Chomsky: Peace Talks In Ukraine "Will Get Nowhere" If US Keeps Refusing To Join

Noam Chomsky

As Russia steps up its assault on Ukraine and its forces advance on Kyiv, peace talks between the two sides were scheduled to resume today for the fourth time, but have now been postponed until tomorrow. Unfortunately, some opportunities for a peace agreement have already been squandered, so it's hard to be optimistic about when the war will end. Regardless of when or how the war ends, though, its impact is already being felt across the international security system, as the rearmament of Europe shows. The Russian invasion of Ukraine also complicates the urgent fight against the climate crisis. The war takes a heavy toll on Ukraine and on the environment, but it also gives the fossil fuel industry extra leverage among governments.

In the interview that follows, world-renowned scholar and dissident Noam Chomsky shares his insights about the prospects for peace in Ukraine and how this war may impact our efforts to combat global warming.

Noam Chomsky, who is internationally recognized as one of the most important intellectuals alive, 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, while a fourth round of negotiations was scheduled to take place today between Russian and Ukrainian representatives, it is now postponed until tomorrow, and it still seems unlikely that peace will be reached in Ukraine any time soon. Ukrainians don't appear likely to surrender, and Putin seems determined to continue his invasion. In that context, what do you think of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's response to Vladimir Putin's four core demands, which were (a) cease military action, (b) acknowledge Crimea as Russian territory, (c) amend the Ukrainian constitution to enshrine neutrality, and (d) recognize the separatist republics in eastern Ukraine?

Noam Chomsky: Before responding, I would like to stress the crucial issue that must be in the forefront of all discussions of this terrible tragedy: We must find a way to bring this war to an end before it escalates, possibly to utter devastation of Ukraine and unimaginable catastrophe beyond. The only way is a negotiated settlement. Like it or not, this must provide some kind of escape hatch for Putin, or the worst will happen. Not victory, but an escape hatch. These concerns must be uppermost in our minds.

I don't think that Zelensky should have simply accepted Putin's demands. I think his public response on March 7 was judicious and appropriate.

In these remarks, Zelensky recognized that joining NATO is not an option for Ukraine. He also insisted, rightly, that the opinions of people in the Donbas region, now occupied by Russia, should be a critical factor in determining some form of settlement. He is, in short, reiterating what would very likely have been a path for preventing this tragedy — though we cannot know, because the U.S. refused to try.

As has been understood for a long time, decades in fact, for Ukraine to join NATO would be rather like Mexico joining a China-run military alliance, hosting joint maneuvers with the Chinese army and maintaining weapons aimed at Washington. To insist on Mexico's sovereign right to do so would surpass idiocy (and, fortunately, no one brings this up). Washington's insistence on Ukraine's sovereign right to join NATO is even worse, since it sets up an insurmountable barrier to a peaceful resolution of a crisis that is already a shocking crime and will soon become much worse unless resolved — by the negotiations that

Washington refuses to join.

That's quite apart from the comical spectacle of the posturing about sovereignty by the world's leader in brazen contempt for the doctrine, ridiculed all over the Global South though the U.S. and the West in general maintain their impressive discipline and take the posturing seriously, or at least pretend to do so.

Zelensky's proposals considerably narrow the gap with Putin's demands and provide an opportunity to carry forward the diplomatic initiatives that have been undertaken by France and Germany, with limited Chinese support. Negotiations might succeed or might fail. The only way to find out is to try. Of course, negotiations will get nowhere if the U.S. persists in its adamant refusal to join, backed by the virtually united commissariat, and if the press continues to insist that the public remain in the dark by refusing even to report Zelensky's proposals.

In fairness, I should add that on March 13, the *New York Times* did publish a call for diplomacy that would carry forward the "virtual summit" of France-Germany-China, while offering Putin an "offramp," distasteful as that is. The article was written by Wang Huiyao, president of a Beijing nongovernmental think tank.

It also seems to me that, in some quarters, peace in Ukraine is hardly on top of the agenda. For example, there are plenty of voices both in the U.S. and in U.K. urging Ukraine to keep on fighting (although western governments have ruled out sending troops to defend Ukraine), probably in the hopes that the continuation of the war, in conjunction with the economic sanctions, may lead to regime change in Moscow. Yet, isn't it the case that even if Putin actually falls from power, it would still be necessary to negotiate a peace treaty with whatever Russia government comes next, and that compromises would have to be made for the withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukraine?

We can only speculate about the reasons for U.S.-U.K. total concentration on warlike and punitive measures, and refusal to join in the one sensible approach to ending the tragedy. Perhaps it is based on hope for regime change. If so, it is both criminal and foolish. Criminal because it perpetuates the vicious war and cuts off hope for ending the horrors, foolish because it is quite likely that if Putin is overthrown someone even worse will take over. That has been a consistent pattern in elimination of leadership in criminal organizations for many years, matters discussed very convincingly by Andrew Cockburn.

And at best, as you say, it would leave the problem of settlement where it stands.

Another possibility is that Washington is satisfied with how the conflict is proceeding. As we have discussed, in his criminal foolishness, Putin provided Washington with an enormous gift: firmly establishing the U.S.-run Atlanticist framework for Europe and cutting off the option of an independent "European common home," a long-standing issue in world affairs as far back as the origin of the Cold War. I personally am reluctant to go as far as the highly knowledgeable sources we discussed earlier who conclude that Washington planned this outcome, but it's clear enough that it has eventuated. And, possibly, Washington planners see no reason to act to change what is underway.

