

South Africans Are Fighting For Crumbs: A Conversation With Trade Union Leader Irvin Jim



Zoe Alexandra & Vijay Prashad - Photo: Twitter

In mid-December, the African National Congress (ANC) held its national conference where South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa was [reelected](#) as leader of his party, which means that he will lead the ANC into the 2024 general elections. A few delegates at the Johannesburg Expo Center in Nasrec, Gauteng—where the party conference was held—shouted at Ramaphosa asking him to resign because of a scandal called [Farmgate](#) (Ramaphosa [survived](#) a parliamentary vote against his impeachment following the scandal).

Irvin Jim, the general secretary of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa ([NUMSA](#)), told us that his country “is sitting on a tinderbox.” A series of crises are wracking South Africa presently: an unemployment crisis, an electricity crisis, and a crisis of xenophobia. The context behind the ANC national conference is stark. “The situation is brutal and harsh,” Irvin Jim said. “The social illness that people experience each day is terrible. The rate of crime has become very high. The gender-based violence experienced by women is very high. The statistics show us that basically people are fighting for crumbs.”

At the ANC conference, five of the top seven posts—from the president to treasurer general—[went](#) to Ramaphosa's supporters. With the Ramaphosa team in place, and with Ramaphosa himself to be the presidential candidate in 2024, it is

unlikely that the ANC will propose dramatic changes to its policy orientation or provide a new outlook for the country's future to the South African people. The ANC has governed the country for almost 30 years beginning in 1994 after apartheid ended, and the party has won a commanding [62.65](#) percent of the total vote share since then before the 2014 general elections. In the last general election in 2019, Ramaphosa [won](#) with 57.5 percent of the vote, still ahead of any of its opponents. This grip on electoral power has created a sense of complacency in the upper ranks of the ANC. However, at the grassroots, there is anxiety. In the municipal elections of 2021, the ANC support fell [below 50 percent](#) for the first time. A national opinion poll in August 2022 [showed](#) that the ANC would get 42 percent of the vote in the 2024 elections if they were held then.

Negotiated Settlement

Irvin Jim is no stranger to the ANC. Born in South Africa's Eastern Cape in 1968, Jim threw himself into the anti-apartheid movement as a young man. Forced by poverty to leave his education, he worked at Firestone Tire in Port Elizabeth. In 1991, Jim became a NUMSA union shop steward. As part of the communist movement and the ANC, Jim observed that the new government led by former South African President Nelson Mandela agreed to a "negotiated settlement" with the old apartheid elite. This "settlement," Irvin Jim argued, "left intact the structure of white monopoly capital," which included their private ownership of the country's minerals and energy as well as finance. The South African Reserve Bank committed itself, he told us, "to protect the value of white wealth." In the new South Africa, he said, "Africans can go to the beach. They can take their children to the school of their choice. They can choose where to live. But access to these rights is determined by their economic position in society. If you have no access to economic power, then you have none of these liberties."

In 1996, the ANC did make changes to the economic structure, but without harming the "negotiated settlement." The policy known as [GEAR](#) (Growth, Employment, and Redistribution) created growth for the owners of wealth, but [failed](#) to create a long-term process of employment and redistribution. Due to the ANC's failure to address the problem of unemployment—[catastrophically](#) the unemployment rate was 63.9 percent during the first quarter of 2022 for those between the ages of 15 and 24—the social distress being faced by South Africans has further been aggravated. The ANC, Irvin Jim said, "has exposed the country to serious vulnerability."

Solidarity Not Hate

Even if the ANC wins less than 50 percent of the vote in the next general elections, it will still be able to form a government since no other party will attract even comparable support (in the 2019 elections, the Democratic Alliance won merely [20.77 percent](#) of the vote). Irvin Jim told us that there is a need for progressive forces in South Africa to fight and “revisit the negotiated settlement” and create a new policy outline for South Africa. The 2013 [National Development Plan 2030](#) is a pale shadow of the kind of policy required to define South Africa’s future. “It barely talked about jobs,” Jim said. “The only jobs it talked about were window office cleaning and hairdressing. There was no drive to champion manufacturing and industrialization.”

A new program—which would revitalize the freedom agenda in South Africa—must seek “economic power alongside political power,” said Jim. This means that “there is a genuine need to take ownership and control of all the commanding heights of the economy.” South Africa’s non-energy mineral reserves are [estimated](#) to be worth \$2.4 trillion to \$3 trillion. The country is the world’s [largest](#) producer of chrome, manganese, platinum, vanadium, and vermiculite, as well as [one of the largest](#) producers of gold, iron ore, and uranium. How a country with so much wealth can be so poor is answered by the lack of public control South Africa has over its metals and minerals. “South Africa needs to take public ownership of these minerals and metals, develop the processing of these through industrialization, and provide the benefits to the marginalized, landless, and dispossessed South Africans, most of whom are Black,” said Jim.

No program like this will be taken seriously if the working class and the urban poor remain fragmented and powerless. Jim told us that his union—NUMSA—is working with others to link “shop floor struggles with community struggles,” the “employed with the unemployed,” and are building an atmosphere of “solidarity rather than the spirit of hate.” The answers for South Africa will have to come from these struggles, says the veteran trade union leader. “The people,” he said, “have to lead the leaders.”

Author Bio:

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Vijay Prashad is an Indian historian, editor, and journalist. He is a writing fellow

and chief correspondent at Globetrotter. He is an editor of [LeftWord Books](#) and the director of [Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research](#). He is a senior non-resident fellow at [Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies](#), Renmin University of China. He has written more than 20 books, including *The Darker Nations* and *The Poorer Nations*. His latest books are *Struggle Makes Us Human: Learning from Movements for Socialism* and (with Noam Chomsky) *The Withdrawal: Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, and the Fragility of U.S. Power*.

Zoe Alexandra is a journalist and co-editor of [Peoples Dispatch](#).

