Noam Chomsky: US Military Escalation Against Russia Would Have No Victors

Noam Chomsky

Russia's invasion of Ukraine took much of the world by surprise. It is an unprovoked and unjustified attack that will go down in history as one of the major war crimes of the 21st century, argues Noam Chomsky in the exclusive interview for *Truthout* that follows. Political considerations, such as those cited by Russian President Vladimir Putin, cannot be used as arguments to justify the launching of an invasion against a sovereign nation. In the face of this horrific invasion, though, the U.S. must choose urgent diplomacy over military escalation, as the latter could constitute a "death warrant for the species, with no victors," Chomsky says.

Noam Chomsky is internationally recognized as one of the most important intellectuals alive. His intellectual stature has been compared to that of Galileo, Newton and Descartes, as his work has had tremendous influence on a variety of areas of scholarly and scientific inquiry, including linguistics, logic and mathematics, computer science, psychology, media studies, philosophy, politics and international affairs. He is the author of some 150 books and the recipient of scores of highly prestigious awards, including the Sydney Peace Prize and the Kyoto Prize (Japan's equivalent of the Nobel Prize), and of dozens of honorary doctorate degrees from the world's most renowned universities. Chomsky is Institute Professor Emeritus at MIT and currently Laureate Professor at the University of Arizona.

C.J. Polychroniou: Noam, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has taken most people by surprise, sending shockwaves throughout the world, although there were plenty of indications that Putin had become quite agitated by NATO's expansion eastward and Washington's refusal to take seriously his "red line" security demands regarding Ukraine. Why do you think he decided to launch an invasion at this point in time?

Noam Chomsky: Before turning to the question, we should settle a few facts that are uncontestable. The most crucial one is that the Russian invasion of Ukraine is a major war crime, ranking alongside the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the Hitler-Stalin invasion of Poland in September 1939, to take only two salient examples. It always makes sense to seek explanations, but there is no justification, no extenuation.

Turning now to the question, there are plenty of supremely confident outpourings about Putin's mind. The usual story is that he is caught up in paranoid fantasies, acting alone, surrounded by groveling courtiers of the kind familiar here in what's left of the Republican Party traipsing to Mar-a-Lago for the Leader's blessing.

The flood of invective might be accurate, but perhaps other possibilities might be considered. Perhaps Putin meant what he and his associates have been saying loud and clear for years. It might be, for example, that, "Since Putin's major demand is an assurance that NATO will take no further members, and specifically not Ukraine or Georgia, obviously there would have been no basis for the present crisis if there had been no expansion of the alliance following the end of the Cold War, or if the expansion had occurred in harmony with building a security structure in Europe that included Russia." The author of these words is former U.S. ambassador to Russia, Jack Matlock, one of the few serious Russia specialists in the U.S. diplomatic corps, writing shortly before the invasion. He goes on to conclude that the crisis "can be easily resolved by the application of common sense…. By any common-sense standard it is in the interest of the United States to promote peace, not conflict. To try to detach Ukraine from Russian influence — the avowed aim of those who agitated for the 'color revolutions' — was a fool's errand, and a dangerous one. Have we so soon forgotten the lesson of the Cuban Missile Crisis?"

Matlock is hardly alone. Much the same conclusions about the underlying issues are reached in the memoirs of CIA head William Burns, another of the few

authentic Russia specialists. [Diplomat] George Kennan's even stronger stand has belatedly been widely quoted, backed as well by former Defense Secretary William Perry, and outside the diplomatic ranks by the noted international relations scholar John Mearsheimer and numerous other figures who could hardly be more mainstream.

None of this is obscure. U.S. internal documents, released by *WikiLeaks*, reveal that Bush II's reckless offer to Ukraine to join NATO at once elicited sharp warnings from Russia that the expanding military threat could not be tolerated. Understandably.

We might incidentally take note of the strange concept of "the left" that appears regularly in excoriation of "the left" for insufficient skepticism about the "Kremlin's line."

The fact is, to be honest, that we do not know why the decision was made, even whether it was made by Putin alone or by the Russian Security Council in which he plays the leading role. There are, however, some things we do know with fair confidence, including the record reviewed in some detail by those just cited, who have been in high places on the inside of the planning system. In brief, the crisis has been brewing for 25 years as the U.S. contemptuously rejected Russian security concerns, in particular their clear red lines: Georgia and especially Ukraine.

