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An investigation into President Joe Biden's foreign policy record reveals "the history of the evolution of the American empire, from the Vietnam War to the present," says Jeremy Scahill, award-winning journalist and co-founder of *The Intercept*, which recently published a project titled "Empire Politician" that examines Biden's stances on war and militarism. Scahill says Joe Biden is the first president in decades to come to the White House after spending significant time in Congress, but it's not clear whether that will push him toward greater restraint in matters of war and peace. "Biden has spent his entire life railing against executive overreach, demanding that Congress be in charge of declaring war, and he may well be presented with a conflict around the world where it's going to really call the question on which Joe Biden shows up: Joe Biden, commander in chief, or Joe Biden who spent most of the past 50 years as a senator demanding that Congress be given its proper authority," says Scahill.

AMY GOODMAN: This is *Democracy Now!*, democracynow.org, *The Quarantine Report*. I'm Amy Goodman, with Juan González. By the way, you can sign up for our daily news digest email by texting the word "democracynow" — one word, no space, "democracynow" — to 66866. This is *Democracy Now!*

As President Biden prepares to address a joint session of Congress, we're looking today at Biden's foreign policy record, both in his first 99 days in office and over the past five decades. We're joined by Jeremy Scahill, co-founder of *The Intercept*, where he's senior correspondent, editor-at-large, co-founder. Jeremy is also the host of the

[podcast](#)

Intercepted

. He has just launched this new remarkable

[project](#)

titled "Empire Politician: A Half-Century of Joe Biden's Stances on War, Militarism, and the CIA

." Jeremy is author of several books, including

Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army

and

Dirty Wars: The World Is a Battlefield

, also the name of his Oscar-nominated film.

Jeremy, welcome back to *Democracy Now!* It's great to have you with us. Why don't you just lay out the big picture for us, as you were doing in that video, what this project is doing, and then where — how you see it fitting in to what President Biden represents today?

JEREMY SCAHILL: Well, you know, Amy, first of all, thank you for having me on. And greetings to you, Juan.

In the big picture, if you study Joe Biden's history, what you realize is that the history of Joe Biden, particularly on matters of war, the CIA, espionage, the balance of powers between the executive branch and the congressional branch, questions of civil liberties — the history of Joe Biden is really the history of the evolution of the American Empire, from the Vietnam War to the present.

And what I think is significant is that Joe Biden, when he first ran for Senate in 1972, remarkably telegraphed what the sort of thrust of his argument about empire and war would be for the next 50 years. And that was that Joe Biden was not a militant opponent of the Vietnam War. In fact, he had great disdain for antiwar protesters. And he tells a story about walking on his campus when he's in law school at the height of the Vietnam War with some of his colleagues, and they see fellow students protesting against the Vietnam War, and they call them "a—holes." Biden says he wasn't big on flak jackets or tie-dye and that he didn't really have any moral qualms about the Vietnam War, that his issue was that he thought it was based on lousy policy and was not executed in the correct manner.

And, you know, Biden also really inflated his involvement, which was almost nonexistent, in the civil rights movement of the 1960s. He only later was forced to kind of clarify that he personally supported it, but that he wasn't doing sit-ins himself, after he had made kind of more sweeping claims.

So, what you see as he starts his political career is that Biden is not really part of the civil rights movement, he has great disdain for the antiwar movement, but he thinks that the empire has made some mistakes in how it has extended itself in Vietnam, in particular.

He gets elected to the Senate. He's one of the youngest people in U.S. history, and the youngest in modern history at that time, to have been elected. He begins serving at age 30

years old. And Biden ends up on a couple of crucial committees at a very crucial time in U.S. history.

The Richard Nixon administration was, of course, a lawless enterprise. You had not only the overt War in Vietnam, but you had secret components to the War in Vietnam. You had the CIA carrying out a spate of assassinations around the world, conducting coups, running guns, cultivating assets who were dictators, thugs, gangsters, criminals. And for the first time since the creation of the

CIA

in the aftermath of World War II, Congress was finally getting around to trying to confront the CIA

and trying to impose restrictions and oversight of Congress.