Source: Globetrotter

Chomsky: Advanced US Weaponry In Ukraine Is Sustaining Battlefield Stalemate



Noam Chomsky

It's now more than 300 days since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the conflict has intensified rather than subsided, with Ukrainian leaders [expressing fears of impending mass infantry attacks from Russia](#) and U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken announcing this week that the U.S. will send Ukraine \$1.8 billion in

military aid, including a Patriot missile battery.

On December 21, in greeting Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at the White House and considering his appeal for nearly \$50 billion in additional aid for Ukraine, U.S. President Joe Biden made clear his intention to continue sending weaponry to Ukraine until Russia is defeated in the battlefield, [saying](#), “The American people have been with you every step of the way, and we will stay with you.”

As Noam Chomsky alludes to in the exclusive interview that follows for *Truthout*, those driven to see Russia disappear from the world map as a major power appear determined to ensure that the war continues, damn the consequences for Ukrainians and Russians alike. Indeed, one wonders if the Cold War ever ended.

C. J. Polychroniou: Noam, with every passing month, the conflict in Ukraine looks much grimmer. Both the U.S. and the EU are now deeply involved in the war, and Biden has already pledged to support Ukraine for “as long as it takes” to defeat Russia on the battlefield. In the meantime, Zelenskyy has made some new demands for peace, but they were quickly rejected by Moscow with the argument that Kyev must take into account the current reality. Are there any historical analogies that could be useful in seeing how this war might possibly end?

Noam Chomsky: There are all too many analogues: Afghanistan, Yemen, Libya, Gaza, Eastern Congo, Somalia — just keeping to ongoing horrors where the U.S. and its allies have a primary or at least substantial role in perpetrating and sustaining them. Such examples, however, are not relevant to discussion of Ukraine in polite circles. They suffer from the fallacy of wrong agency: us not them. Therefore, benign intent gone awry and not reincarnation of Hitler. Since this is all a priori truth, it is not subject to discussion any more than $2+2 = 4$.

The analogues do offer some unhappy suggestions as to how this war might possibly end: by not ending until devastation is so extreme that we wouldn't want to think about it. That unfortunately seems more than likely with each passing day.

I claim no military expertise. I do follow military analysts, and find most of them supremely confident, with opposing conclusions — not for the first time. My suspicion is that General Milley, former chair of the joint chiefs, is probably right in concluding that neither side can win a decisive military victory and that the

cost of continuing warfare is enormous for both sides, with many repercussions beyond.

If the war goes on, Ukraine will be the primary victim. Advanced U.S. weapons may sustain a battlefield stalemate as Russia pours in more troops and equipment, but how much can Ukrainian society tolerate now that Russia, after many months, has turned to the U.S.-U.K. style of war, directly attacking infrastructure, energy, communications, anything that allows the society to function? Ukraine is already facing a major [economic and humanitarian crisis](#). As the war persists, Ukrainian central bank officials fear that “People could flee Ukraine in droves, taking their money with them, potentially crashing the national currency as they seek to exchange their Ukrainian hryvnia for euros or dollars.”

Fortunately, ethnic Ukrainians who flee are likely to be accepted in the West. They are considered to be (almost) white, unlike those left to drown by the thousands in the Mediterranean while fleeing from Europe’s destruction of Africa, or forcefully returned to U.S.-backed terrorist states. While many may be able to flee, as matters now stand destruction of a viable society in Ukraine is likely to continue on its gruesome path.

Talk of nuclear weapons is almost all in the West, though it’s all too easy to think of steps up the escalation ladder. The casual talk about nuclear war in the U.S. is shocking, disastrous.

So is the now standard line about a cosmic struggle between democracy and autocracy — eliciting ridicule outside of Western educated circles. Elsewhere, people are capable of looking at the glaringly obvious facts of past and current history and are not so deeply immersed in doctrinal fabrications that they are rendered blind.

The same is true of the tales concocted in Western propaganda about Putin’s plans to conquer Europe, if not beyond, eliciting fears that coexist easily with gloating over the demonstration of Russia’s military incompetence and inability even to conquer towns a few miles from its borders. Orwell called it “doublethink”: the ability to hold two contradictory ideas in mind and firmly believe them both. Western doublethink is buttressed by the industry of tea leaf-reading that seeks to penetrate Putin’s twisted mind, discerning all sorts of perversities and grand ambitions. The industry reverses George W. Bush’s

discoveries when he looked into Putin's eyes, saw his soul and recognized it to be good. And it is about as well-grounded as Bush's insights.

But reality doesn't go away. Apart from the destruction of Ukraine, there is an ever-growing possibility of nuclear war. Millions are facing starvation from disruption of grain and fertilizer shipments from the Black Sea region. Precious resources that are desperately needed to avert climate catastrophe are being wasted in destruction and sharply increased preparation for more. Europe is taking a beating, with its very natural complementary relation with Russia broken, and links to the emerging China-based system harmed as well. It's an open question whether Europe — in particular the German-based industrial system — will agree to decline by subordinating itself to Washington, a topic of far-reaching importance.

That prospect goes beyond Ukraine-Russia. Biden's virtual declaration of war against China, with sanctions against exports to China of technology that makes use of U.S. components or designs, hits European industry hard, particularly the advanced chip-manufacturing industry in the Netherlands. So far it is not clear whether European industry will be willing to pay the costs of the U.S. effort to prevent China's economic development — framed, as usual, in terms of national security, but only the most loyal partisans can take that claim seriously.

Meanwhile the U.S. is gaining enormously in multiple ways: geopolitically by Putin's self-destructive decision to drive Europe into Washington's pocket by ignoring very real possibilities for avoiding criminal aggression, but also in other ways. It is not, of course, the U.S. population that is gaining. Rather, those in charge: fossil fuel industries, financial institutions that invest in them, military producers, the agribusiness semi-monopolies, and masters of the economy generally, who can scarcely control their euphoria over bulging profits (which are feeding inflation with markups) and great prospects for moving on to destroy human society on earth more expeditiously.

