

Chomsky: To Tackle Climate, Our Morality Must Catch Up With Our Intelligence



Noam Chomsky

This week, the World Meteorological Organization warned that the world has a 50 percent chance of seeing warming of 1.5 degrees above preindustrial levels in the next five years. Even those who view the glass as half full tend to agree that efforts undertaken so far by the world's countries to combat the climate crisis, while significant in some respects, are not enough. Indeed, the global economy continues to rely extensively on fossil fuels, which still provide about 80 percent of the energy supply.

The warnings about an impending climate catastrophe included in the second and third segments of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) latest review of climate science, which were released on February 28 and April 4, 2022, respectively, went completely ignored amid the war in Ukraine and soaring energy costs.

In the United States, the Biden administration's response to soaring gas prices was to renew oil and gas drilling on federal lands and to announce "the largest-ever release of oil from the strategic petroleum reserves." The rest of the world has also responded with short-term thinking to the consequences of the war in Ukraine.

World-renowned scholar-activist Noam Chomsky grapples with the consequences of this short-term thinking amid escalating military tensions, in this exclusive interview for *Truthout*. Chomsky is the father of modern linguistics and one of the

most cited scholars in modern history, and has published some 150 books. He is institute professor and professor of linguistics emeritus at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and currently laureate professor at the University of Arizona.

The following transcript has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

C.J. Polychroniou: Noam, the war in Ukraine is causing unimaginable human suffering, but it is also having global economic consequences and is terrible news for the fight against global warming. Indeed, as a result of rising energy costs and concerns about energy security, decarbonization efforts have taken a back seat. In the U.S., the Biden administration has embraced the Republican slogan “drill, baby, drill,” Europe is set on building new gas pipelines and import facilities, and China plans to boost coal production capacity. Can you comment on the implications of these unfortunate developments and explain why short-term thinking continues to prevail among world leaders even at a time when humanity could be on the brink of an existential threat?

Noam Chomsky: The last question is not new. In one or another form, it has arisen throughout history.

Take one case that has been extensively studied: Why did political leaders go to war in 1914, supremely confident of their own righteousness? And why did the most prominent intellectuals in every warring country line up with passionate enthusiasm in support of their own state — apart from a handful of dissidents, the most prominent of whom were jailed (Bertrand Russell, Eugene Debs, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht)? It wasn't a terminal crisis, but it was serious enough.

The pattern goes far back in history. And it continues with little change after August 6, 1945, when we learned that human intelligence had risen to the level where it soon would be able to exterminate everything.

Observing the pattern closely, over the years, a basic conclusion seems to me to emerge clearly: Whatever is driving policy, it is not security — at least, security of the population. That is at best a marginal concern. That holds for existential threats as well. We have to look elsewhere.

A good starting point, I think, is what seems to me to be the best-established

principle of international relations theory: Adam Smith's observation that the "Masters of Mankind" — in his day the merchants and manufacturers of England — are the "principal architects of [state] policy." They use their power to ensure that their own interests "are most peculiarly attended to" no matter how "grievous" the effects on others, including the people of England, but most brutally the victims of the "savage injustice of the Europeans." His particular target was British savagery in India, then in its early stages, already horrifying enough.

Nothing much changes when the crises become existential. Short-term interests prevail. The logic is clear in competitive systems, like unregulated markets. Those who do not play the game are soon out of it. Competition among the "principal architects of policy" in the state system has somewhat similar properties, but we should bear in mind that security of the population is far from a guiding principle, as the record shows all too clearly.

You are quite right about the horrific impact of the criminal Russian invasion of Ukraine. Discussion in the U.S. and Europe focuses on the suffering in Ukraine itself, quite reasonably, while also applauding our policy of accelerating the misery, not so reasonably. I'll return to that.

The policy of escalating the war in Ukraine, instead of trying to take steps to end it, has a horrific impact far beyond Ukraine. As widely reported, Ukraine and Russia are major food exporters. The war has cut off food supplies to populations in desperate need, particularly in Africa and Asia.

Take just one example, the world's worst humanitarian crisis according to the UN: Yemen. Over 2 million children face imminent starvation, the World Food Program reports. Almost 100 percent of cereal [is imported] "with Russia and Ukraine accounting for the largest share of wheat and wheat products (42%)," in addition to re-exported flour and processed wheat from the same region.

The crisis extends far beyond. Let's try to be honest about it: Perpetuation of the war is, simply, a program of mass murder throughout much of the Global South.

That's the least of it. There are [discussions in purportedly serious journals](#) about how the U.S. can win a nuclear war with Russia. Such discussions verge on criminal insanity. And, unfortunately, US-NATO policies provide many possible scenarios for quick termination of human society. To take just one, Putin has so

far refrained from attacking the supply lines sending heavy weapons to Ukraine. It won't be a great surprise if that restraint ends, bringing Russia and NATO close to direct conflict, with an easy path to tit-for-tat escalation that could well lead to a quick goodbye.