And Biden ends up in two crucial roles. On the one hand, he ends up being one of the senators studying war powers. And that leads to an extremely important law getting past called the War Powers Resolution of 1973. Biden is a co-sponsor of that. The Nixon White House decides this is a grave threat to executive power, and they veto it. And then the House ends up overriding the veto, so the War Powers Resolution, which says that the Congress has the right to declare war, not the president, and puts restrictions on the president's ability to conduct military actions and, certainly, to deploy American troops without consulting with Congress. On the other side, Biden was one of the people who helped to create the Senate Intelligence Committee, which would be the first congressional body that was going to have jurisdiction over CIA activities.

And so, Amy, there is a sort of two-prong part of this history. On the one hand, Biden seems to understand very well what Richard Nixon did during his time in office and very well how out of control the CIA was. On the other hand, Biden, as a new senator, starts to get a taste for what it means to have access to power, powerful people, classified information, and he develops this very complicated relationship with the CIA of sort of, in public, being an

aggressive interrogator of the CIA, denouncing its secrecy and withholding of information from Congress, and, on the other hand, Joe Biden aids and abets the

CIA

not only in pushing covert operations and selling wars to Biden's Senate colleagues, but also aiding the

CIA

in an emerging, and continuing to this day, war against whistleblowers and leakers.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: Jeremy, I wanted to ask you — Joe Biden is unique among presidents, I

guess, since the post-World War II era, in terms of his understanding of how Congress works, because if you look at the previous presidents, from Nixon, Bill Clinton, George Bush, the second George Bush, Jimmy Carter, they all came into the White House as governors. And Herbert Walker Bush obviously had a long history in the CIA before becoming vice president. You'd have to go back to Lyndon Johnson to find a president who actually knows how Congress works, knows how laws are passed, knows how you reach agreements to get legislation passed. But Biden seems to suffer the same problem that Johnson had. Johnson could pass great domestic policy, but when it came to foreign policy, whether it was Vietnam or his invasion of the Dominican Republic in 1965, was extremely hawkish in foreign policy. I'm wondering your sense of how you see Biden moving forward in terms of the U.S. expanding the U.S. Empire, if it can be still talked about as an empire with possibilities of expansion.

JEREMY SCAHILL: It's a great question, Juan. And I'll just answer it by saying that the White House is pushing, as the sort of premier issue on war regarding Biden, this notion that Biden is going to end the war in Afghanistan. I think it's really important, just for accuracy's sake, to recognize that the plan that Biden is implementing now was the plan that was developed by the Trump administration. And it's basically the plan that was on Biden's desk when he left office — when Trump left office. And so, Biden said, you know, "I would have done this differently, but agreements are agreements. The Trump administration signed this agreement with the Taliban, so we're going to abide by it." Now, there are other policies where Biden says we're not going to continue on with the path of Trump. So he's playing a little bit with the notion that the U.S. always keeps its agreement.

But what I think is interesting, Juan, and it cuts to the heart of your question, is that when Joe Biden was vice president under Barack Obama, there were a handful of policy issues where Biden sort of decided that he was in the opposition, and he took a dissenting view. The first one was the first year of the Obama-Biden administration. Obama's advisers, many of them, wanted to surge U.S. troops in Afghanistan, and they ultimately did that. They wanted to engage in the COIN doctrine, counterinsurgency, which is another way of saying sort of nation-building, that you have this large-scale military deployment, you set up your own infrastructure, and you're basically running an occupation regime in a country, similar to what the United States did, and other European allies, in Europe in the aftermath of World War II.

Biden says, "Whoa, wait a minute. I don't like what I'm seeing here. I don't think we should be having large-scale troop deployments. I think we should use our assassins, essentially — the CIA, the Joint Special Operations Command — in a small footprint, to conduct antiterrorism operations to hunt down people that we determine represent an ongoing threat to our national security."

Ultimately, Biden loses, in part, that argument, because what happens is that Obama decides to do both. He goes with a large-scale surge, and he starts escalating the use of drones — and not just in Afghanistan, as you know, Juan, but in many countries around the world. And they basically empower the CIA and the Joint Special Operations Command as really streamlined implementers of an emerging U.S. assassination policy.