It's easy to understand why almost the whole world is calling for negotiations and a diplomatic settlement, including most of Europe, as polls indicate. Ukrainians will decide for themselves. As to what they prefer, we have clear statements by the government, but know little about the general population. The highly regarded correspondent Jonathan Steele brings to our [attention](#) a Gallup telephone poll of Ukrainians in September. It found that "Although 76 per cent of

men wanted the war to continue until Russia is forced to leave all occupied territory including Crimea, and 64 per cent of women had the same view, the rest — a substantial number of people — wanted negotiations.” Regional analysis showed that “In areas closest to the front lines where the horror of war is felt most keenly people’s doubts about the wisdom of fighting until victory are highest. Only 58 per cent support it in southern Ukraine. In the east the figure is as low as 56 per cent.”

Are there possibilities for diplomacy? The U.S. and the U.K., the two traditional warrior states, are still insisting that the war must be fought to severely weaken Russia, hence no negotiations, but even in their inner circles there is some [softening](#) in this regard.

Right now, the positions of the two adversaries seem irreconcilable, having predictably hardened as hostilities escalate. We don’t know whether it is possible to return to the positions of last March, when, according to [Ukrainian left sources](#), “Ukraine had publicly announced proposals to the Istanbul meeting on March 29, which included the withdrawal of Russian troops to the line on February 23 and the postponement of discussion about Crimea and Donbas. At the same time, the Ukrainian side insisted that all disputes should be resolved through transparent referendums held under the supervision of international observers and after the return of all forcibly displaced persons.”

The Istanbul negotiations collapsed. The source just quoted places the blame totally on Russia. Little is known, since coverage of diplomatic efforts is so scanty. In particular, we do not know whether a factor in the collapse was Britain’s opposition to negotiations, apparently backed by the U.S. Do possibilities remain? The only way to find out is to facilitate efforts to try.

At the very least we can remove obstacles to diplomacy that the U.S. has placed, topics we’ve reviewed in detail. And we can try to foster an arena of open discussion about these topics, free from tantrums and heroic posturing about high principles that dismisses the factual record and human consequences.

There are many pitfalls and dangers, but it’s hard to see what other course can save Ukraine, and far beyond, from catastrophe.

German Chancellor Scholz has described the war in Ukraine as a strategic attempt on the part of Vladimir Putin to recreate the Russian empire and stated

that relations with Moscow will be reestablished once the conflict is over and Russia has been defeated. Is there any evidence that Putin's regime is interested in reviving the Russian empire? And what happens if Russia is not defeated in the battlefield? Will Europe be dragged into a new Cold War? Indeed, does the U.S./NATO-Russia conflict over Ukraine prove that the Cold War perhaps never ended?

Scholz surely knows better. Whatever one thinks of Russian war aims, they were explicit and far narrower, and Scholz, who is well-informed, cannot fail to be aware of that.

The tea leaf-reading industry has seized on occasional comments by Putin, generally taken out of context, to conjure up the frightening images of Russia on the march. That requires an impressive subordination to doublethink, as just described.

The Cold War briefly ended when the Soviet Union collapsed. The Gorbachev-Bush I negotiations, supported by Germany, provided a basis for escaping its legacy. The hopes did not long survive.

We should not overlook the fact that the end of the Cold War also lifted the ideological clouds — briefly. Government documents recognized, indirectly, that the Cold War was in large part a tacit agreement between the superpowers to allow each to use violence when necessary to control its own domains: for Russia, eastern Europe; for the U.S., much of the world. Thus, the Bush I administration officially recognized that we have to maintain intervention forces aimed at the Middle East, where the serious problems “could not be laid at the Kremlin’s door,” contrary to decades of prevarication. Rather, they were the usual threat: independent nationalism. That didn’t change, apart from the need to design new pretexts, the menacing Russian hordes having evaporated: “humanitarian intervention” and other concoctions, lauded at home and bitterly denounced by the Global South, the traditional victims. All reviewed in detail elsewhere.

The official Cold War briefly ended. Bush I lived up to his promises to Gorbachev, but Clinton almost immediately rescinded them, initiating the expansion of NATO to Russia’s borders in violation of firm and unambiguous promises. He did so for domestic political reasons (the Polish vote etc.) as he explained to his friend Boris Yeltsin. There should be no need to review again the rest of the sordid story until

today. The hope for a “common European home” with no military alliances — Gorbachev’s vision, tolerated by Bush I — was undermined by Clinton, and a form of Cold War then developed, now becoming extremely dangerous.

Former German Chancellor Angela Merkel made some revealing remarks in an interview with the newspaper Die Zeit. She stated that the 2014 Minsk agreements were intended to “give Ukraine time” to make the country stronger, thus admitting that Kyev was not going to implement the peace deal and that the plan was to arm Ukraine for a large-scale conflict with Russia. Is this a case of diplomatic fraud? If so, is it a legitimate claim for launching an international tribunal?

What Merkel had in mind we do not know. We do know that there is no basis in the historical or diplomatic record for her claims. I am inclined to agree with the astute commentator who posts under the name “[Moon of Alabama](#).” He points out that “Merkel is under very harsh critique not only in the U.S. but also in her own conservative party. She is now out to justify her previous decisions as well as the current bad outcome in Ukraine. My hunch is that she is making things up. Unfortunately she also creates serious damage.”

He proceeds to a close analysis of the texts to justify this conclusion, which is the most plausible one I’ve seen. I don’t think there’s a basis for an international tribunal. More likely it is just a case of a political figure seeking to justify herself in a highly toxic climate.

For the last couple of months or so, Russia has been launching massive attacks on Ukraine’s energy infrastructure. What’s the strategic incentive behind these hideous types of military operations, which must surely qualify as war crimes? And what might be the implications of Ukrainian strikes inside Russia insofar as diplomatic efforts to end the war are concerned?