It is worth noticing that most of the world is keeping apart from the awful spectacle underway in Europe. One telling illustration is sanctions. Political analyst John Whitbeck has produced a map of sanctions against Russia: the U.S. and the rest of the Anglosphere, Europe and some of East Asia. None in the Global South, which is watching, bemused, as Europe reverts to its traditional pastime of mutual slaughter while relentlessly pursuing its vocation of destroying whatever else it chooses to within its reach: Yemen, Palestine, and far more. Voices in the Global South condemn Putin's brutal crime, but do not conceal the supreme hypocrisy of western posturing about crimes that are a bare fraction of their own regular practices, right to the present.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine may very well change the global order, especially with the likely emergence of the militarization of the European Union. What does the change in Germany's Russia strategy — i.e., its rearmament and the apparent end of Ostpolitik — mean for Europe and global diplomacy?

The major effect, I suspect, will be what I mentioned: more firm imposition of the U.S.-run, NATO-based Atlanticist model and curtailing once again the repeated efforts to create a European system independent of the U.S., a "third force" in world affairs, as it was sometimes called. That has been a fundamental issue since the end of World War II. Putin has settled it for the time being by providing Washington with its fondest wish: a Europe so subservient that an Italian university tried to ban a series of lectures on Dostoyevsky, to take just one of many egregious examples of how Europeans are making fools of themselves.

Meanwhile, it seems likely that Russia will drift further into China's orbit,

becoming even more of a declining kleptocratic raw materials producer than it is now. China is likely to persist in its programs of incorporating more and more of the world into the development-and-investment system based on the Belt-and-Road initiative, the "maritime silk road" that passes through the UAE into the Middle East, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The U.S. seems intent on responding with its comparative advantage: force. Right now, that includes Biden's programs of "encirclement" of China by military bases and alliances, while perhaps even seeking to improve the U.S. economy as long as it is framed as competing with China. Just what we are observing now.

There is a brief period in which course corrections remain possible. It may soon come to an end as U.S. democracy, such as it still is, continues on its self-destructive course.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine may also have dealt a severe blow to our hopes of tackling the climate crisis, at least in this decade. Do you have any comments to make on this rather bleak observation of mine?

Appropriate comments surpass my limited literary skills. The blow is not only severe, but it may also be terminal for organized human life on earth, and for the innumerable other species that we are in the process of destroying with abandon.

In the midst of the Ukraine crisis, the IPCC released its 2022 report, by far the most dire warning it has yet produced. The report made it very clear that we must take firm measures now, with no delay, to cut back the use of fossil fuels and to move toward renewable energy. The warnings received brief notice, and then our strange species returned to devoting scarce resources to destruction and rapidly increasing its poisoning of the atmosphere, while blocking efforts for extricating itself from its suicidal path.

The fossil fuel industry can scarcely suppress its joy in the new opportunities the invasion has provided to accelerate its destruction of life on earth. In the U.S., the denialist party, which has successfully blocked Biden's limited efforts to deal with the existential crisis, is likely to be back in power soon, so that it can resume the dedication of the Trump administration to destroy everything as quickly and effectively as possible.

These words might sound harsh. They are not harsh enough.

The game is not over. There still is time for radical course correction. The means are understood. If the will is there, it is possible to avert catastrophe and to move on to a much better world. The invasion of Ukraine has indeed been a severe blow to these prospects. Whether it constitutes a terminal blow or not is for us to decide.

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).

Climate Mitigation Isn't Just A

Matter Of Ethics; It’s Life And Death

James K. Boyce – umass.edu

The climate crisis worsens with each passing year — and even the current levels of warming are disastrous, affecting ecosystems as well as social and environmental conditions of health. People in the world’s poorest countries remain most vulnerable to the crisis. The world’s governments are slow to react to the greatest challenge facing humanity today, even though potential solutions are not in short supply, with the transition to a green economy offering the most effective pathway to tackling the problem of global warming at its roots.

There are, in addition, intermediate steps that can be taken toward climate stabilization, such as carbon pricing and even the adoption of a universal basic income scheme as a means to counter the effects of global warming. Meanwhile, policy frameworks for climate adaptation are urgently needed, as renowned economist James K. Boyce points out in this interview. Boyce is professor emeritus of economics and senior fellow at the Political Economy Research Institute of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. He received his PhD in economics from Oxford University and is the author of scores of books, including, most recently, *The Case for Carbon Dividends* (2019) and *Economics for People and the Planet* (2021). He received the 2017 Leontief Prize for Advancing the

Frontiers of Economic Thought.

C.J. Polychroniou: The climate crisis is the biggest problem facing humanity in the 21st century. In the effort to avoid a greenhouse apocalypse, competing approaches to climate action have been advanced, ranging from outright technological solutions to an economic and social revolution as envisioned in the Green New Deal project and everything in between. Two of those "in between" approaches for cutting carbon emissions are cap-and-trade, a system already implemented in the state of California, and carbon pricing and carbon dividends, which is the approach you are advocating. Why do we need to put a price on carbon? How does carbon pricing work, and what are its benefits?

James K. Boyce: First, let me say that I do not think it is useful to invoke the language of a coming "apocalypse." It's a vision with a lot of historical baggage, much of it downright reactionary, as my partner Betsy Hartmann explains in her book, *The America Syndrome: War, Apocalypse, and Our Call to Greatness* (Seven Stories Press, 2019). It misrepresents the climate crisis as a cliff edge, an all-or-nothing question akin to nuclear war, as opposed to an unfolding process that has ever-worsening consequences for humans and other living things. And it can instill a sense of despair and hopelessness that is deeply counterproductive. I agree with the late Raymond Williams that the task of the true radical is "to make hope possible, not despair convincing."

