

Chomsky: A Stronger NATO Is The Last Thing We Need As Russia-Ukraine War Turns 1



Noam Chomsky

The war in Ukraine is almost a year old, with no end in sight to the fighting, suffering and destruction. In fact, the war's next phase could turn into a bloodbath and last for years, as the U.S. and Germany agree to supply Ukraine with battle tanks and as Volodymyr Zelenskyy urges the West to send long-range missiles and fighter jets.

It is becoming increasingly obvious that this is now a U.S./NATO-Russia war, Noam Chomsky argues in the exclusive interview for *Truthout* that follows, excoriating the idea that, in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, there needs to be a stronger NATO rather than a negotiated settlement to the conflict. "Those calling for a stronger NATO might want to think about what NATO is doing right now, and also about how NATO depicts itself," Chomsky says, warning of "the growing threat of steps up the escalation ladder to nuclear war."

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Illegitimate Authority: Facing the Challenges of Our Time (with C.J. Polychroniou; Haymarket Books, forthcoming); *The Secrets of Words* (with Andrea Moro; MIT Press, 2022); *The Withdrawal: Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, and the Fragility of U.S. Power* (with Vijay Prashad; The New Press, 2022); *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic and the Urgent Need for Social Change* (with C.J. Polychroniou; Haymarket Books, 2021); and *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet* (with Robert Pollin and C. J. Polychroniou; Verso 2020).

C. J. Polychroniou: The war in Ukraine is approaching its one-year anniversary and not only is there no end in sight to the fighting, but the flow of weaponry from the U.S. and Germany to Ukraine is increasing. What's next on the NATO/U.S. agenda, one wonders? Urging the Ukrainian military to retaliate by striking Moscow and other Russian cities? So, what's your assessment, Noam, of the latest developments in the Russia-Ukraine conflict?

Noam Chomsky: We can usefully begin by asking what is not on the NATO/U.S. agenda. The answer to that is easy: efforts to bring the horrors to an end before they become much worse. "Much worse" begins with the increasing devastation of Ukraine, awful enough, even though nowhere near the scale of the U.S.-U.K. invasion of Iraq or, of course, the U.S. destruction of Indochina, in a class by itself in the post-WWII era. That does not come close to exhausting the highly relevant list. To take a few minor examples, as of February 2023, the UN estimates civilian deaths in Ukraine at about 7,000. That's surely a severe underestimate. If we triple it, we reach the probable death toll of the U.S.-backed Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. If we multiply it by 30, we reach the toll of Ronald Reagan's slaughter in Central America, one of Washington's minor escapades. And so it continues.

But this is a pointless exercise, in fact a contemptible one in Western doctrine. How dare one bring up Western crimes when the official task is to denounce Russia as uniquely horrendous! Furthermore, for each of our crimes, elaborate apologetics are readily available. They quickly collapse on investigation, as has been demonstrated in painstaking detail. But that is all irrelevant within a well-functioning doctrinal system in which "unpopular ideas can be silenced, and inconvenient facts kept dark, without the need for any official ban," to borrow George Orwell's description of free England in his (unpublished) introduction to *Animal Farm*.

But “much worse” goes far beyond the grim toll in Ukraine. It includes those facing starvation from the curtailing of grain and fertilizer from the rich Black Sea region; the growing threat of steps up the escalation ladder to nuclear war (which means terminal war); and arguably worst of all, the sharp reversal of the limited efforts to avert the impending catastrophe of global heating, which there should be no need to review.

Unfortunately, there is a need. We cannot ignore the euphoria in the fossil fuel industry over the skyrocketing profits and the tantalizing prospects for decades more of destruction of human life on Earth as they abandon their marginal commitment to sustainable energy as profitability of fossil fuels soars.

And we cannot ignore the success of the propaganda system in driving such concerns from the minds of the victims, the general population. The latest [Pew poll](#) of popular attitudes on urgent issues did not even ask about nuclear war. Climate change was at the bottom of the list; among Republicans, 13 percent.

It is, after all, only the most important issue to have arisen in human history, another unpopular idea that has been effectively suppressed.

The poll happened to coincide with the latest setting of the Doomsday Clock, moved forward to 90 seconds to midnight, another record, driven by the usual concerns: nuclear war and environmental destruction. We can add a third concern: the silencing of awareness that our institutions are driving us to catastrophe.