As we have discussed before, U.S.-U.K. strategists expected that Putin would occupy Kyev in a few days, as Russia did as well, it seems. There were plans reported to set up a Ukrainian government-in-exile. Both sides seriously underestimated Ukrainian will and capacity to resist the aggression, and radically overestimated Russian military power. U.S.-U.K. military analysts also expressed their surprise that Russia was not launching their kind of war, with immediate resort to the “hideous types of military operations” you mention. It was not hard

to predict, as we did over the months, that sooner or later Russia would resort to U.S.-U.K.-Israeli tactics: Quickly destroy everything that sustains a viable society. So they are now doing, arousing justified horror among decent people — joined by those who implement or justify these tactics with the “right agency”: us. The strategic incentive is clear enough, especially after Russia’s battlefield setbacks: Destroy the economy and the will to resist. All familiar to us.

Quite definitely war crimes, whether in Iraq, or Gaza, or Ukraine.

It’s not surprising that Ukraine is seeking to strike back against Russia. So far, the U.S. government, apparently under Pentagon advice, is seeking to restrict those reactions, not sharing the willingness to see the world go up in flames expressed by many commentators in the current crazed environment.

Things could easily go wrong. One new twist is that the U.S. is planning to send Patriot anti-missile systems to Ukraine. Whether they work seems to be an [open question](#). They require a substantial military cohort, I think about 80 people, which will presumably include American trainers. Work or not, they’re a natural target for Russian attack, even during installation. What then?

Any escalation is very dangerous in itself and can only impede whatever fading chances there may be for diplomatic efforts to fend off worse catastrophe.

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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).

Moscow's Leverage In The Balkans



John P. Ruehl

Since [September](#), Kosovo's fragile stability that has endured since 1999, following [intervention](#) by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), has grown progressively precarious. [Clashes between](#) ethnic Serbians and Kosovo security forces saw Serbia's military placed on [high alert](#) in November. [Several high-profile Serbian officials](#), including President Aleksandar Vučić, announced that the Serbian military could be deployed to northern Kosovo to protect the ethnic Serbs, who make up the majority of the population in the region.

Moscow has [natural incentives](#) to provoke the crisis. An unraveling of regional security would create more obstacles for Serbia's EU aspirations, optimistically [slated for 2025](#). The West's support for Kosovo has [historically undermined](#) Serbia's European integration effort, and [51 percent of Serbs](#) polled by Belgrade-based pollster Demostat in June 2022 said they would vote against EU membership in a national referendum.

But by escalating tensions, Russia can also [prevent](#) further EU and NATO expansion in the region, and potentially reduce Western pressure on Russian forces in Ukraine by diverging resources from Kyiv to the Balkans.

Throughout the 1990s, NATO [took a leading role](#) in the breakup of Yugoslavia, [perceived to be dominated by Serbia](#). While [the West supported](#) Bosnian and Croatian independence initiatives and Kosovan autonomy, Serbia was [supported](#)

by Russia. These policies led to considerable tension between NATO and Russia, with the Kremlin's occupation of [Kosovo's Slatina airport in 1999](#) leading to "one of the most tense standoffs between Russia and the West since the end of the Cold War."

However, Russia was too weak to adequately support Serbia in the 1990s. And after then-Yugoslavian President Slobodan Milošević was overthrown [in 2000](#) and Russian forces withdrew from Kosovo [in 2003](#), Serbian political elites instead pursued cautious integration with Europe while keeping the U.S. at arm's length. At the same time, [Serbia and Russia forged closer relations](#) through growing economic ties, embracing their common Slavic Orthodox heritage, and sharing resentment toward NATO's role in their affairs.

Territories under Serbian control continued to [secede](#) in the 2000s, with Montenegro [peacefully voting for independence](#) in 2006 and [Kosovo in 2008](#). Yet unlike other secession initiatives in the former Yugoslavia, Kosovo's failed to gain universal recognition. Almost half of the UN General Assembly [refused to recognize Kosovo's independence](#), with NATO/EU members [Spain, Greece, Slovakia, and Romania among them](#).

Moscow was firmly against Kosovo's independence, and prior to the February 2008 declaration of independence, the Kremlin [warned of geopolitical consequences](#) if it were to move forward. Six months later, Russia invoked the "[Kosovo Precedent](#)" to invade Georgia and recognized the separatist territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent. The Kremlin is now using the same paradigm [to justify its support](#) for Russian-backed separatist territories in Ukraine.

Currently bogged down in Ukraine, the Kremlin is exploring [fomenting](#) additional unrest in the Balkans by exploiting Serbian nationalist sentiment. Doing so will undoubtedly redirect some Western political, economic, and military efforts away from Ukraine.

Russia's influence over Serbia has grown in recent years, and Serbian politicians [have become more assertive](#) regarding northern Kosovo. Though overall trade between Russia and Serbia [is negligible](#) in comparison to the EU, Russia provides [one-quarter of the oil imported to Serbia](#), while Gazprom [finalized 51 percent share](#) in Serbia's major oil and gas company, Naftna Industrija Srbije (NIS), in

2009.

Russia's veto power at the UN Security Council has prevented [greater international recognition of Kosovo](#), demonstrating Moscow's usefulness as a diplomatic ally. [Putin has, meanwhile, become Serbians' most admired international leader](#), with pro-Putin and pro-Russia [rallies having been held](#) in Serbia since the invasion of Ukraine. According to recent polling, [almost 70 percent](#) of Serbians hold NATO responsible for the conflict.

Balancing Putin's popularity and Serbia's relations with Europe has been [a delicate task for Serbian President Vučić](#). Though he condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine, he refused to implement sanctions against the Kremlin, prompting German Chancellor Olaf Scholz to signal that Vučić [had to make a choice](#) between Europe and Russia in June.