Something similar can be said about the contrast between technological fixes and revolutionary transformations. Economic and social revolution is a process, too, not a one-off affair. Technological change can help to propel institutional change, and vice versa, and often there is an intimate connection between the two. I do not think we will solve the climate crisis with new technologies alone. The transition to a clean energy economy will require profound changes not only in how we relate to the natural world but also in how we relate to each other. I have argued that it will require a narrowing of inequalities and a deepening of democracy. But it would be folly to sit aside, waiting for social and economic revolution, before tackling the climate problem.

Cap-and-trade and carbon dividend policies both put a price on carbon. Instead of being able to dump carbon into the atmosphere free of charge (more precisely, free of monetary charge, since nature is charging us big time), pollution would carry a price tag. But there are crucial differences between these two policies.

Cap-and-trade gives free pollution permits to corporations, up to the limit set by the cap. Consumers feel the bite in higher prices for transportation fuels, heating and electricity, just as they do when the oil cartel restricts supplies. The extra money they pay goes as windfall profits into the coffers of the corporations that received free permits. This may blunt political opposition to a carbon price from fossil fuel lobbyists, but their first preference remains no cap at all, as was shown in the repeat debacles of efforts to pass cap-and-trade bills in Washington, D.C. in the first decade of the century.

Carbon dividend policies put a price on carbon, too, either via a cap with auctioned (not free) permits or by means of a tax. But instead of fueling windfall profits, the money from higher prices goes directly back to the public in equal per-person payments, consistent with the principle that we all own the gifts of nature — in this case, the limited capacity of the biosphere to absorb carbon emissions — in common and equal measure. As I discuss in my book, *The Case for Carbon Dividends* (Polity Press, 2019), this is an example of universal property. The right to receive carbon dividends cannot be bought or sold, or accumulated in a few hands, or owned by corporations. Universal property is individual, inalienable and perfectly egalitarian. This new kind of property, which is more akin to traditional common property than to private property or state property, could be a cornerstone for what is sometimes called "libertarian socialism."

It's not that we simply need to put a price — any price — on carbon, although anything is better than the prevailing *de facto* price of zero. What we need to do is to keep the fossil fuels in the ground, to curtail their extraction at a pace and scale ambitious enough to stabilize the Earth's climate by the middle of the century. This is the goal of the Paris Agreement. In practice, it means that high-consuming countries, like the United States, must cut their use of fossil fuels by about 8 or 9 percent per year, year after year, between now and 2050. The easiest way to arrive at the "right" price on carbon is to cap the amount of fossil fuels we allow to enter our economy to meet this trajectory. For each ton of carbon they sell, fossil fuel firms would have to surrender a permit. They would buy permits (up to the limit set by the cap that tightens over time) at auctions. This is not rocket science. Quarterly auctions have been held since 2009 under the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative for power plants in the northeastern states of the U.S. The carbon price comes about as a side effect of keeping fossil fuels in the ground, not as an end in itself.

n addition to climate stabilization, a side benefit of carbon dividends is that they would take a modest step toward reducing economic inequality, which has reached obscene levels in the U.S. and many other countries. Most households would come out ahead financially with carbon dividends, receiving more in dividends than they pay in higher fuel prices, for the simple reason that their carbon footprints are smaller than average. High-income households with their outsized consumption of carbon, and everything else, would pay more than they get back, but they can afford it.

You have also argued for a universal basic income as a solution to inequality and the effects of global warming. How would a universal income be funded, and would it be an addition to existing welfare programs or a replacement for them?

Correction: Universal basic income can be *part of* the solution. Guaranteed employment can also be part of the solution, and as my colleagues Bob Pollin and his coauthors have shown, the clean energy transition will generate millions of jobs. The extent to which existing welfare programs become redundant would depend on how much money we're talking about. A big advantage of universal income, compared to means-tested welfare payments, is that it unites society rather than dividing it between the welfare-eligible poor and everyone else. Universality helps to ensure political durability, as we've seen with Social Security and Medicare here in the U.S.

For universal basic income, a key question is how to pay for it. Most proposals rely on government funding. But redistributive taxation can be a heavy lift, and its durability is never certain since it depends on the vagaries of party politics. This is one reason I favor universal property as a source of universal basic income [universal property refers to the idea of a universal birthright to an equal share of co-inherited wealth]. Carbon dividends are one example. In his new book, *Ours: The Case for Universal Property* (Polity Press, 2021), Peter Barnes discusses a number of other possibilities.

We now know that dramatic mass climate catastrophe is inevitable, especially for mega-cities and coastal populations. What are the sorts of changes (involving migration, changes in how cities are structured, changes in how nations relate to each other, technologies, etc.) that could help humans as a global community weather these catastrophes without massive human deaths? And what are the sorts of pressures and dynamics (protests, legislation, international cooperation)

that would actually make these changes imaginable to implement in time?

Every year that passes without serious policies to keep fossil carbon in the ground, where it belongs, increases the suffering that climate change will inflict. Coastal populations will be among the most seriously affected, but they will not be alone. Drought-prone regions in Africa, for example, are at grave risk, too.

