

Chomsky: Six Months Into War, Diplomatic Settlement in Ukraine Is Still Possible



Noam Chomsky

The war in Ukraine continues unabated. There are no visible signs of a conclusion to this tragedy, although it's hard to imagine the current situation remaining unchanged for much longer. The war has exposed dramatic weaknesses in Russia's armed forces, while Ukrainian resistance has surprised even military experts. In the meantime, it is more than obvious that the U.S. is fighting a "proxy" war in Ukraine, as Noam Chomsky underlines in the exclusive interview for *Truthout*, thus making it extremely difficult for Russia's military planners to make major advances.

From day one, Noam Chomsky established himself as one of the most important voices on the war in Ukraine. He condemned Russia's invasion as a criminal aggression while analyzing the subtle political and historical context surrounding Putin's decision to launch an attack on Russia's neighbor. In the interview that follows, Chomsky reiterates his condemnation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, suggests that the situation over peace talks inevitably recalls the "Afghan trap," and talks about the exceptional form of censorship that is taking place in the U.S. through a systematic suppression of unpopular ideas over the war in Ukraine.

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by millions of people as a national and international treasure, Chomsky has published more than 150 books in linguistics, political and social thought, political economy, media studies, U.S. foreign policy and world affairs. His latest books are *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); and *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic and the Urgent Need for Social Change* (with C.J. Polychroniou; Haymarket Books, 2021).

C.J. Polychroniou: It's been six months since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, yet there is no end to the war in sight. Putin's strategy has backfired in a huge way, as it not only failed to take down Kyiv but also revived the western alliance while Finland and Sweden ended decades of neutrality by joining NATO. The war has also caused a massive humanitarian crisis, brought higher energy prices, and made Russia into a pariah state. From day one, you described the invasion as a criminal act of aggression and compared it to the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the Hitler-Stalin invasion of Poland, in spite of the fact that Russia felt threatened from NATO's expansion to the east. I reckon that you still hold this view, but do you think that Putin would have had second thoughts about an invasion if he knew that this military adventure of his would end up in a prolonged war?

Noam Chomsky: Reading Putin's mind has become a cottage industry, notable for the extreme confidence of those who interpret the scanty tea leaves. I have some guesses, but they are not based on better evidence than others have, so they have low credibility.

My guess is that Russian intelligence agreed with the announced U.S. government expectations that conquest of Kyiv and installation of a puppet government would be an easy task, not the debacle it turned out to be. I suppose that if Putin had had better information about the Ukrainian will and capacity to resist, and the incompetence of the Russian military, his plans would have been different. Perhaps the plans would have been what many informed analysts had expected, what Russia now seems to have turned to a Plan B: trying to establish firmer control over Crimea and the passage to Russia, and to take over the Donbas region.

Possibly, benefiting from better intelligence, Putin might have had the wisdom to respond seriously to the tentative initiatives of Macron for a negotiated settlement that would have avoided the war, and might have even proceeded to

Europe-Russia accommodation along the lines of proposals by de Gaulle and Gorbachev. All we know is that the initiatives were dismissed with contempt, at great cost, not least to Russia. Instead, Putin launched a murderous war of aggression which, indeed, ranks with the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the Hitler-Stalin invasion of Poland.

That Russia felt threatened by NATO expansion to the East, in violation of firm and unambiguous promises to Gorbachev, has been stressed by virtually every high-level U.S. diplomat with any familiarity with Russia for 30 years, well before Putin. To take just one of a rich array of examples, in 2008 when he was ambassador to Russia and Bush II recklessly invited Ukraine to join NATO, current CIA director William Burns warned that “Ukrainian entry into NATO is the brightest of all redlines for the Russian elite (not just Putin).” He added that “I have yet to find anyone who views Ukraine in NATO as anything other than a direct challenge to Russian interests.” More generally, Burns called NATO expansion into Eastern Europe “premature at best, and needlessly provocative at worst.” And if the expansion reached Ukraine, Burns warned, “There could be no doubt that Putin would fight back hard.”