But the Serbian leader had already [signed a three-year gas deal](#) with Russia in May, and in September agreed [to "consult" with Moscow on foreign policy issues](#). Other ventures, [such as doubling flights from Moscow to Belgrade](#), have demonstrated Serbia's willingness to assist Russia in undermining Western sanctions.

More concerning to Western officials is Russia's attempts over the last decade to alter the military balance between Serbia and Kosovo. A Russian humanitarian center located in the Serbian city of Niš, which is close to the Kosovo border and [opened in 2012](#), is suspected of being a secret Russian military base "set up by the Kremlin to spy on U.S. interests in the Balkans." Additionally, Serbia has [increased imports of Russian weaponry](#), while joint military exercises between Russia, Belarus, and Serbia (labeled "Slavic Brotherhood") [have been held annually since 2015](#).

Russian-backed non-state actors have in turn become increasingly present in Serbia. [In 2009](#), Russian private military and security companies, as well as organizations composed of Russian military veterans, began conducting, in coordination with Serbian counterparts, [military youth camps](#) in Zlatibor, Serbia. These were seen as attempts to develop the next generation of fighters and were eventually shut down by the local police in 2018.

Russia's Night Wolves biker gang, which has [played a pivotal role](#) in the 2014 seizure of Crimea and the unrest that has followed in Ukraine since, also [opened a](#)

[Serbian chapter](#) and conducted road trips in the region for years. And in December, a cultural center was opened [by the Russian private military company Wagner](#)—which is similarly [fighting in Ukraine](#)—in Serbia, “to strengthen and develop friendly relations between Russia and Serbia with the help of ‘soft power.’”

Using these forces to threaten a low-level insurgency in Kosovo would cause enormous alarm in NATO and the EU. But Russia’s efforts to fan the flames of Serbian nationalism will also be directed toward Bosnia and Herzegovina. The country’s Serb-dominated territory, Republika Srpska, [accepted power-sharing stipulations as part of the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995](#), and Russian forces similarly [withdrew](#) from the country in 2003.

Nonetheless, Milorad Dodik, president of Republika Srpska (who was also the president from 2010-2018), has increasingly allied himself with the Kremlin and has taken greater steps toward [declaring](#) his region’s independence from the rest of Bosnia and Herzegovina over the last decade. Republika Srpska security forces are now [well-equipped with Russian weaponry](#), while Moscow has given subtle approval [to supporting and developing Republika Srpska paramilitary groups](#). A Bosnian-Serb militia group called Serbian Honor is believed to have received training [at the humanitarian center in Niš](#) and the Night Wolves have also repeatedly [held rallies in the territory](#).

Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, [Dodik has expressed his support for](#) Russia, raising alarm over his ability to instigate unrest in Bosnia and Herzegovina with limited Russian state and non-state support. In response, the EU’s peacekeeping mission in the country, EUFOR or Operation Althea, almost doubled [its presence from 600 to 1,100 since the invasion in February](#).

Yet this still pales compared to the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR), [which has roughly 3,700 troops](#) in a country with a smaller population and less territory [than](#) Bosnia and Herzegovina, and is [further aided](#) by the EU Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX). Pushing [Republika Srpska’s independence initiative](#) to a point where Russia can officially recognize and support it may in turn rapidly overwhelm the smaller international force there. It would also provoke calls for independence among Bosnia and Herzegovina’s ethnic Croatian minority, [whose leaders have close relations with Moscow](#).

Disagreements in the Western alliance over the collective approach to the Balkans have been revealed in recent months. While the UK and the U.S. [placed sanctions on “various Bosnian politicians who are threatening the country’s territorial integrity,”](#) the EU chose not to, notably due to opposition by Slovenia, Croatia, and Hungary. And while Croatia was accepted into the Schengen area in [December](#), Romania, and Bulgaria, already EU members since 2007, [were denied entry by Austria](#), while the Netherlands similarly opposed Bulgaria being part of the Schengen area.

Effectively managing potential violence in the former Yugoslavia while continuing the integration efforts of other Balkan EU/NATO members would prove to be a difficult procedure for the Western alliance. Billions of dollars in [aid and assistance](#) have already been provided to Ukraine in 2022. Confronting additional instability in the Balkans would also highlight the flaws of NATO policy in the region since the 1990s and the lack of a viable, long-term solution to confront the issues plaguing the Balkans.

Yet regional integration efforts have picked up in recent months. In July, the EU [restarted](#) membership talks of bringing Albania and North Macedonia into the organization, Bosnia and Herzegovina was [officially accepted](#) as a candidate on December 15, and Kosovo applied [for EU membership](#) on December 14. NATO membership for both Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina remains largely on [hold](#), however, and is currently out of the question for Serbia, which considers NATO its “enemy.”

Considerable work will be required to integrate these divided states into the Western alliance, and recent attempts to speed up this process have been largely unsuccessful. The scheme by former President Donald Trump’s administration to [change the Serbia-Kosovo border](#) amounted to little, while the proposed Association of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo has been criticized for outlining [the creation of another Republika Srpska](#).

The role of [Russian intelligence and Serbian nationalists](#) in the attempted coup in Montenegro in 2016, which sought to derail the country’s NATO accession, reveals the lengths to which Moscow will go to achieve its aims. Western officials must, therefore, remain wary of Russia’s potential in the region. Escalating unresolved Balkan conflicts is now a major part of the Kremlin’s attempts to stall Western integration in Europe and take pressure off its war with Ukraine.

Author Bio:

This article was produced by [Globetrotter](#).

John P. Ruehl is an Australian-American journalist living in Washington, D.C. He is a contributing editor to Strategic Policy and a contributor to several other foreign affairs publications. He is currently finishing a book on Russia to be published in 2022.

Source: Globetrotter

Iran Punished For Treatment Of Women



Photo: Independent Media Institute

The Islamic Republic of Iran was the first UN member ever to be expelled from the prestigious Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), tasked with protecting women's rights and promoting gender equality.