Let’s return to the current topic: how policy is being designed to bring about “much worse” by escalating the conflict. The official reason remains as before: to severely weaken Russia. The liberal commentariat, however, offers more humane reasons: We must ensure that Ukraine is in a stronger position for eventual negotiations. Or in a weaker position, an alternative that does not enter into consideration, though it is hardly unrealistic.

In the face of such powerful arguments as these, we must concentrate on sending U.S. and German tanks, probably soon jet planes, and more direct U.S.-NATO participation in the war.

What’s probably coming next is not concealed. The press has just reported that the Pentagon is calling for a top-secret program to insert “control teams” in

Ukraine to monitor troop movements. It has also revealed that the U.S. has been providing targeting information for all advanced weapon strikes, “a previously undisclosed practice that reveals a deeper and more operationally active role for the Pentagon in the war.” At some point there might be Russian retaliation, [another step up the escalation ladder](#).

Persisting on its present course, the war will come to vindicate the view of much of the world outside the West that this is a U.S.-Russian war with Ukrainian bodies — increasingly corpses. The view, to quote Ambassador Chas Freeman, that the U.S. seems to be fighting Russia to the last Ukrainian, reiterating the conclusion of Diego Cordovez and Selig Harrison that in the 1980s the U.S. was fighting Russia to the last Afghan.

There have been real successes for the official policy of severely weakening Russia. As many commentators have discussed, for a fraction of its colossal military budget, the U.S., via Ukraine, is significantly degrading the military capacity of its sole adversary in this arena, not a small achievement. It’s a bonanza for major sectors of the U.S. economy, including fossil fuel and military industries. In the geopolitical domain, it resolves — at least temporarily — what has been a major concern throughout the post-WWII era: ensuring that Europe remains under U.S. control within the NATO system instead of adopting an independent course and becoming more closely integrated with its natural resource-rich trading partner to the East.

Temporarily. It is not clear how long the complex German-based industrial system in Europe will be willing to face decline, even a measure of deindustrialization, by subordinating itself to the U.S. and its British lackey.

Is there any hope for diplomatic efforts to escape the steady drift to disaster for Ukraine and beyond? Given Washington’s lack of interest, there is little media inquiry, but enough has leaked out from Ukrainian, U.S., and other sources to make it reasonably clear that there have been possibilities, even as recently as last March. We’ve discussed them in the past and more [bits of evidence of varying quality](#) keep trickling through.

Do opportunities for diplomacy still remain? As fighting continues, positions predictably harden. Right now, Ukrainian and Russian stands appear irreconcilable. That is not a novel situation in world affairs. It has often turned out

that “Peace talks are possible if there is a political will to engage in them,” the situation right now, [two Finnish analysts suggest](#). They proceed to outline steps that can be taken to ease the way toward further accommodation. They rightly point out that the political will is there in some circles: among them the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and senior figures in the Council of Foreign Relations. So far, however, vilification and demonization are the preferred method to deflect such deviation from the commitment to “much worse,” often accompanied by lofty rhetoric about the cosmic struggle between the forces of light and darkness.

The rhetoric is all too familiar to those who have paid any attention to U.S. exploits throughout the world. We might, for example, recall Richard Nixon’s call to the American people to join him in pulverizing Cambodia: “If, when the chips are down, the world’s most powerful nation, the United States of America, acts like a pitiful, helpless giant, the forces of totalitarianism and anarchy will threaten free nations and free institutions throughout the world.”

A constant refrain.

Putin’s invasion of Ukraine has clearly hit the buffers, but as is the case with any war, there is dishonesty, propaganda and lies flying left and right from all sides involved. On some occasions, there is also outright madness in the thinking of some commentators which, unfortunately enough, passes itself off as analytical discourse worth publishing in so-called world leading opinion pages. “Russia must lose this war and demilitarize” argued the authors of a recent piece that appeared in [Project Syndicate](#). In addition, they claim that the West does not want to see Russia defeated. And they cite you as one of those who is somehow naïve enough to believe in the idea that the West bears responsibility for creating the conditions provoking Russia’s attack on Ukraine. Your comments and reaction to this piece of “analysis” on the ongoing war in Ukraine, which I presume may in fact be widely shared not only by Ukrainians but also by many others in Eastern Europe and the Baltic states, not to mention the United States?

There’s not much point wasting time on “outright madness” — which, in this case, also calls for devastation of Ukraine and great damage far beyond.