Burns was merely reiterating common understanding at the highest level of government, back to the early ‘90s. Bush II’s own Secretary of Defense Robert Gates [recognized](#) that “trying to bring Georgia and Ukraine into NATO was truly overreaching, ... recklessly ignoring what the Russians considered their own vital national interests.”

The warnings from informed government sources were strong and explicit. They were rejected by Washington from Clinton on. In fact, on to the present moment. That conclusion is confirmed by the recent [comprehensive Washington Post study](#) of the background to the invasion. Reviewing the study, George Beebe and Anatol Lieven [observe](#) that “the Biden administration’s efforts to avert the war altogether come across as quite lacking. As Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov put it during the weeks preceding the invasion, for Russia ‘the key to everything is the guarantee that NATO will not expand eastward.’ But nowhere in the *Post*’s account is there any mention that the White House considered offering concrete compromises regarding Ukraine’s future admission into NATO.” Rather, as the State Department had already [conceded](#), “the United States made no effort to address one of Vladimir Putin’s most often stated top security concerns — the possibility of Ukraine’s membership into NATO.”

In brief, provocations continued to the last minute. They were not confined to undermining negotiations but included expansion of the project of integrating Ukraine into the NATO military command, turning it into a “de facto” member of NATO, as [U.S. military journals](#) put it.

The glaringly obvious record of provocation is, presumably, the reason for the tacit rule that the Russian assault must be called “unprovoked,” a term otherwise scarcely if ever used but required in this case in polite society. Psychologists should have no problem explaining the curious behavior.

Though the provocations were consistent and conscious over many years, despite the warnings, they of course in no way justify Putin’s resort to “the supreme international crime” of aggression. Though it may help explain a crime, provocation provides no justification for it.

As for Russia’s becoming a “pariah state,” I think some qualifications are in order. It is surely becoming a pariah state in Europe and the Anglosphere, to an extent that has amazed even seasoned cold warriors. Graham Fuller, one of the top figures in U.S. intelligence for many years, [recently commented that](#):

- “I don’t think that I’ve ever seen—in my entire life—such a dominant American media blitz as what we’re seeing regarding Ukraine today. The U.S. isn’t only pressing its *interpretation* of events — the U.S. is also engaging in full-scale *demonization* of Russia as a state, as a society, and as a culture. The bias is extraordinary — I never saw anything like this when I was involved in Russian affairs during the Cold War.”

Picking up those tea leaves again, one might perhaps surmise that as in the required reference to the “unprovoked” invasion, some guilt feelings are not too well concealed.

That is the stance of the U.S. and to varying degrees its close allies. Most of the world, however, continues to stand aloof, condemning the aggression but maintaining normal relations with Russia, just as western critics of the U.S.-U.K. invasion of Iraq maintained normal relations with the (entirely unprovoked) aggressors. There is also considerable ridicule of the pious proclamations on human rights, democracy and “sanctity of borders” issued by the world champions in violence and subversion — matters the Global South knows about well from ample experience.

Russia claims that the U.S. is directly involved in the Ukraine war. Is the U.S. fighting a “proxy war” in Ukraine?

That the U.S. is heavily involved in the war, and proudly so, is not in question. That it is fighting a proxy war is widely held outside of the Europe-Anglosphere domain. It is not hard to see why. Official U.S. policy, open and public, is that the war must go on until Russia is so severely weakened that it cannot undertake further aggression. The policy is justified by exalted proclamations about a cosmic struggle between democracy, freedom, and all good things vs. ultimate evil bent on global conquest. The fevered rhetoric is not new. The fairy tale style reached comical heights in the major Cold War document NSC 68 and is commonly found elsewhere.

Taken literally, official policy entails that Russia must be subjected to harsher punishment than Germany was at Versailles in 1919. Those targeted are likely to take explicit policy literally, with obvious consequences as to how they may react.