In response to Iran's crackdown on protests, following the death of a young woman in police custody, Tehran's four-year term on the CSW came to an end on December 14 after the adoption of a resolution [introduced](#) by the United States,

with 29 members voting in favor of the resolution, eight against, and 16 abstaining.

U.S. Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield called the vote “historic” and [told](#) reporters, “I think we sent a strong message to the Iranian government, and we sent a strong message to Iranian women.”

The 45-member commission is nearly as old as the United Nations itself and was formed in 1946. The 54-member UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) that oversees the CSW, and which had previously elected Iran in [April 2021](#) for a four-year term to the CSW beginning [March 2022](#), adopted the resolution to oust it from the commission.

Based on increasing [evidence](#) gathered in the 1960s that women were disproportionately affected by poverty, the work of the commission centered on the needs of women in community and rural development, agricultural work and family planning, and scientific and technological advances. The commission also encouraged the UN to provide greater technical assistance to ensure further advancement of women, especially in developing countries, according to “[A Short History of the Commission on the Status of Women.](#)”

It is unusual to oust any government from a United Nations body. And several states questioned the legality of the move, especially Iran and Russia. But Canada’s Ambassador [Bob Rae](#) countered this opposition by saying a vote has to be taken first in order to request an opinion.

Death of Mahsa Amini

The resolution was sparked by Iran’s brutality against protesters who took to the streets in September [after](#) the death of a 22-year-old woman, Mahsa Amini, arrested by the “morality police” for not wearing a hijab, a head covering. She died in custody. As street protests spread across the country, political stability is being put to a potential test for the politically inexperienced president of Iran, conservative cleric Ebrahim Raisi.

At least [488](#) people have been killed since the demonstrations began, according to a November 29 [tweet](#) by the Iran Human Rights (IHR) group, which is monitoring the protests. Another [18,200](#) people have been detained by authorities, IHR said. Iran recently publicly [executed](#) two male protestors.

Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield spoke of the young woman, [saying](#): “Mahsa Amini just wanted to finish her studies. She wanted to start a family. ... She was just a student. But now she is a martyr... We know she was killed for the crime of being a woman.”

According to the [Council on Foreign Relations](#), the protesters have no interest in reforming Iran’s theocracy but, instead, want to do away with it, and the women-focused demonstrations have been attacking the regime’s legitimacy. “Chants of ‘woman, life, freedom’ and calls to end mandatory hijab-wearing challenge the Islamist ideology that Iran’s government is based on. These protests have unusually widespread support, unbound by class, ethnicity, or gender,” [stated](#) the article by CFR.

Iran Objects

Iran’s UN ambassador, [Amir Saeid Iravani](#), has, meanwhile, denied all allegations leveled against the country. Castigating the United States, he [said](#) that Washington demonstrated hostile policy toward the Iranian people, particularly women, “pursued under the guise of defending human rights.” He questioned the legality of the vote, [saying](#) that “terminating an elected member’s participation in a functional commission for any alleged reason” is not supported by the ECOSOC’s rules.

Russia’s deputy ambassador, [Gennady Kuzmin](#), said the purpose of the meeting was to purge the Commission on the Status of Women of a sovereign player, adding that each state has the obligation to maintain public order. But he said the Iranian government should take measures to prevent such tragedies like the death of Mahsa Amini in the future. He also questioned the legality of the vote.

Ambassador Gilad Erdan of [Israel](#), now in a proxy war with Iran, told the ECOSOC delegates that “this resolution must receive the support of all of us and whoever doesn’t support it is complicit in the oppression and murder of women.”

Those not supporting the resolution [were](#) Bolivia, China, Kazakhstan, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Oman, Russia, and Zimbabwe.

According to [Richard Gowan](#), a UN expert at the International Crisis Group, lots of delegates had second thoughts when reports of the U.S. action became known. “I have heard a lot of diplomats say they think Iran’s actions are vile, but they

worry that the U.S. will use these exclusionary tactics more in future. One day it's Iran, the next day it could be you.”

The text of the [resolution](#) voiced concern over Iran “administering policies flagrantly contrary to the human rights of women and girls and to the mandate of the Commission on the Status of Women,” and decided “to remove with immediate effect” Iran from membership in the commission for the remainder of its 2022-2026 term.

Author Bio:

This article was produced by [Globetrotter](#).

Evelyn Leopold is a writing fellow and correspondent for Globetrotter. She is an independent journalist based at the United Nations and the winner of a UN Correspondents Association gold medal for her reporting. She served at Reuters as a manager, editor, and correspondent in New York, Washington, London, Berlin, and Nairobi. She is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and head of the Dag Hammarskjöld Fund for Journalists.

Source: Globetrotter

New Era Of China-Saudi Ties Riles Iran



M.K. Bhadrakumar

The pomp and ceremony of the recent visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping to Saudi Arabia has drawn comparison with the banality and frigid atmosphere surrounding the U.S. President Joe Biden's trip to the kingdom in July. However, the main difference is that the Saudis organized three separate regional summits for Xi—aside the bilateral summit, a second summit with 21 Arab leaders and a third with seven rulers of GCC countries.

The “three-in-one” conveyed a big signal that Saudi Arabia stands at the heart of China's Arab world diplomacy. It is in sharp contrast with the transactional relationship that the historic U.S.-Saudi alliance has been reduced to.

Indeed, the nearly three dozen energy and investment deals during Xi's visit will preserve the core of the strategic interests of Saudi Arabia and China. They encompass frontier areas such as information technology, green energy, cloud services, infrastructure and health and inject a greater sense of alignment between Riyadh's economic diversification pivot (known as Vision 2030) and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)-driven development of smart industries and high quality infrastructure, including digital infrastructure, which has the potential to undergird regional connectivity in the coming decades.