There is good reason to believe that this tragedy could have been avoided, until the last minute. We've discussed it before, repeatedly. As to why Putin launched the criminal aggression right now, we can speculate as we like. But the immediate background is not obscure — evaded but not contested.

It's easy to understand why those suffering from the crime may regard it as an unacceptable indulgence to inquire into why it happened and whether it could have been avoided. Understandable, but mistaken. If we want to respond to the tragedy in ways that will help the victims, and avert still worse catastrophes that loom ahead, it is wise, and necessary, to learn as much as we can about what went wrong and how the course could have been corrected. Heroic gestures may be satisfying. They are not helpful.

As often before, I'm reminded of a lesson I learned long ago. In the late 1960s, I

took part in a meeting in Europe with a few representatives of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam ("Viet Cong," in U.S. parlance). It was during the brief period of intense opposition to the horrendous U.S. crimes in Indochina. Some young people were so infuriated that they felt that only a violent reaction would be an appropriate response to the unfolding monstrosities: breaking windows on Main Street, bombing an ROTC center. Anything less amounted to complicity in terrible crimes. The Vietnamese saw things very differently. They strongly opposed all such measures. They presented their model of an effective protest: a few women standing in silent prayer at the graves of U.S. soldiers killed in Vietnam. They were not interested in what made American opponents of the war feel righteous and honorable. They wanted to survive.

It's a lesson I've often heard in one or another form from victims of hideous suffering in the Global South, the prime target of imperial violence. One we should take to heart, adapted to circumstances. Today that means an effort to understand why this tragedy occurred and what could have been done to avert it, and to apply these lessons to what comes next.

The question cuts deep. There is no time to review this critically important matter here, but repeatedly the reaction to real or imagined crisis has been to reach for the six-gun rather than the olive branch. It's almost a reflex, and the consequences have generally been awful — for the traditional victims. It's always worthwhile to try to understand, to think a step or two ahead about the likely consequences of action or inaction. Truisms of course, but worth reiterating, because they are so easily dismissed in times of justified passion.

The options that remain after the invasion are grim. The least bad is support for the diplomatic options that still exist, in the hope of reaching an outcome not too far from what was very likely achievable a few days ago: Austrian-style neutralization of Ukraine, some version of Minsk II federalism within. Much harder to reach now. And — necessarily — with an escape hatch for Putin, or outcomes will be still more dire for Ukraine and everyone else, perhaps almost unimaginably so.

Very remote from justice. But when has justice prevailed in international affairs? Is it necessary to review the appalling record once again?

Like it or not, the choices are now reduced to an ugly outcome that rewards

rather than punishes Putin for the act of aggression — or the strong possibility of terminal war. It may feel satisfying to drive the bear into a corner from which it will lash out in desperation — as it can. Hardly wise.

Meanwhile, we should do anything we can to provide meaningful support for those valiantly defending their homeland against cruel aggressors, for those escaping the horrors, and for the thousands of courageous Russians publicly opposing the crime of their state at great personal risk, a lesson to all of us.

And we should also try to find ways to help a much broader class of victims: all life on Earth. This catastrophe took place at a moment where all of the great powers, indeed all of us, must be working together to control the great scourge of environmental destruction that is already exacting a grim toll, with much worse soon to come unless major efforts are undertaken quickly. To drive home the obvious, the IPCC just released the latest and by far most ominous of its regular assessments of how we are careening to catastrophe.

Meanwhile, the necessary actions are stalled, even driven into reverse, as badly needed resources are devoted to destruction and the world is now on a course to expand the use of fossil fuels, including the most dangerous and conveniently abundant of them, coal.

A more grotesque conjuncture could hardly be devised by a malevolent demon. It can't be ignored. Every moment counts.

The Russian invasion is in clear violation of Article 2(4) of the UN Charter, which prohibits the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity of another state. Yet Putin sought to offer legal justifications for the invasion during his speech on February 24, and Russia cites Kosovo, Iraq, Libya and Syria as evidence that the United States and its allies violate international law repeatedly. Can you comment on Putin's legal justifications for the invasion of Ukraine and on the status of international law in the post-Cold War era?

There is nothing to say about Putin's attempt to offer legal justification for his aggression. Its merit is zero.

Of course, it is true that the U.S. and its allies violate international law without a blink of an eye, but that provides no extenuation for Putin's crimes. Kosovo, Iraq and Libya did, however, have direct implications for the conflict over Ukraine.