Now that Biden is president, essentially, he is getting the war waged the way he proposed back in 2009. He's going to pull out the large-scale U.S. military presence. There are a few thousand troops and 16,000 contractors that are on the ground there. But what he's saying is that he's going to keep these hit teams in the region to do surgical strikes. And the risk for Biden is that he ends up in a scenario akin to what happened with President Barack Obama in 2014, where he actually has to redeploy U.S. troops to Iraq in the battle against ISIS, after having declared the war over and initiated this made-for-television withdrawal from Iraq in 2011.

So, you know, to wrap this part of it up, Juan, I think it's fascinating that Biden has spent his entire life railing against executive overreach, demanding that Congress be in charge of declaring war, and he may well be presented with a conflict around the world where it's going to really call the question on which Joe Biden shows up: Joe Biden, commander-in-chief, or Joe Biden who spent most of the past 50 years as a senator demanding that Congress be given its proper authority?

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: Now, I wanted to ask you about another major foreign policy issue that Biden will deal with, and that's relations with China. There's a very interesting

[column](#)

in today's

New York Times

by Thomas Friedman, who is arguably —

JEREMY SCAHILL: Is that possible?

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: — one of the most influential — one of the most influential —

JEREMY SCAHILL: That —

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: Can you hear me?

JEREMY SCAHILL: Yeah. Sorry.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: Yeah, Thomas Friedman's column in today's *New York Times*. He's arguably one of the most influential voices of the U.S. neoliberal elite. And his column is titled "Is There a War Coming Between the U.S. and China?" And he goes on to say, "What has made this return of Chinese, Iranian and Russian aggressive nationalism even more dangerous is that, in each country, it is married to state-led industries — particularly military industries — and it's emerging at a time when America's democracy is weakening." Of course, he doesn't mention the United States's major defense industry and how our state is married to our defense industry.

But he goes on to talk about Taiwan as a major producer of the most advanced chips in the world for — in terms of artificial intelligence. And he goes on to say, "And as much as U.S. strategists are committed to preserving Taiwan's democracy, they are even more committed to ensuring that TSMC" — the big chip maker in Taiwan — "doesn't fall into China's hands." And, "Because," he goes on to say, "in a digitizing world, he who controls the best chip maker will control ... a lot." It almost sounds like Friedman is urging Biden to draw a line on the issue of Taiwan, when the entire world has already recognized that Taiwan is historically and legitimately a part of China. Your sense of how Biden will act when it comes to relations with China?

JEREMY SCAHILL: Well, you know, Juan, we just came off of an era, under the Trump administration, where overt xenophobia and racism became official U.S. policy. And the Biden team is still implementing many of the sort of underlying principles of the Trump policy, if you will, but doing it in a more diplomatic manner.

And what's always absent, and this is certainly — what's always absent from Thomas Friedman's columns, for sure, but what is almost always absent from discussions about U.S. relationship with China, U.S. relationship with Russia, is the U.S. role in the world. There is no more hostile, threatening, powerful force in the world right now than the United States

government. And you always need to look through the lens of how other nations are responding to the United States. You can't just say, "Oh, China is aggressively pursuing this technology," or "China is in countries throughout Africa right now," and pretend that it's some ominous development that a major world power with one-seventh of the world's population would be interested in expanding its influence or securing its future. All discussions about China, all discussions about Russia, regarding U.S. policy, leave out the role that the United States plays in destabilizing the world, but also provoking responses from other nations.

Now, having said that, Juan, I think one of the areas to watch, that does not get a great amount of attention, is the way that the United States, China and other world powers are battling for control of natural resources throughout Africa. The United States has quietly, over the past 10 or 15 years, built up a kind of covert and semi-overt military presence in Africa, while also flooding the zone with a lot of private business and contractors. China is doing the exact same thing. And in fact, China, because it is not bound by any laws requiring that it certify human rights practices, is really taking control of large parts of several African nations' natural resource supply. And this cuts to the heart of technology, precious metals and an incredibly geostrategical important location in the world.

So, I think that you're going to see a lot of pressure on Biden to become much more belligerent, much more hostile to China. And the people that are pushing him to do that are going to completely ignore and minimize the role that the United States plays in provoking responses from other powerful nations.