More likely, in fact highly probable, is slower death through poisoning of the planet. The most recent IPCC report made it crystal clear that if there is to be any hope for a livable world, we must stop using fossil fuels right now, proceeding steadily until they are soon eliminated. As you point out, the effect of the ongoing war is to end the far-too-limited initiatives underway, indeed to reverse them and to accelerate the race to suicide.

There is, naturally, great joy in the executive offices of the corporations dedicated to destroying human life on Earth. Now they are not only freed from constraints and from the carping of annoying environmentalists, but they are lauded for saving the civilization that they are now encouraged to destroy even more expeditiously. Arms producers share their euphoria about the opportunities offered by the continuing conflict. They are now encouraged to waste scarce resources that are desperately needed for humane and constructive purposes. And like their partners in mass destruction, the fossil fuel corporations, they are raking in taxpayer dollars.

What could be better, or from a different perspective, more insane? We would do well to recall President Dwight D. Eisenhower's words in his "Cross of Iron" speech in 1953:

Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. The [cost](#) of one modern heavy bomber is this: a modern brick school in more than 30 cities. It is two electric power plants, each serving a town of 60,000 population. It is two fine, fully equipped hospitals. It is some fifty miles of concrete pavement. We pay for a single fighter with a half-million bushels of wheat. We pay for a single [destroyer](#) with new homes that could have housed more than 8,000 people.... This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron.

These words could hardly be more appropriate today.

Let's return to why "world leaders" pursue this mad course. First, let's see if we can find any who deserve the appellation, except in irony.

If there were any, they would be devoting themselves to bringing the conflict to an end in the only way possible: by diplomacy and statecraft. The general outlines of a political settlement have long been understood. We [have discussed them before](#) and have also documented the dedication of the U.S. (with NATO in tow) to undermine the possibility of a diplomatic settlement, quite openly, and with pride. There should be no need to review the dismal record again.

A common refrain is that "Mad Vlad" is so insane, and so immersed in wild dreams of reconstructing an empire and maybe conquering the world, that there's no point even listening to what Russians are saying — that is, if you can evade U.S. censorship and find some snippets on Indian state TV or Middle East media. And there is surely no need to contemplate diplomatic engagement with such a creature. Therefore, let's not even explore the only possibility for ending the horror and just continue to escalate it, no matter what the consequences for Ukrainians and the world.

Western leaders, and much of the political class, are now consumed with two major ideas: The first is that Russian military force is so overwhelming that it may soon seek to conquer Western Europe, or even beyond. Thus, we have to "fight Russia over there" (with Ukrainian bodies) so that "we don't have to fight Russia here" in Washington, D.C., or so we are warned by House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence Chair Adam Schiff, a Democrat.

The second is that Russian military force has been shown to be a paper tiger, so incompetent and frail, and so poorly led, that it can't conquer cities a few kilometers from its border defended largely by a citizens' army.

The latter thought is the object of much gloating. The former inspires terror in our hearts.

Orwell defined "doublethink" as the capacity to hold two contradictory ideas in mind and to believe them both, a malady only imaginable in ultra-totalitarian states.

Adopting the first idea, we must arm ourselves to the teeth to protect ourselves from the demonic plans of the paper tiger, even though Russian military spending is a fraction of NATO's, even excluding the U.S. Those suffering memory loss will be delighted that Germany has finally gotten the word, and [may soon surpass](#) Russia in military spending. Now Putin will have to think twice before conquering western Europe.

To repeat the obvious, the war in Ukraine can end with a diplomatic settlement, or with the defeat of one side, either quickly or in prolonged agony. Diplomacy, by definition, is a give-and-take affair. Each side must accept it. It follows that in a diplomatic settlement, Putin must be offered some escape hatch.

We either accept the first option, or we reject it. That at least is not controversial. If we reject it, we are choosing the second option. Since that is the near-universal preference in Western discourse, and continues to be U.S. policy, let's consider what it entails.

The answer is straightforward: The decision to reject diplomacy means that we will engage in an experiment to see whether the irrational mad dog will slink away quietly in total defeat, or whether he will use the means that he certainly has to destroy Ukraine and set the stage for terminal war.

And while conducting this grotesque experiment with the lives of Ukrainians, we will ensure that millions starve from the food crisis, we will toy with the possibility of nuclear war, and we will race on enthusiastically to destroying the environment that sustains life.

It is of course conceivable that Putin will just surrender, and that he'll refrain from using the forces at his command. And perhaps we can simply laugh off the prospects of resort to nuclear weapons. Conceivable, but what kind of person would be willing to take that gamble?