The Iraq invasion was a textbook example of the crimes for which Nazis were hanged at Nuremberg, pure unprovoked aggression. And a punch in Russia's face.

In the case of Kosovo, NATO aggression (meaning U.S. aggression) was claimed to be "illegal but justified" (for example, by the International Commission on Kosovo chaired by Richard Goldstone) on grounds that the bombing was undertaken to terminate ongoing atrocities. That judgment required reversal of the chronology. The evidence is overwhelming that the flood of atrocities was the consequence of the invasion: predictable, predicted, anticipated. Furthermore, diplomatic options were available, [but] as usual, ignored in favor of violence.

High U.S. officials confirm that it was primarily the bombing of Russian ally Serbia — without even informing them in advance — that reversed Russian efforts to work together with the U.S. somehow to construct a post-Cold War European security order, a reversal accelerated with the invasion of Iraq and the bombing of Libya after Russia agreed not to veto a UN Security Council Resolution that NATO at once violated.

Events have consequences; however, the facts may be concealed within the doctrinal system.

The status of international law did not change in the post-Cold War period, even in words, let alone actions. President Clinton made it clear that the U.S. had no intention of abiding by it. The Clinton Doctrine declared that the U.S. reserves the right to act "unilaterally when necessary," including "unilateral use of military power" to defend such vital interests as "ensuring uninhibited access to key markets, energy supplies and strategic resources." His successors as well, and anyone else who can violate the law with impunity.

That's not to say that international law is of no value. It has a range of applicability, and it is a useful standard in some respects.

The aim of the Russian invasion seems to be to take down the Zelensky government and install in its place a pro-Russian one. However, no matter what happens, Ukraine is facing a daunting future for its decision to become a pawn in Washington's geostrategic games. In that context, how likely is it that economic sanctions will cause Russia to change its stance toward Ukraine — or do the economic sanctions aim at something bigger, such as undermining Putin's control inside Russia and ties with countries such as Cuba, Venezuela and possibly even

China itself?

Ukraine may not have made the most judicious choices, but it had nothing like the options available to the imperial states. I suspect that the sanctions will drive Russia to even greater dependency on China. Barring a serious change of course, Russia is a kleptocratic petrostate relying on a resource that must decline sharply or we are all finished. It's not clear whether its financial system can weather a sharp attack, through sanctions or other means. All the more reason to offer an escape hatch with a grimace.

Western governments, mainstream opposition parties, including the Labour Party in U.K., and corporate media alike have embarked on a chauvinistic anti-Russian campaign. The targets include not only Russia's oligarchs but musicians, conductors and singers, and even football owners such as Roman Abramovich of Chelsea FC. Russia has even been banned from Eurovision in 2022 following the invasion. This is the same reaction that the corporate media and the international community in general exhibited towards the U.S. following its invasion and subsequent destruction of Iraq, wasn't it?

Your wry comment is quite appropriate. And we can go on in ways that are all too familiar.

Do you think the invasion will initiate a new era of sustained contestation between Russia (and possibly in alliance with China) and the West?

It's hard to tell where the ashes will fall — and that might turn out not to be a metaphor. So far, China is playing it cool, and is likely to try to carry forward its extensive program of economic integration of much of the world within its expanding global system, a few weeks ago incorporating Argentina within the Belt and Road initiative, while watching rivals destroy themselves.

As we've discussed before, contestation is a death warrant for the species, with no victors. We are at a crucial point in human history. It cannot be denied. It cannot be ignored.

CJ

Polychroniou

C.J. Polychroniou is a political scientist/political economist, author, and journalist who has taught and worked in numerous universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. Currently, his main research interests are in U.S. politics and the political economy of the United States, European economic integration, globalization, climate change and environmental economics, and the deconstruction of neoliberalism's politico-economic project. He is a regular contributor to *Truthout* as well as a member of *Truthout's* Public Intellectual Project. He has published scores of books and over 1,000 articles which have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into a multitude of different languages, including Arabic, Chinese, Croatian, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Turkish. His latest books are *Optimism Over Despair*: *Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change* (2017); *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal*: *The Political Economy of Saving the Planet* (with Noam Chomsky and Robert Pollin as primary authors, 2020); *The Precipice*: *Neoliberalism, the Pandemic, and the Urgent Need for Radical Change* (an anthology of interviews with Noam Chomsky, 2021); and *Economics and the Left*: *Interviews with Progressive Economists* (2021).