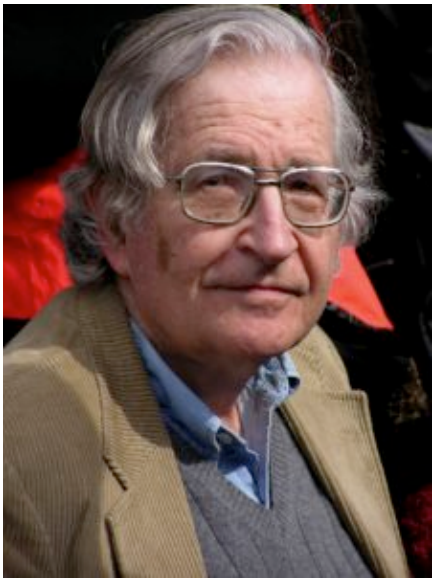
Not long ago, proponents of action to halt climate change ("mitigation" in the official lingo), including many governments in the Global South, were averse to discussing adaptation, fearing that it would let the big polluters off the mitigation hook. Times have changed. Today, the need for adaptation is urgent and undeniable. The key questions are how adaptation resources will be allocated across and within countries, and who will foot the bill.

In principle, the 1992 Framework Convention on Climate Change, an international treaty which today has near-universal membership, addresses the "who will pay" question by saying that countries will contribute "in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities." The advanced industrialized countries bear greater responsibility and have greater capabilities, so they should pay for adjustment costs accordingly. Whether and to what extent this principle will be translated into concrete action remains an open question. So far, the results have not been encouraging.

The issue of how scarce resources for adaptation will be allocated — and whatever happens, they will be scarce relative to needs — is a critical question that has yet to receive much serious attention. If allocation obeys the default setting prescribed by neoclassical economics, the lives and properties of richer people will get priority over those of the poor because that the rich have greater ability (and hence willingness) to pay. Sea walls will be constructed to protect the "most valuable" real estate in Manhattan and Mumbai, for example, diverting flood waters to the locales where poor people live. In my view, this would be a travesty, adding injury to insult. If we believe that a clean and safe environment is a human right, not a commodity that should be allocated on the basis of purchasing power, then adaptation policies ought to prioritize those at greatest risk regardless of their ability to pay. Protests, legislation, international cooperation — all of these will be needed to make this happen. This is not just a matter of economics and ethics; it's a matter of life and death.

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).

Noam Chomsky: A No-Fly Zone Over Ukraine Could Unleash Untold Violence



Noam Chomsky ~ Photo: en.wikipedia.org

As war rages on in Ukraine, diplomacy continues to take a back seat in spite of the heartbreaking devastation Russia's invasion has wrought. The post-World War II global architecture is simply incapable of regulating issues of war and peace, and the West continues to reject Russia's security concerns. Moreover, there are calls in some quarters for a declaration of a no-fly zone over Ukraine, although the actual enforcement of such a policy would quickly escalate violence, with potential consequences nearly too horrible to speak. The idea of a no-fly zone is profoundly dangerous, warns Noam Chomsky in this exclusive interview for *Truthout*.

C.J. Polychroniou: Noam, nearly two weeks into the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russian forces continue to pummel cities and towns while more than 140 countries voted in favor of a UN nonbinding resolution condemning the invasion and calling for a withdrawal of Russian troops. In light of Russia's failure to comply with rules of international law, isn't there something to be said at the present juncture about the institutions and norms of the postwar international order? It's quite obvious that the Westphalian state-centric world order cannot regulate the geopolitical behavior of state actors with respect to issues of war/peace and even sustainability. Isn't it therefore a matter of survival that we develop a new global normative architecture?

Noam Chomsky: If it really is literally a matter of survival, then we are lost, because it cannot be achieved in any relevant time frame. The most we can hope

for now is strengthening what exists, which is very weak. And that will be hard enough.

The great powers constantly violate international law, as do smaller ones when they can get away with it, commonly under the umbrella of a great power protector, as when Israel illegally annexes the Syrian Golan Heights and Greater Jerusalem — tolerated by Washington, authorized by Donald Trump, who also authorized Morocco's illegal annexation of Western Sahara.

Under international law, it is the responsibility of the UN Security Council to keep the peace and, if deemed necessary, to authorize force. Superpower aggression doesn't reach the Security Council: U.S. wars in Indochina, the U.S.-U.K. invasion of Iraq, or Putin's invasion of Ukraine, to take three textbook examples of the "supreme international crime" for which Nazis were hanged at Nuremberg. More precisely, the U.S. is untouchable. Russian crimes at least receive some attention.

The Security Council may consider other atrocities, such as the French-British-Israeli invasion of Egypt and the Russian invasion of Hungary in 1956. But the veto blocks further action. The former was reversed by orders of a superpower (the U.S.), which opposed the timing and manner of the aggression. The latter crime, by a superpower, could only be protested.

Superpower contempt for the international legal framework is so common as to pass almost unnoticed. In 1986, the International Court of Justice condemned Washington for its terrorist war (in legalistic jargon, "unlawful use of force") against Nicaragua, ordering it to desist and pay substantial reparations. The U.S. dismissed the judgment with contempt (with the support of the liberal press) and escalated the attack. The UN Security Council did try to react with a resolution calling on all nations to observe international law, mentioning no one, but everyone understood the intention. The U.S. vetoed it, proclaiming loud and clear that it is immune to international law. It has disappeared from history.

It is rarely recognized that contempt for international law also entails contempt for the U.S. Constitution, which we are supposed to treat with the reverence accorded to the Bible. Article VI of the Constitution establishes the UN Charter as "the supreme law of the land," binding on elected officials, including, for example, every president who resorts to the threat of force ("all options are open") — banned by the Charter. There are learned articles in the legal literature arguing

that the words don't mean what they say. They do.

It's all too easy to continue. One outcome, which we have discussed, is that in U.S. discourse, including scholarship, it is now *de rigueur* to reject the UN-based international order in favor of a "rule-based international order," with the tacit understanding that the U.S. effectively set the rules.