But it’s not complete madness. They’re right about me, though they might add that I share the company of [almost all historians](#) and a wide range of prominent policy intellectuals since the ‘90s, among them leading hawks, as well as the top

echelon of the diplomatic corps who know anything about Russia, from George Kennan and Reagan's Ambassador to Russia Jack Matlock, to Bush II's hawkish defense secretary Robert Gates, to the current head of the CIA, and an impressive list of others. The list in fact includes any literate person capable of reviewing the very clear historical and diplomatic record with an open mind.

It is, surely, worthwhile to think seriously about the history of the past 30 years since Bill Clinton launched a new Cold War by [violating the firm and unambiguous U.S. promise](#) to Mikhail Gorbachev that "We understand the need for assurances to the countries in the East. If we maintain a presence in a Germany that is a part of NATO, there would be no extension of NATO's jurisdiction for forces of NATO one inch to the east."

Those who want to ignore the history are free to do so, at the cost of failure to understand what is happening now, and what the prospects are for preventing "much worse."

Another unfortunate chapter in human mentality in connection with the Russian-Ukraine conflict is the degree of racism manifested by many commentators and policy makers in the Western world. Yes, fortunately enough, Ukrainians fleeing their country have been welcomed with open arms by European countries, which is not of course the treatment accorded to those fleeing parts of Africa and Asia (or from Central America in the case of the United States) because of persecution, political instability and conflict, and desire to escape poverty. In fact, it's hard to miss the racism hidden behind the thinking of many who claim that one should not compare U.S.'s invasion of Iraq with Russia's invasion of Ukraine because the two events are on a different level. This is, for instance, [the position taken by the neoliberal Polish intellectual Adam Michnik](#), who, incidentally, also cites you as one of those who commits the cardinal sin of failing to draw distinctions between the two invasions! Your reaction to this type of "intellectual analysis?"

Outside the self-protective Western bubble, the racism is [perceived in even starker terms](#), for example, by the distinguished Indian writer and political activist/essayist Arundhati Roy: "Ukraine is certainly not seen here as something with a clear moral tale to tell. When brown or black people get bombed or shocked-and-awed, it does not matter, but with white people it is supposed to be different."

I'll return directly to the "cardinal sin," a most revealing aspect of contemporary high culture in the West, mimicked by loyalists elsewhere.

We should recognize however that Eastern Europe is a somewhat special case. For familiar and obvious reasons, Eastern European elites tend to be more susceptible to U.S. propaganda than the norm. That's the basis for Donald Rumsfeld's distinction between Old and New Europe. Old Europe are the bad guys, who refused to join in the U.S. invasion of Iraq, encumbered by antiquated ideas about international law and elementary morality. New Europe, mostly the former Russians satellites, are the good guys, free from such baggage.

Finally, there are even some "leftist" intellectuals out there who have taken the position that the world now, in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, needs a stronger NATO and that there shouldn't be any negotiated settlements to the conflict. I find it hard to digest the notion that anyone who claims to be part of the left-radical tradition would be advocating the expansion of NATO and be in favor of the continuation of the war, so what's your take on this particularly strange "leftist" position?

I somehow missed the calls from the left for a revival of the Warsaw Pact when the U.S. invaded Iraq and Afghanistan while also attacking Serbia and Libya — always with pretexts, to be sure.

Those calling for a stronger NATO might want to think about what NATO is doing right now, and also about how NATO depicts itself. The latest NATO summit extended the North Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific, that is, all the world. NATO's role is to participate in the U.S. project of planning for a war with China, already an economic war as the U.S. dedicates itself (and by compulsion, its allies) to preventing Chinese economic development, with steps toward possible military confrontation lurking not far in the distance. Again, terminal war.

We've discussed all of this before. There are new developments as Europe, South Korea and Japan ponder ways to avoid severe economic decline by following Washington's orders to withhold technology from China, their major market.

It's also of no slight interest to see the self-image that NATO is proudly constructing. One instructive example is the U.S. Navy's latest acquisition, the amphibious assault ship *USS Fallujah*, named to commemorate [the two Marine attacks on Fallujah in 2004](#), among the more atrocious crimes of the U.S. invasion

of Iraq. It's normal for imperial states to ignore or seek to explain away their crimes. It's a shade more unusual to see them celebrated.

Outsiders don't always find this amusing, including Iraqis. Reflecting on the commissioning of the *USS Fallujah*, [Iraqi journalist Nabil Salih describes](#) a football field "known as the [Martyrs' Cemetery](#). It is where residents of the once besieged city [of Fallujah] buried the women and children massacred in repeated United States assaults to repress a raging rebellion in the early years of occupation. In Iraq, even playgrounds are now sites for mourning. The war entailed showering Fallujah in depleted uranium and white phosphorus."