The assessment that the U.S. is dedicated to a proxy war is reinforced by common Western discourse. While there is extensive discussion of how to fight Russian aggression more effectively, one finds hardly a word about how to bring the horrors to an end — horrors that go far beyond Ukraine. Those who dare to raise the question are usually vilified, even such revered figures as Henry Kissinger — though, interestingly, calls for a diplomatic settlement pass without the usual demonization when they [appear in the major establishment journal](#).

Whatever terminology one prefers to use, the basic facts about U.S. policy and plans are clear enough. To me, “proxy war” seems a fair term, but what matters are the policies and plans.

As was to be expected, the invasion has also led to a prolonged propaganda war on the part of all sides involved. On that note, you said recently that, with the banning of RT and other Russian media venues, Americans have less access to the official adversary than Soviets had in the 1970s. Can you elaborate a bit on this, especially since your statement about censorship in the U.S. over the war in Ukraine was totally distorted, leaving readers to think that what you implied is that censorship in the U.S. today is worse than it was under communism in Russia?

On the Russian side, the domestic propaganda war is extreme. On the U.S. side,

while there are no official bans, it's hard to deny Graham Fuller's observations.

Literal censorship in the U.S. and other western societies is rare. But as George Orwell wrote in 1945 in his (unpublished) introduction to *Animal Farm*, the "sinister fact" about free societies is that censorship is "largely voluntary. Unpopular ideas can be silenced, and inconvenient facts kept dark, without the need for any official ban," generally a more effective means of thought control than overt force.

Orwell was referring to England, but the practice goes far beyond, in revealing ways. To take a current example, the highly respected Middle East scholar Alain Gresh was [censored by French TV](#) because of his critical comments on Israel's latest terrorist crimes in occupied Gaza.

Gresh observed that "this form of censorship is exceptional. On the question of Palestine, it is rarely presented in such an obvious manner." A more effective form of censorship is exercised by careful selection of commentators. They are acceptable, Gresh concludes, if they "regret the violence" while adding that Israel has "the right to defend itself" and stress the need to "fight extremists on both sides," but "it seems there is no room for those who radically criticise Israel's occupation and apartheid."

In the United States, such means of silencing unpopular ideas and keeping inconvenient facts dark have been honed to a high art, as one would expect in an unusually free society. By now there are literally thousands of pages documenting the practices in close detail. Fine organizations of media critique like *FAIR* in the U.S. and *Media Lens* in England pour out more on a regular basis.

There is also extensive discussion in print about the advantages of western models of indoctrination over the crude and transparent measures of totalitarian states. The more sophisticated devices of free society instill doctrines by presupposition, not assertion, as in the case Gresh describes. The rules are never heard, just tacitly assumed. Debate is allowed, even encouraged, but within bounds, which are unexpressed and rigid. They become internalized. As Orwell puts it, those subjected to subtle indoctrination, with a good education for example, have instilled into them the understanding that there are certain things "it wouldn't do to say" — or even to think.

The modes of indoctrination need not be conscious. Those who implement them

already have internalized the understanding that there are certain things “it wouldn’t do to say” — or even to think.

Such devices are particularly effective in a highly insular culture like that of the U.S., where few would dream of seeking foreign sources, particularly those of a reviled enemy, and where the appearance of limitless freedom offers no incentive to go beyond the established framework.

It’s in this general context that I mentioned the case of banning of Russian sources such as *RT* — “exceptional” as Gresh pointed out. Though there was no time to elaborate in a few brief remarks in a long interview on other topics, the direct banning brought to mind [an interesting topic I had written about 30 years ago](#). Like much other work, the article reviewed many cases of the usual modes of silencing unpopular ideas and suppressing unwanted facts in free societies, but it also reported government-academic studies seeking to determine where Russians were getting their news in the ‘70s: the late Soviet period, pre-Gorbachev. The results indicated that despite the rigid censorship, a remarkably high percentage of Russians were accessing such sources as BBC, even illegal Samizdat, and may well have been better informed than Americans.