Even if international law (and the U.S. Constitution) were to be obeyed, its reach would be limited. It would not reach as far as Russia's horrendous Chechnya wars, levelling the capital city of Grozny, perhaps a hideous forecast for Kyiv unless a peace settlement is reached; or in the same years, Turkey's war against Kurds, killing tens of thousands, destroying thousands of towns and villages, driving hundreds of thousands to miserable slums in Istanbul, all strongly supported by the Clinton administration which escalated its huge flow of arms as the crimes increased. International law does not bar the U.S. specialty of murderous sanctions to punish "successful defiance," or stealing the funds of Afghans while they face mass starvation. Nor does it bar torturing a million children in Gaza or a million Uighurs sent to "re-education camps." And all too much more.

How can this be changed? Not much is likely to be achieved by establishing a new "parchment barrier," to borrow James Madison's phrase, referring to mere words on paper. A more adequate framework of international order may be useful for educational and organizing purposes — as indeed international law is. But it is not enough to protect the victims. That can only be achieved by compelling the powerful to cease their crimes — or in the longer run, undermining their power altogether. That's what many thousands of courageous Russians are doing right now in their remarkable efforts to impede Putin's war machine. It is what Americans have done in protesting the many crimes of their state, facing much less serious repression, with good effect even if insufficient.

Steps can be taken to construct a less dangerous and more humane world order. For all its flaws, the European Union is a step forward beyond what existed before. The same is true of the African Union, however limited it remains. And in the Western hemisphere, the same is true for such initiatives as UNASUR [the Union of South American Nations] and CELAC [the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States], the latter seeking Latin American-Caribbean integration separate from the U.S.-dominated Organization of American States.

The questions arise constantly in one or another form. Up to virtually the day of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the crime very possibly could have been averted by pursuing options that were well understood: Austrian-style neutrality for Ukraine, some version of Minsk II federalism reflecting the actual commitments of Ukrainians on the ground. There was little pressure to induce Washington to pursue peace. Nor did Americans join in the worldwide ridicule of the odes to sovereignty on the part of the superpower that is in a class by itself in its brutal disdain for the notion.

The options still remain, though narrowed after the criminal invasion.

Putin demonstrated the same reflexive resort to violence although peaceful options were available. It's true that the U.S. continued to dismiss what even high U.S. officials and top-ranking diplomats have long understood to be legitimate Russian security concerns, but options other than criminal violence remained open. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe observers had been reporting sharply increased violence in the Donbas region, which many — not just Russia — charge was largely at Ukrainian initiative. Putin could have sought to establish that charge, if it is correct, and to bring it to international attention. That would have strengthened his position.

More significantly, Putin could have pursued the opportunities, which were real, to appeal to Germany and France to carry forward the prospects for a "common European home" along the lines proposed by De Gaulle and Gorbachev, a European system with no military alliances from the Atlantic to the Urals, even beyond, replacing the Atlanticist NATO-based system of subordination to Washington. That has been the core background issue for a long time, heightened during the current crisis. A "common European home" offers many advantages to Europe. Intelligent diplomacy might have advanced the prospects.

Instead of pursuing diplomatic options, Putin reached for the revolver, an all-too-common reflex of power. The result is devastating for Ukraine, with the worst probably still to come. The outcome is also a very welcome gift to Washington, as Putin has succeeded in establishing the Atlanticist system even more solidly than before. The gift is so welcome that some sober and well-informed analysts have speculated that it was Washington's goal all along.

We should be thinking hard about these matters. One useful exercise is to

compare the rare appearance of “jaw-jaw” with the deluge on “war-war,” to borrow Churchill’s rhetoric.

Perhaps peacemakers are indeed the blessed. If so, the good Lord doesn’t have to put in overtime hours.

Speaking of the need for a new global architecture and diplomatic practice to adopt to the present-day global dynamic, Putin repeated, in a recent telephone conversation he had with French President Emmanuel Macron, the list of Russia’s grievances against the West, and hinted at a way out of the crisis. Yet, there was, again, rejection of Putin’s demands and, even more inexplicably, complete suppression of this ray of light offered by Putin. Do you wish to comment on this matter?

Regrettably, it is not inexplicable. Rather, it is entirely normal and predictable.

Buried in the press report of the Putin-Macron conversation, with the routine inflammatory headline about the goals of Putin, was a brief report of what Putin actually said: “In its own readout of the call, the Kremlin said that Mr. Putin had told his French counterpart that his main goal was ‘the demilitarization and neutral status of Ukraine.’ Those goals, the Kremlin said, ‘will be achieved no matter what.’”

In a rational world, this comment would be headlined, and commentators would be calling on Washington to seize what may be an opportunity to end the invasion before a major catastrophe that will devastate Ukraine and may even lead to terminal war if Putin is not offered an escape hatch from the disaster he has created. Instead, we’re hearing the usual “war-war” pronouncements, pretty much across the board, beginning with the renowned foreign policy analyst Thomas Friedman. Today *The New York Times*tough guy counsels, “Vladimir, you haven’t felt the half of it yet.”

Friedman’s essay is a celebration of the “cancellation of Mother Russia.” It may be usefully compared to his reaction to comparable or worse atrocities for which he shares responsibility. He is not alone.

That’s how things are in a very free but deeply conformist intellectual culture.

A rational response to Putin’s reiteration of his “main goal” would be to take him

up on it and to offer what has long been understood to be the basic framework for peaceful resolution: to repeat, "Austrian-style neutrality for Ukraine, some version of Minsk II federalism reflecting the actual commitments of Ukrainians on the ground." Rationality would also entail doing this without the pathetic posturing about sovereign rights for which we have utter contempt — and which are not infringed any more than Mexico's sovereignty is infringed by the fact that it cannot join a Chinese-based military alliance and host joint Mexico-China military maneuvers and Chinese offensive weapons aimed at the U.S.

