutting off sand access to Taiwan means doomsday. [Other sources of sand may be more expensive,](#) but that is hardly the end of the world, and it is advisable for Taiwan to reduce any avenues of dependency on China for needed supplies.

Chomsky, on the other hand, does not bring up how China and [much of the world is dependent on Taiwanese semiconductors in the slightest,](#) with Taiwan thought to produce [over 90% of the world's](#)

[advanced semiconductors](#). This is one deterrent for China invading Taiwan, in that its own supply chains are dependent on Taiwanese semiconductors, as well as that this increases the incentive for western countries to defend Taiwan. In failing to bring this up and instead focusing on the bizarre example of sand, Chomsky fails to understand a crucial linchpin of the global capitalist economy.

Sources of concrete are substitutable for Taiwan; on the other hand, Taiwanese semiconductors are not substitutable. Chomsky just regurgitates China's efforts at psychologically intimidating Taiwan by acting as though it could simply turn off Taiwan's economy at any time, as though it were a faucet, when economic relationships run both ways.

To this extent, Chomsky brings up China's claimed blockade of Taiwan, but had he been paying any attention to the news—or how Taiwanese reacted to Chinese military exercises, he would know that this was not a full-scale blockade. A blockade would be an act of war that Taiwan would have reacted to with military force and, seeing as this would affect the international shipping of other countries, this could have led to intervention by other regional powers. One also notes that the US did not escalate through attempts to interfere in the live-fire drills, though a more serious action by China would have led to this consideration.

However, Chomsky seems to have internalized a view of the world in which the US is the only Big Bad, in which he views China as only responding in kind to disproportionate US actions aimed at encircling China, but in which the US also has no capacity to ward off an invasion of Taiwan. Chomsky's views, like those of many American leftists, simply see no other evil in the world apart from the US and fail to recognize the realities of other imperial powers aside from America. Yet neither can he seem to make his mind up about US military omnipotence or its omni-impotence in the face of China.



PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY SOLDIERS. PHOTO CREDIT: PUBLIC DOMAIN

Chomsky then moves into a rambling discussion of Cuba and the Congo that seem to have little relevance to the discussion of American power in the Asia Pacific, except as a moral critique of US actions worldwide. One notes that Chomsky makes some glaring errors in his overview of global politics, such as depicting India as only reluctantly aligning with the US against China, while on the contrary, [India seems wholly in the throes of hawkish nationalist backlash against China](#), to which [Chinese nationalists in government have responded in kind](#). It proves particularly odd that Prashad also seeks to depict India—currently under the rule of right-wing nationalist Narendra Modi—in a similar light in other talks and writings.

Subsequently, Prashad's comments after Chomsky begin by naming a litany of Chinese left nationalist intellectuals to prove that he listens to a variety of perspectives and is open to dialogue. The references to these Chinese intellectuals simply seem to be aimed at bolstering Prashad's credibility to speak about China. But, while Prashad raises American and Chinese perspectives, clearly he does not give a damn about Taiwanese perspectives.

Prashad's comments are much briefer than Chomsky's, but he claims that there is a need for "dialogue", instead of a Huntington-style "clash of civilizations." Which is not incorrect, though one wonders when exactly good leftists take civilizational discourse at face value rather than immediately dismiss it as nationalist abstraction.

Afterward, Prashad moves to claim that the US is lashing out at China because it produces high-quality goods capable of competing with US goods—and at cheaper prices. US backlash against China, then, is because of this inferiority complex directed at China's superior goods.

Prashad claims that the US is unwilling to simply engage in fair competition, but aims to prevent China from producing advanced electronic goods. He suggests, then, that the US should simply try to learn how to produce electronic goods in a better, more advanced way, as China does.

Asserting that the US simply needs to learn from China where electronics manufacturing is concerned, and that this is the way out of the conflict between the two great powers proves a strange claim from individuals that might otherwise refer to themselves as leftist anti-capitalists.

However, Prashad fails to note that the reason why China can undercut the US in terms of manufacturing is because of the lower cost of living in China, whereas the cost of living in the US has risen past the point that electronics manufacturing in the US is cheap. For the same reason, with the cost of living having risen in China over the past decades, electronics manufacturers are now [relocating out of China to Southeast Asian](#) countries in search of cheaper labor.

The poor labor practices in electronics factories in China, in which factory workers live in tiny, unsanitary dormitories, also serve to drive down costs. Chinese workers work long hours for meager salaries in conditions that are hazardous and demeaning.



PHOTO CREDIT: CHRIS/WIKICOMMONS/CC BY-SA 2.0

It proves appalling that Prashad makes claims as to the superiority of the Chinese system, while failing to note that this system is built on the literal blood of Chinese workers. Prashad seems to

think that China has stumbled across the secret sauce to unlimited economic productivity, but how the sausage is made is not so different from the US in its manufacturing heyday. The secret to such productivity is, if anything, the exploitation of workers.

Jacobin clearly does not care about Taiwanese perspectives then, or even Chinese perspectives beyond those of a few Chinese left nationalist intellectuals. As for its views on Asia, it prefers to platform idealized abstractions of China rather than grapple with the messy realities of inter-imperial competition and the forces of totalizing, global capital in their immensity. Chomsky and Prashad are platformed because of their fame. But parsing through the logic of their argumentation and whether it corresponds to social reality should quickly reveal how facile these claims are.

And while both speak of neglected perspectives, neither seem willing to grant Taiwanese perspectives any place in a discussion about their future. Instead, both have internalized nationalistic abstractions about Taiwan having always been part of China that are simply not true, historically, and in which case, have no relevance to what contemporary Taiwanese think about their future today. This proves of some irony, in that the voices of Taiwanese are among those repressed by the US as inconvenient for its national interests. But while both Chomsky and Prashad bring this up, they seem to fail to note that this also applies to Taiwanese.

One should expect little from western leftists, when it comes to that, except for their profound ability to speak over local voices

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P.S.

• New Bloom. 08/25/2022AUGUST 2022:
<https://newbloommag.net/2022/08/25/jacobin-prashad-tw-rock/>