As a Chinese commentator noted, Beijing's green hydrogen and solar energy investments are expected to complement Riyadh's clean energy push and together they “strengthen adaptive infrastructure in the Arab world.” Take, for example, the landmark agreement inked with Chinese tech giant Huawei, which will open the doors to high-tech complexes in Saudi cities that mesh with China's 5G development cooperation in many Gulf states (eg., UAE, Kuwait, Qatar.)

As Saudi Arabia synchronizes its priorities in the energy sector with China's focus on bolstering supply chain resilience in the West Asian region, the kingdom is presenting itself as a regional center for the Chinese factories. This is “win-win,” as stable energy supply chains are critical to growth and recovery prospects of many regional Arab economies.

Suffice it to say that even as new development synergies and the proposed multi-sector collaborations place the China-Saudi comprehensive strategic partnership in a different league, the Arab region as a whole will reap enormous benefits from the partnership's transformational impact.

The [joint statement](#) issued after Xi's visit speaks about the importance of

expanding Saudi-Chinese relations “in their international framework and setting an example of cooperation, solidarity, and mutual gain for developing countries.”

It says, “The Saudi side also stressed the importance of attracting international Chinese companies to open regional headquarters in the Kingdom and appreciated the interest of a number of companies in that regard as they are obtaining licenses to establish their regional headquarters in the Kingdom, to ultimately benefit from the exceptional Chinese experiences and capabilities for the benefit of the economies of the two countries.” Clearly, the signing of a “harmonization plan” between Vision 2030 and the BRI is a game changer.

The first-ever China-GCC Summit and China-Arab League Summit stand out in the current international environment and create prospects of “collective cooperation” between China and Arab countries. They are pegged on joint action by Saudi Arabia and China to strengthen strategic partnership relations between the GCC States and China, conclude a free trade agreement between the GCC and China, and institutionalize the GCC-China Meeting of Ministers of Economy and Trade in a “6 + 1” format between GCC and China.

Equally, on the diplomatic side, the joint statement says, “The Chinese side commended the Kingdom’s positive contributions and outstanding support for the promotion of regional and international peace and stability.”

Particularly noteworthy is China’s strong endorsement of the Saudi stance on Yemen stressing the importance of supporting the Yemeni Presidential Leadership Council.

Unsurprisingly, Xi’s Saudi visit caused disquiet in Tehran. The web of regional alliances that Riyadh has woven for China’s participation is exclusively of Arab countries. And what riles Tehran most is that Saudi Arabia and the Arab alliance will be the most crucial template of China’s regional strategies in the West Asian and African regions.

Iran cannot possibly cope with the development as a rival power center. And it is happening at a time when Iran is surging ahead as the Gulf region’s highflier and Saudi Arabia’s pivotal alliance with the U.S. sank into hopeless disrepair.

The unkindest cut of all must be that although China is a participant in the JCPOA negotiations, the joint statement states that the two sides “called on Iran to

cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency, maintain the non-proliferation regime, and emphasize respect for the principles of good-neighborliness and non-interference in the internal affairs of states.”

Elsewhere, the joint statement says in a veiled reference to Iran, “Chinese side expressed support for the Kingdom in maintaining its security and stability and affirmed its opposition to any actions that would interfere in the internal affairs of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and rejects any attacks targeting civilians, civilian facilities, territories, and Saudi interests.”

However, Tehran has chosen to ignore all this and instead zeroed in on a particular passage in the China-GCC joint statement to vent its displeasure. The relevant formulation stated: “The leaders affirmed their support for all peaceful efforts, including the initiative and endeavors of the United Arab Emirates to reach a peaceful solution to the issue of the three islands; Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb, and Abu Musa, through bilateral negotiations in accordance with the rules of international law, and to resolve this issue in accordance with international legitimacy.”

Prima facie, there is nothing explosive here, but Tehran took umbrage that Beijing ignored the Iranian stance that the issue is “non-negotiable” and concerns the country’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Iranian commentators and officials have alleged that “China appeared to be taking sides in the dispute.” The Chinese ambassador was summoned to the Iranian foreign ministry and President Ebrahim Raisi has voiced displeasure mentioning China. (See the furious commentary in Tehran Times entitled [*China’s wrong move on the rotten rope of Persian Gulf Cooperation Council*](#).)

How far this histrionics is to be taken seriously is hard to tell at this point. Tehran’s real grouse could be two-fold: one, that China-Saudi relationship is acquiring gravitas and it may incrementally relegate Iran to a second tier in regional politics.

Of course, Iran has a promising partnership with Russia but that is quintessentially a geopolitical matrix with variables subject to the twists and turns of Moscow’s confrontation with the West under the conditions of sanctions. Meanwhile, the impasse in the nuclear negotiations in Vienna precludes Iran’s normalization vis-a-vis the “collective West.”

The joint statement only perfunctorily takes note of “their determination to develop cooperation and coordination in defense fields” and of the two countries “cooperating in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy.” But defense ties and nuclear cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia have a long history. Nobody will be the wiser, as the Saudis and Chinese officials are known to be in discussion regarding payment mechanisms in local currencies for certain types of transactions.

In the final analysis, Iran can only blame itself. It took an early lead over Saudi Arabia with its much-vaunted 25-year \$400 billion road map for Chinese investments but lost the plot, and China likely would have weighed that Saudi Arabia has far more to offer as economic partner than Iran in the near and medium term.

The Saudis know how to put the money where the mouth is; they are not dogmatic; and, Vision 2030 is a honeycomb of mega projects. And in Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, they have a decisive leadership. As for China, its economy is slowing down and there is a pressing need to boost exports.

Indeed, the decision on holding biennial Chinese-Saudi summits ensures that the top-down approach of management, which is characteristic of both countries, is closely monitored and adjusted according to needs. Iran, on the other hand, can be an exasperating partner, given its multiple decision-making levels and contrarian autarchic policies.

Most certainly, China is also attracted by Saudi Arabia’s clout in the Arab world as a key factor with the potential to help advance the BRI regionally in the post-pandemic environment.