All of this is feasible, but it assumes something remote, a rational world, and furthermore, a world in which Washington is not gloating about the marvelous gift that Putin has just presented to it: a fully subordinate Europe, with no nonsense about escaping the control of the Master.

The message for us is the same as always, and as always simple and crystal clear. We must bend every effort to create a survivable world.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky condemned NATO's decision not to close the sky over Ukraine. An understandable reaction given the catastrophe inflicted on his homeland by Russian armed forces, but wouldn't a declaration of a no-fly zone be a step closer to World War III?

As you say, Zelensky's plea is understandable. Responding to it would very likely lead to the obliteration of Ukraine and well beyond. The fact that it is even discussed in the U.S. is astonishing. The idea is madness. A no-fly zone means that the U.S. Air Force would not only be attacking Russian planes but would also be bombing Russian ground installations that provide anti-aircraft support for Russian forces, with whatever "collateral damage" ensues. Is it really difficult to comprehend what follows?

As things stand, China may be the only great power out there with the ability to stop the war in Ukraine. In fact, Washington itself seems to be eager to get the Chinese involved, as Xi Jinping could be the only leader to force Putin to reconsider his actions in Ukraine. Do you see China playing the role of a peace mediator between Russia and Ukraine, and perhaps even emerge soon as a global peace mediator?

China could try to assume this role, but it doesn't seem likely. Chinese analysts can see as easily as we can that there had always been a way to avert

catastrophe, along lines that we've discussed repeatedly in earlier interviews, briefly reiterated here. They can also see that while the options are diminished, it would still be possible to satisfy Putin's "main goal" in ways that would be beneficial to all, infringing on no basic rights. And they can see that the U.S. government is not interested, nor the commentariat. They may see little inducement to plunge in.

It's not clear that they would even want to. They're doing well enough by keeping out of the conflict. They are continuing to integrate much of the world within the China-based investment and development system, with Turkey — a NATO member — very possible next in line.

China also knows that the Global South has little taste for "canceling Mother Russia" but would prefer to maintain relations. The South may well share the horror at the cruelty of the invasion, but their experiences are not those of Europe and the U.S. They are, after all, the traditional targets of European-U.S. brutality, alongside of which the suffering of Ukraine hardly stands out. The experiences and memories are shared by China from its "century of humiliation" and far more.

While the West may choose not to perceive this, China can certainly understand. I presume that they'll keep their distance and proceed on their current path.

Assuming that all diplomatic undertakings fail, is Russia really in a position to occupy an entire country the size of Ukraine? Couldn't Ukraine become Putin's Afghanistan? Indeed, back in December 2021, the head of the Russian Academy of Science's Center for Ukrainian Research, Viktor Mironenko, warned that Ukraine could become another Afghanistan. What are your thoughts on this matter? Hasn't Putin learned any lessons from Afghanistan?

If Russia does occupy Ukraine, its miserable experience in Afghanistan will resemble a picnic in the park.

We should bear in mind that the cases are quite different. The documentary record reveals that Russia invaded Afghanistan very reluctantly, several months after President Carter authorized the CIA to "provide … support to the Afghan insurgents" who were opposing a Russian-backed government — with the strong support if not initiative of National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, as he later proudly declared. There was never any basis for the frenzied pronouncements about Russian plans to take over the Middle East and beyond.

Again, George Kennan's quite isolated rejection of these claims was astute and accurate.

he U.S. provided strong support for the Mujahideen who were resisting the Russian invasion, not in order to help liberate Afghanistan but rather to "kill Soviet Soldiers," as explained by the CIA station chief in Islamabad who was running the operation.

For Russia, the cost was terrible, though of course, hardly a fraction of what Afghanistan suffered — continuing when the U.S.-backed Islamic fundamentalists ravaged the country after the Russians withdrew.

One hesitates even to imagine what occupying Ukraine would bring to its people, if not to the world.

It can be averted. That is the crucial point.

C J 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).

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).

Bruce Springsteen – Chimes Of Freedom (East Berlin 1988)

July 1988. One year before the fall of the Berlin wall, between 200.000 and 300.000 east-berliners witnessed this historical concert. In his speech, they recommended him not to say the word “wall” so he changed it for “barriers”. Epic historical moment.

GERMAN: Es ist schön in Ost-Berlin zu sein. Ich möchte euch sagen ich bin nicht hier für oder gegen eine Regierung, ich bin gekommen um rock’n’roll zu spielen für Ost-Berlinern, in der Hofnung dass eines Tages alle Barrieren obgeriesen warden.

ENGLISH: It’s nice to be in East Berlin. I want to tell you that I’m not here for or against any government, I have come to play rock’n’roll for the East-Berliners, in the hope that one day all barriers will be torn down.

Nationalizing Fossil Fuel Industry Is A Practical Solution To Rising Inflation

Prof.dr. Robert Pollin

Since mid-2020, inflation has been rising, with the level of average prices going up at a faster rate than it has since the early 1980s.
In January 2022, prices had increased by 7.5 percent compared to prices in January 2021, and it now looks like the U.S. may be stuck with higher inflation in 2022 and even beyond.