I checked at the time with Russian émigrés who related their own experiences of evading the intrusive but not very efficient censorship. They basically confirmed the picture, though they felt that the numbers reported were too high, possibly because the samples might have been skewed to Leningrad and Moscow.

Direct banning of the publications of adversaries is not only illegitimate but also harmful. Thus, it would be important for Americans to have been aware that immediately before the invasion, the Russian Foreign Minister was emphasizing that “the key to everything is the guarantee that NATO will not expand eastward” to Ukraine — the firm redline for decades. Had there been any concern to avoid horrible crimes and to move to a better world, this could have been an opening to explore.

The same is true of Russian government pronouncements when the invasion was already underway; for example, Lavrov’s [statement on May 29](#) that:

– “We have goals: to demilitarise Ukraine (there should be no weapons threatening Russia on its territory); to restore the rights of the Russian people in line with the Constitution of Ukraine (the Kiev regime violated it by adopting anti-

Russia laws) and the conventions (in which Ukraine takes part); and to denazify Ukraine. Nazi and neo-Nazi theory and practice have deeply permeated daily life in Ukraine and are codified in its laws.”

It might be useful for Americans to have access to such words by a flip of the switch on TV, at least those Americans with some interest in ending the horrors rather than plunging into the apocalyptic battle conjured up from the tea leaves to cage the rampaging bear before it devours all of us.

Peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine have stagnated since early spring. Apparently, Russia wants to enforce peace on its own terms, while Ukraine seems to have adopted the position that there can be no negotiations until Russia's prospects on the battlefield become dim. Do you see an end to this conflict any time soon? Is negotiating to end the war an appeasement, as those who oppose peace talks claim?

Whether negotiations have stagnated is not entirely clear. Little is reported, but it seems possible that [“Talks to end the war are back on the agenda: A meeting between Ukraine, Turkey and the UN shows that Kyiv may be warming to the idea of discussions with Moscow,”](#) and that “Given Russian territorial advances,” it may be that Ukraine “has softened its opposition to considering a diplomatic end to the war.” If so, it’s up to Putin to show whether his “avowed zeal for negotiations is really a bluff,” or has some substance.

What’s happening is obscure. It brings to mind the “Afghan trap” that we discussed earlier, when the U.S. was fighting a proxy war with Russia “to the last Afghan,” as Cordovez and Harrison put it in their definitive study of how the UN managed to arrange for a Russian withdrawal despite U.S. efforts to prevent a diplomatic settlement. That was the period when Carter’s National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, who claimed credit for instigating the Russian invasion, applauded the outcome even though it came at the cost of some “agitated Muslims.”

Are we witnessing something similar today? Perhaps.

No doubt Russia wants to enforce peace on its own terms. A negotiated diplomatic settlement is one that each side tolerates while relinquishing some of its own demands. There’s only one way to find out whether Russia is serious about negotiations: Try. Nothing is lost.

On the battlefield prospects, there are confident and sharply conflicting claims by military experts. I have no such credentials; I think it's fair to conclude from the spectacle that the fog of war has not lifted. We do know what the U.S. position is, or at least was last April at the Ramstein Air Base conference of NATO powers and other military leaders that the U.S. organized: "Ukraine clearly believes it can win and so does everyone here." Whether it was actually believed then, or is now, I don't know, and know of no way to find out.

For what it's worth, I personally respect the [words of Jeremy Corbyn](#) published on the day after the Ramstein war conference opened, words that contributed to his being virtually expelled from the Labour Party: "There must be an immediate ceasefire in Ukraine followed by a Russian troop withdrawal and agreement between Russia and Ukraine on future security arrangements. All wars end in a negotiation of some sort — so why not now?"

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