Tehran has reason to feel worried that the regional balance may shift in favor of Saudi Arabia. It cannot be lost on Tehran that the historicity of Xi’s visit to Saudi Arabia lies in the recreation of the history playing out in West Asia since the secret meeting between the then U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt and King Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia off Alexandria in 1945.

Author Bio:

This article was produced in partnership by [Indian Punchline](#) and [Globetrotter](#).

M.K. Bhadrakumar is a former Indian diplomat.

EU Cracks A Gentle Whip At Iran



M.K. Bhadrakumar - Photo: YouTube

The European Union has returned to the ritual of sanctioning Iran to leverage its foreign and security policies. The highlight of the EU Foreign Affairs Council ministerial meeting in Brussels on Monday was the imposition of sanctions against Iran over a range of issues.

The issues were “the unacceptable repression of the ongoing protests and the worsening human rights situation” in Iran, Iran’s military cooperation with Russia, including delivery of drones deployed against Ukraine, the prospects of renewal of the JCPOA as well as regional security.

The Council added [20 individuals and one entity](#) to the EU’s existing Iran human rights sanctions regime plus four individuals and four entities for the development and delivery of drones used by Russia in Ukraine.

While imposing these sanctions, EU demands that those responsible for the killing of Mahsa Amini must be held accountable; Iranian authorities should ensure “transparent and credible investigations to clarify the number of deaths and arrests”, and release all non-violent protesters and provide due process to all detainees and lift restrictions on internet access and unblock instant messaging platforms.

The EU Council threatened that it “will consider all the options at its disposal” to address the situation arising out of the death of Mahsa Amini and the way Iranian security forces handled the demonstrations.

Those sanctioned include top executives of Iran Broadcasting, “which is notorious for being a regime mouthpiece,” Iran’s Deputy Minister of Interior and some IRGC commanders. Equally, Gen. Hamid Vahedi, Iran’s chief of air force, has been put on sanctions list for Iran’s “military support” for Russia’s war in Ukraine.

Ironically, while the EU Council meeting charged ahead on Iran sanctions, it failed to reach consensus on the expected 9th sanctions package on Russia, “against the Kremlin, for escalating its aggression against Ukraine.” Borrell said the Council of Ministers could not agree “to react to the latest escalation,” but he expected an approval of the new tough package during this week.

On the whole, Borrell was in a mellowed mood, though, claiming that the EU is making a careful distinction between punishing Iran on its human rights record and military support to Russia and the Iranian nuclear program.

As he put it, “You will understand that, in this situation the JCPOA is in a very difficult situation. But I think that we do not have a better option than the JCPOA to ensure that Iran does not develop nuclear weapons. This remains in our own interest.”

Borrell disclosed that he talks “quite often” with Iran’s foreign minister and “We share, we disagree, but, at least, we talk to each other. I think that diplomacy is here to keep the channels of communication open in any circumstances. I think that it was good that, before the Council took this [sanctions] decision today, [I could inform the Minister](#) and he could explain [to] me what is happening and I explain [to] him my concerns. And these concerns brought to these decisions.”

[Borrell said](#): “I want to make a clear difference between the nuclear deal... and the decision taken by the Foreign Affairs Council on the issue of human rights and supply of arms to Russia. They are two different things.

“Certainly, this does not create the best atmosphere to advance in any kind of issue in the relationship between the European Union and Iran. But the nuclear deal is not an issue of the relationship between the European Union and Iran: it is something that goes further, many others are involved. The JCPOA is not just the

European Union and Iran.”

Unsurprisingly, Tehran has hit back by [announcing its own sanctions](#) on several EU and British officials and entities “over their deliberate support of terrorism and terrorist groups, and their incitement to terrorism, violence and hatred, which have caused unrest, violence, terrorist acts and violation of human rights against the Iranian nation.”

Looking ahead, the big question is whether Tehran accepts the “Borrell way” of selective engagement—even if he took his Iranian counterpart into confidence. The EU will selectively engage with Tehran on the JCPOA because it is in the interests of the collective West, especially the Biden Administration, which would like the door to be kept open to resume the negotiations with Iran in Vienna that were suspended in August.

The energy crisis in Europe is a compelling factor here. Nonetheless, the EU probably also shares the Biden Administration’s estimation that the current disturbances in Iran cannot be easily suppressed. On the other hand, Tehran cannot be expected to compromise on any perceived challenge to the regime.

Also, the EU may have acted excessively by sanctioning Imam Sayyid Ahmad Khatami, a senior cleric and influential conservative and principalist politician who also happens to be a member of the powerful Guardian Council as well as the Assembly of Experts, who was appointed by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as Tehran’s “substitute” Friday prayer leader in 2005, a position he holds ever since.

In the final analysis, the trail of linkages outlined by Borrell ultimately leads to Moscow. Basically, the EU is messaging that JCPOA (lifting of western sanctions) will be conditional on Iran’s willingness to roll back its deepening ties with Russia.

The drone part is only the tip of the iceberg; what really causes uneasiness in Washington and Brussels is that Russia may borrow from Iran’s toolbox to undercut western sanctions. Iran’s geography as well as its geopolitics makes it a unique partner for Russia today. (See my article [U.S. internationalizes Iran’s unrest](#), Asia Times)

Tehran is unlikely to budge on its firm handling of the unrest in the country.

Indeed, there is remarkable consistency in Iran's political history through the past 4 decades that there can be no compromises on the challenges to the fundamentals of the Islamic regime that came into existence through the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Clearly, the western powers are barking up the wrong tree—knowingly or unknowingly.

The [defiant remarks](#) of the Commander-in-Chief of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps Major General Hossein Salami recently—the stark warning by the general that Iran today has “achieved all the military technologies in the world”—should leave the Biden Administration in no doubt.

That said, on the resumption of the JCPOA talks with the United States, Tehran remains interested.

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Author Bio:

M.K. Bhadrakumar is a former Indian diplomat.

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