Why are prices rising so dramatically? Are we heading toward double-digit inflation? Can anything be done to curb inflation? How does inflation impact growth and unemployment? Renowned progressive economist Robert Pollin provides comprehensive responses to these questions in the exclusive interview for *Truthout* that follows. Pollin is distinguished professor of economics and co-director of the Political Economy Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

C.J. Polychroniou: Back in the 1970s, inflation was the word that was on everybody's lips. It was the longest stretch of inflation that the United States had experienced and seems to have been caused by a surge in oil prices. Since then, we've had a couple of other brief inflationary episodes, one in the late 1980s and another one in mid-2008, both of which were also caused by skyrocketing gas prices. Inflation returned with a vengeance in 2021, causing a lot of anxiety, and it's quite possible that we could be stuck with it throughout 2022. What's causing this inflation surge, and how likely is it that we could see a return to 1970s levels of inflation?

Robert Pollin: For the 12-month period ending this past January, inflation in the U.S economy was at 7.5 percent. This is the highest U.S. rate since 1981, when inflation was at 10.3 percent. Over the 30-year period from 1991 to 2020, U.S. inflation averaged 2.2 percent. The inflation rate for 2020 itself was 1.2 percent. Obviously, some new forces have come into play over the past year as the U.S. economy has been emerging out of the COVID-induced recession.

To understand these new forces, let's first be clear on what exactly we mean by the term "inflation." The 7.5 percent increase in inflation is measuring the average rise in prices for a broad basket of goods and services that a typical household will purchase over the course of a year. At least in principle, this includes everything — food, rent, medical expenses, child care, auto purchases and upkeep, gasoline, home heating fuel, phone services, internet connections and Netflix subscriptions.

In fact, prices for the individual items within this overall basket of goods and services have not all been rising at this average 7.5 percent rate. Rather, the 7.5 percent average figure includes big differences in price movements among individual components in the overall basket.

The biggest single factor driving up overall inflation rate is energy prices. Energy prices rose by 27 percent over the past year, and within the overall energy category, gasoline rose by 40 percent and heating oil by 46 percent. This spike in gasoline and heating oil prices, in turn, has fed into the total operating costs faced by nearly all businesses, since these businesses need gasoline and heating oil to function. Businesses therefore try to cover their increased gasoline and heating oil costs by raising their prices.

The second big factor is automobile prices, used cars in particular. The average price of used cars rose by 41 percent over the past year. High auto prices do also feed into the costs of other businesses, though not to as large an extent as energy costs.

The third big factor has been wage increases. Average wages rose by 4.0 percent over the past year. Here again, businesses will try to cover these increased wage costs through passing the costs onto consumers through higher prices. That said, we need to be clear on some details about the wage increases. First of all, for the average workers, their 4.0 percent wage increase is 3.5 percent below the 7.5 percent increase in prices for the average consumer basket. This tells us that, due to the 7.5 percent inflation rate, the workers' 4.0 percent wage increase ends up amounting to a 3.5 percent *pay cut* after we take account of what the workers can buy with their wages.

Second, not all workers have gotten this average 4.0 percent wage increase. Some have gotten more and others got less. In fact, some of the largest wage increases went to workers employed in hotels and restaurants (8.4 percent raises) and in nursing home facilities (6 percent raises). These workers were hard-hit by the COVID pandemic and recession, through the dangerous conditions in nursing homes and the full-scale lockdowns of restaurants and hotels. Finance industry employees also got big raises, at 8.1 percent, though in this case, hardly to compensate for hardships over the previous year. These raises rather reflect the dizzying rise of the U.S. stock market during COVID and after, all fueled by the Federal Reserve's $4 trillion bailout of Wall Street over the crisis.

What then are the key specifics underlying the overall inflation rise?

Let's consider car prices, energy prices and wages in turn:

Cars: What is pushing up these prices is the widely discussed breakdown in global supply chains, and in particular, the sharp fall in the supply of computer chips that are needed for manufacturing new cars. The supply chain breakdown is far more widespread than just the computer chip industry. But auto manufacturing is where the impact on overall inflation has been most acute to date. This is because the demand for used car purchases spiked when the supply of new cars coming off of global assembly lines contracted.

Car prices will start falling when the computer chip supply becomes replenished. But this may not happen for several more months. In any case, both for the short term and over the longer term as well, the demand for car ownership can and should be reduced, through increasing the availability and quality of public transportation, along with people carpooling to work, and biking or walking when that is a realistic option. All of these ways to reduce our dependency on private cars will also, of course, mean lowering the demand for gasoline. And let's not forget that when we burn less gasoline, we will then also reduce carbon dioxide emissions that are the primary cause of climate change.

Energy: Precisely because burning gasoline, heating oil, and other fossil fuel energy sources is the primary cause of climate change, what we most need to accomplish is to dramatically lower demand for fossil fuels. In other words, pushing fossil fuel prices back down is not helpful in terms of addressing the climate crisis since it would encourage greater fossil fuel consumption.

As such, government policy now needs to commit to both keeping fossil fuel energy prices high, but then to protect energy consumers from the impact of these high fossil fuel prices. This will require large-scale investments in energy efficiency, in all areas of buildings, transportation and industrial activity. Greatly expanding public transportation offerings is one place to start. Providing large subsidizes to retrofit residences with low-cost LED lights, improved insulation and high-efficiency electric heat pumps to replace inefficient boilers is another critical area. Government policy then needs to massively accelerate the production of clean renewable energy sources to supplant our existing fossil fuel energy infrastructure. It is already the case that the costs of generating electricity with

solar and wind power are at parity or lower than with fossil fuels. Of course, not all of these investments in energy efficiency and renewable energy will have an immediate impact. Therefore, for the immediate term, the government should provide people with energy tax rebates to compensate them for the impacts of any temporary spikes in energy prices.