"But US savagery didn't end there," Salih continues:

"Twenty years and incalculable birth defects later, the US navy is naming one of its warships the USS Fallujah.... This is how the US Empire continues its war against Iraqis. Fallujah's name, bleached in white phosphorus implanted in mothers' wombs for generations, is a spoil of war, too. "Under extraordinary odds," reads a US Empire [statement](#) explaining the decision to name a warship after Fallujah, "the Marines prevailed against a determined enemy who enjoyed all the advantages of defending in an urban area."... What is left is the haunting absence of family members, homes bombed into nonexistence and photographs incinerated along with the smiling faces. Instead, a lethally corrupt system of cross-sectarian camaraderie-in-theft was bequeathed to us by the unpunished war criminals of Downing Street and the Beltway."

Salih quotes Walter Benjamin in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*: "Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate."

"Through this historical revisionism," Salih concludes, "the US has launched another assault on our dead. Benjamin had warned us: 'Even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins.' The enemy has won."

That's the true image of NATO, as many victims can testify.

But what do Iraqis know, or other Brown and Black people like them? For "The Truth" one can turn to a Polish writer who obediently repeats the most vulgar American propaganda, echoing many of his counterparts among the commissars at home.

Let's be fair, however. At the time of the massacre, the U.S. media did report what was going on. I can do no better than to quote at length from the [damning compilation](#) of much of that reporting that Australian journalist John Menadue published in 2018:

[On October 16, 2004, the Washington Post reported](#) that *"electricity and water were cut off to the city just as a fresh wave of [bombing] strikes began Thursday night, an action that US forces also took at the start of assaults on Najaf and Samarra."* The Red Cross and other aid agencies were also denied access to deliver the most basic of humanitarian aid — water, food, and emergency medical supplies to the civilian population.

On November 7, a [New York Times front page story](#) detailed how the Coalition's ground campaign was launched by seizing Fallujah's only hospital: *"Patients and hospital employees were rushed out of the rooms by armed soldiers and ordered to sit or lie on the floor while troops tied their hands behind their backs."* The story also revealed the motive for attacking the hospital: *"The offensive also shut down what officers said was a propaganda weapon for the militants: Fallujah General Hospital with its stream of reports of civilian casualties."* The city's two medical clinics were also bombed and destroyed.

In a November 2005 editorial denouncing its use, the [New York Times described white phosphorous](#), *"Packed into an artillery shell, it explodes over a battlefield in a white glare that can illuminate an enemy's positions. It also rains balls of flaming chemicals, which cling to anything they touch and burn until their oxygen supply is cut off. They can burn for hours inside a human body."*

In early November 2004, alongside the *New York Times* reports that Fallujah's main hospital had been attacked, the *Nation* magazine referred to *"reports that US armed forces killed scores of patients in an attack on a Fallujah health centre and have deprived civilians of medical care, food and water."*

The [BBC reported on 11 November 2004](#) *"Without water and electricity, we feel completely cut off from every one else ... there are dead women and children lying on the streets. People are getting weaker from hunger. Many are dying from their injuries because there is no medical help left in the city whatsoever."*

On 14 November 2004, [the Guardian reported](#) *"The horrific conditions for those who remained in the city have begun to emerge in the last 24 hours as it becomes*

clear that US military claims of 'precision' targeting of insurgent positions were false.... The city has been without power or water for days."

That's NATO, for those willing to learn about the world.

But enough of this deplorable whataboutism. Orders from on high are that it is outrageous to compare the new Hitler's assault on Ukraine with the misguided but benign U.S.-U.K. mercy mission to help Iraqis by ousting an evil dictator — whom the U.S. enthusiastically supported right through his worst crimes, but that's not proper fare for the intellectual class.

Again, however, we should be fair. Not all agree that it's improper to raise questions about the U.S. mission in Iraq. Recently, there was much ado about [Harvard's rejection of Human Rights Watch Director Kenneth Roth](#) for a position at the Kennedy School, quickly rescinded under protest. Roth's credentials were lauded. He even took the negative position in a debate, moderated by noted human rights advocate Samantha Power, on whether the Iraq invasion qualifies as humanitarian intervention. (Michael Ignatieff, director of the Carr Center for Human Rights, argued it did qualify.)

How lucky we are that at the peak of the intellectual world, our culture is so free and open that we even can have a debate on whether the enterprise was an exercise in humanitarianism.

The undisciplined might ask how we would react to an analogous event at Moscow University.

Source: <https://truthout.org/>

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