The answer is: Western leaders, quite explicitly, along with the political class. That has been obvious for years, even stated officially. And to make sure that all understand, the position was forcefully reiterated in April at the first monthly meeting of the "Contact Group," which includes NATO and partner countries. The meeting was not held at NATO headquarters in Brussels, Belgium. Rather, all pretenses were dropped, and it was held at the U.S. Ramstein Air Base in Germany; technically German territory, but in the real world belonging to the U.S.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin opened the meeting by [declaring](#) that “Ukraine clearly believes it can win and so does everyone here.” Therefore, the assembled dignitaries should have no hesitation in pouring advanced weapons into Ukraine and persisting in the other programs, proudly announced, to bring Ukraine effectively within the NATO system. In their wisdom, the attending dignitaries and their leader guarantee that Putin will not react in ways they all know he can.

The record of military planning for many years, in fact centuries, indicates that “everyone here” may indeed hold these remarkable beliefs. Whether they do or not, they are, clearly, willing to carry out the experiment with the lives of Ukrainians and the future of life on Earth.

Since we are assured on this high authority that Russia will passively observe all of this with no reaction, we can take further steps to “integrate Ukraine into NATO de facto,” in accord with the goals of the Ukrainian defense ministry, [establishing](#) “full compatibility of the Ukrainian army with the armies of NATO countries” — thereby also guaranteeing that no diplomatic settlement can be reached with any Russian government, unless Russia is somehow turned into a U.S. satellite.

Current U.S. policy calls for a long war to “weaken Russia” and ensure its total defeat. The policy is very similar to the Afghan model of the 1980s, which is, in fact, now explicitly advocated in high places; [by former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton](#) for example.

Since that is close to current U.S. policy, even a working model, it is worthwhile to look at what actually happened in Afghanistan in the ‘80s when Russia invaded. Fortunately, we now have a [detailed and authoritative account](#) by Diego Cordovez, who directed the successful UN programs that ended the war, and the distinguished journalist and scholar Selig Harrison, who has extensive experience in the region.

The Cordovez-Harrison analysis completely overthrows the received version. They demonstrate that the war was ended by careful UN-run diplomacy, not by military force. Soviet military forces were fully capable of continuing the war. The U.S. policy of mobilizing and funding the most extremist radical Islamists to fight the Russians amounted to “fighting to the last Afghan,” they conclude, in a proxy war to weaken the Soviet Union. “The United States did its best to prevent the

emergence of a U.N. role,” that is, the careful diplomatic efforts that ended the war.

U.S. policy apparently delayed the Russian withdrawal that had been contemplated from shortly after the invasion — which, they show, had limited objectives, with no resemblance to the awesome goals of world conquest that were conjured up in U.S. propaganda. “The Soviet invasion was clearly not the first step in an expansionist master plan of a united leadership,” Harrison writes, confirming the [conclusions of historian David Gibbs](#) based on released Soviet archives.

The chief CIA officer in Islamabad, who ran the operations directly, put the main point simply: The goal was to kill Russian soldiers — to give Russia their Vietnam, as proclaimed by high U.S. officials, revealing the colossal inability to understand anything about Indochina that was the hallmark of U.S. policy for decades of slaughter and destruction.

Cordovez-Harrison wrote that the U.S. government “was divided from the start between ‘bleeders,’ who wanted to keep Soviet forces pinned down in Afghanistan and thus to avenge Vietnam, and ‘dealers’, who wanted to compel their withdrawal through a combination of diplomacy and military pressure.” It’s a distinction that shows up very often. The bleeders usually win, causing immense damage. For “the decider,” to borrow W. Bush’s self-description, it is safer to look tough than to appear to be too soft.

Afghanistan is a case in point. In the Carter administration, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance was a dealer, who suggested far-reaching compromises that would have almost certainly prevented, or at least sharply curtailed, what was intended to be a limited intervention. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski was the bleeder, intent on avenging Vietnam, whatever that meant in his confused world view, and killing Russians, something he understood very well, and relished.

Brzezinski prevailed. He convinced Carter to send arms to the opposition that was seeking to overthrow the pro-Russian government, anticipating that the Russians would be drawn into a Vietnam-style quagmire. When it happened, he could barely contain his delight. When asked later whether he had any regrets, he dismissed the question as ridiculous. His success in drawing Russia into the

Afghan trap, he claimed, was responsible for the collapse of the Soviet empire and ending the Cold War — mostly [nonsense](#). And who cares if it harmed “some agitated Muslims,” like the million cadavers, putting aside such incidentals as the devastation of Afghanistan, and the rise of radical Islam.

The Afghan analogy is being publicly advocated today, and more importantly, is being implemented in policy.

The dealer-bleeder distinction is nothing new in foreign policy circles. A famous example from the early days of the Cold War is the conflict between George Kennan (a dealer) and Paul Nitze (a bleeder), won by Nitze, laying the basis for many years of brutality and near destruction. Cordovez-Harrison explicitly endorse Kennan’s approach, with ample evidence.