The more basic solution here would be for the government to take over the U.S. fossil fuel industry. Under a nationalized fossil fuel industry, the necessary phase-out of fossil fuels as an energy source can proceed in an orderly fashion. The government could then set fossil fuel energy prices to reflect the needs of both consumers and the imperatives of the clean energy transition. At present, the U.S. government could purchase controlling interest in the three dominant U.S. oil and gas companies — ExxonMobil, Chevron and Conoco — for about $350 billion. This would be less than 10 percent of the $4 trillion that the Federal Reserve pumped into Wall Street during the COVID crisis. More generally, these costs should be understood as trivial because nationalization would end these corporations' relentless campaign of sabotaging the clean energy transition.

Wages: It is crucial to frame these current wage increases within the broader historical context. Over the past 50 years, the average wage for U.S. workers has stagnated (after accounting for inflation). Thus, as of January 2021, the average wage for nonsupervisory workers was at $25.18 an hour, while this figure for 1972, adjusted for inflation, was $25.28 per hour. This is while average labor productivity — the average amount each worker produces over the course of a day — has increased nearly 2.5-fold between 1972 and 2021. Thus, if average wages had risen in step with productivity gains, and no more, between 1972 and today, the average worker's wage last year would have been $61.94, not $25.18.

Indeed, a major factor keeping inflation low for the previous 30 years was the fact that workers didn't have the clout to bargain up their wages. Alan Greenspan, the chair of the Federal Reserve from 1987 to 2006, explicitly acknowledged this fact. He observed in 1995 that, even at low unemployment rates, U.S. workers had become "traumatized" by the loss of bargaining strength, resulting primarily from global outsourcing that pitted U.S. workers against those in relatively low-wage economies, such as China and Mexico. Greenspan was effectively describing what Karl Marx termed the "reserve army of labor," in Volume 1 of *Capital,* except that the reserve army now operates on a global scale.

Within this perspective, we certainly do not want to keep inflation down through preventing workers from receiving the wage increases they more than deserve. But this is exactly the core idea undergirding the approach advocated by a large chorus of orthodox economists such as Lawrence Summers. Their proposals entail the Federal Reserve increasing interest rates significantly, with the aim of reducing spending in the economy since it will then become more expensive to borrow money. The spending cutbacks will then raise the unemployment rate. Higher unemployment, in turn, will inculcate workers with a necessary fresh dose of trauma. Wage demands will correspondingly fall.

In short, this is a program to accomplish exactly the opposite of what the Biden administration has promised in terms of delivering increased well-being to U.S. workers post-COVID.

Are there any feasible alternatives to the Fed raising interest rates as a means of controlling inflation?

The Federal Reserve has held the short-term interest rate that it controls at near-zero since the onset of the COVID pandemic in March 2020. The Fed also held this interest rate at near zero for six years in the aftermath of the 2007-2009 Wall Street collapse and Great Recession. Generally speaking, it should be possible for interest rates to be higher than zero without causing the economy to collapse. Interest rates could therefore rise modestly and incrementally. But this is different than the Fed imposing large interest rate increases for the purpose of raising the unemployment rate and, thereby, decimating workers' bargaining strength.

An alternative program for addressing the current inflationary pressures should include:

-Responding to the full set of immediate supply-chain issues, starting with computer chip shortages. For example, expand public transportation and subsidize ride-sharing to dampen the demand for used cars while the computer chip bottlenecks are brought under control.

– Protect consumers from high energy prices through energy tax rebates and accelerating large-scale energy efficiency investments.

– Supporting ongoing wage increases. Businesses will have to absorb these

increased labor costs to some extent, and thus, on average, see their profit margins decline modestly. U.S. businesses cannot expect that wage stagnation will remain a feature of U.S. capitalism for another 50 years, even while labor productivity continues to increase steadily. To the extent that big corporations, in particular, try to push their increased labor costs onto consumers through raising prices, the Biden administration should aggressively enforce existing antitrust (i.e., anti-monopoly) policies to control these price mark-ups over labor costs. They have already begun to do so.

Considering these measures as a whole, they are not likely to bring the inflation rate down into the 2 percent range that the U.S. experienced between 1990 and 2020. Keeping inflation that low will almost certainly require exactly more decades of traumatized workers and wage stagnation. But by itself, an average inflation rate in the range of 3-4 percent, as opposed to 1-2 percent, is not a serious problem, as long as that somewhat higher inflation rate results from increased wages and a more equal distribution of the economy's overall income pie.

What is the impact of persistent inflation on economic growth and unemployment?

In fact, there is no consistent relationship between inflation, economic growth and unemployment. Rather, focusing now just on the high-income economies (i.e., those that make up the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) since the 1960s, relatively high inflation, even in the range of 10 percent or higher, has been associated with periods of both high growth and low growth, depending on the specific circumstances.

In the 1960s, higher inflation rates emerged because economic growth was strong, as supply bottlenecks, such as we are experiencing now, became more common. Workers were also generally more able to bargain up wages and gain an increased share of the economy's overall income pie. But facing such problems is certainly preferable to an economy operating at zero inflation that is also stuck in recession. As President Lyndon Johnson himself noted after U.S. inflation had arisen from 1.5 percent in 1965 to 3 percent in 1966, "If rising prices are a problem, they're a lot better than a stagnant economy and high unemployment." On the other hand, when high inflation resulted from the oil-producing countries (OPEC members) and the private oil corporations such as Exxon exercising

monopoly power to quadruple oil prices in 1973, and then to double prices in 1979, the resulting overall inflation was associated with recession and high unemployment.

The 1970s inflation was also the precursor to the rise of neoliberalism at the end of the decade, with the election of Margaret Thatcher in the U.K. and then the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan in the U.S. As for the present, we absolutely cannot allow neoliberalism to bask in a new wave of legitimacy in the name of fighting inflation.

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).