An example close to Vance-Brzezinski is the conflict between Secretary of State William Rogers (a dealer) and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger (a bleeder) over Middle East Policy in the Richard Nixon years. Rogers proposed reasonable diplomatic solutions to the Israel-Arab conflict. Kissinger, whose ignorance of the region was monumental, insisted on confrontation, [leading to the 1973 war](#), a close call for Israel with a serious threat of nuclear war.

These conflicts are perennial, almost. Today there are only bleeders in high places. They have gone as far as to [enact a huge Lend Lease Act](#) for Ukraine, passed almost unanimously. The terminology is designed to evoke the memory of the enormous Lend-Lease program that brought the U.S. into the European war (as intended) and linked the European and Asian conflicts into a World War (unintended). “Lend Lease tied together the separate struggles in Europe and Asia to create by the end of 1941 what we properly call World War II,” writes Adam Tooze. Is that what we want in today’s quite different circumstances?

If that is what we want, as seems to be the case, let us at least reflect on what it entails. That is important enough to repeat.

It entails that we reject out of hand the kind of diplomatic initiatives that in reality ended the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, despite U.S. efforts to impede them. We therefore undertake an experiment to see whether integration of Ukraine into NATO, total defeat of Russia in Ukraine, and further moves to “weaken Russia,” will be observed passively by the Russian leadership, or whether they will resort to the means of violence they unquestionably possess to devastate Ukraine and

set the stage for possible general war.

Meanwhile, by extending the conflict instead of seeking to end it, we impose severe costs on Ukrainians, drive millions of people to death by starvation, hurtle the burning planet even more rapidly to the sixth mass extinction, and — if we are lucky — escape terminal war.

No problem, the government and political class tell us. The experiment carries no risk because the Russian leadership is sure to accept all of this with equanimity, passing quietly into the ash heap of history. As for the “collateral damage,” they can join the ranks of Brzezinski’s “agitated Muslims.” To borrow the phrase made famous [by Madeleine](#) Albright: “This is a very hard choice, but the price — we think the price is worth it.”

Let’s at least have the honesty to recognize what we are doing, eyes open.

Global emissions rose to record high in 2021, so the world went back to a “business-as-usual” approach once the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic subsided — for now. How hardwired is human behavior? Are we capable of having moral duties toward future people?

It is a deep question, the most important question we can contemplate. The answer is unknown. It may be helpful to think about it in a broader context.

Consider Enrico Fermi’s famous paradox: In simple words, where are they? A distinguished astrophysicist, Fermi knew that there are a huge number of planets within the reach of potential contact that have the conditions to sustain life and higher intelligence. But with the most assiduous search, we can find no trace of their existence. So where are they?

One response that has been seriously proposed, and cannot be dismissed, is that higher intelligence has developed innumerable times, but has proven to be lethal: It discovered the means for self-annihilation but did not develop the moral capacity to prevent it. Perhaps that is even an inherent feature of what we call “higher intelligence.”

We are now engaged in an experiment to determine whether this grim principle holds of modern humans, a very recent arrival on Earth, some 200,000-300,000 years ago, a flick of an eye in evolutionary time. There is not much time to find

the answer — or more precisely, to determine the answer, as we will do, one way or the other. That is unavoidable. We will either act to show that our moral capacity reaches as far as to control our technical capacity to destroy, or that it does not.

An extraterrestrial observer, if there were one, would unfortunately conclude that the gap is too immense to prevent species suicide, and with it the sixth mass extinction. But it could be mistaken. That decision is in our hands.

There is a rough measure of the gap between capacity to destroy and capacity to contain that death wish: the Doomsday Clock of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists. The distance of the hands from midnight can be regarded as an indication of the gap. In 1953, when the U.S. and Soviet Union exploded thermonuclear weapons, the minute-hand was set to two minutes to midnight. It did not reach that point again until Donald Trump's term in office. In his last year, the analysts abandoned minutes and switched to seconds: 100 seconds to midnight, where the clock now stands. Next January it will be set again. It's not hard to make a case that the second-hand should move closer to midnight.

The grim question arose with brilliant clarity on August 6, 1945. That day provided two lessons: 1.) human intelligence, in its glory, was approaching the capacity to destroy everything, an achievement reached in 1953; and 2.) human moral capacity lagged far behind. Few even cared, as people of my age will remember very well. Viewing the hideous experiment to which we are enthusiastically committed today, and what it entails, it is hard to see improvement, to put it mildly.

That doesn't answer the question. We know far too little to answer it. We can only observe closely the one case of "higher intelligence" that we know of, and ask what it suggests about the answer.

Far more importantly, we can act to determine the answer. It is within our power to bring about the answer that we all hope for, but there is no time to waste.

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