

Chomsky: US Must Join Global Call For Negotiations As Russia Escalates Actions



Noam Chomsky

The war in Ukraine has taken a dramatic turn for the worse. Putting to rest his own ludicrous claim that the invasion of Ukraine constitutes a “special military operation,” Russian President Vladimir Putin has ordered a military call-up and staged “referendums” — votes to join Russia — have been conducted in the occupied territories. Meanwhile, there are calls for more weapons from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and even demands that Russia be removed from the United Nations Security Council. The political and military ramifications of these developments are profoundly disturbing, says Noam Chomsky in an exclusive interview for *Truthout*. They indicate “a plan for a long-drawn-out war of attrition.” Chomsky urges that the U.S. join the rest of the world in calling for negotiations, not because Putin can be trusted, but because negotiations are our best hope for averting disaster. There’s no certainty as to whether this process would result in peace, but as Chomsky says, “There is one and only one way to find out: Try.”

Chomsky is institute professor emeritus in the department of linguistics and philosophy at MIT and laureate professor of linguistics and Agnese Nelms Haury Chair in the Program in Environment and Social Justice at the University of Arizona. One of the world’s most-cited scholars and a public intellectual regarded 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: Seven months after Putin's criminal invasion of Ukraine, the war has reached a turning point. It has come home to Russia with Putin's call for "partial mobilization," and annexation referendums have been staged. What does the bolstering of Russian forces in Ukraine mean for Russia and Ukraine? Are Putin's orders for military call-up an admission that Russia is no longer conducting a "special military operation" in Ukraine?

Noam Chomsky: What has come home to Russia is unclear. There are reports of protests and forced conscription, alongside of appeals to defend Mother Russia from yet another Western invasion, which, like those [going] back to Napoleon, will be crushed. Such appeals might have resonance. Historical memories may be deep. What the outcome will be we can only guess.

From the first day, it was a criminal invasion, never a "special military operation," but the pretense in the Kremlin is still maintained. The mobilization is unlikely to have much effect on the war for some time to come, and what kind of effect is unclear. The failures and incompetence of the Russian military have been a continuing surprise to most well-placed analysts. That may well extend to mobilization, training and supply of equipment. Any meaningful bolstering of Russian forces from these efforts is likely to be well ahead, probably after the winter months. I suppose Russia could move forces from other regions, but whether the leadership has the capability or will to do that, I don't know.

The mobilization and referenda seem to indicate a plan for a long, drawn-out war of attrition. If the mobilization does succeed in shifting the tide of the war, that increases the risks of inducing the West to up the ante with more advanced weapons, perhaps reaching to Russia itself as President Zelenskyy has requested, so far rebuffed. It's not hard to envision scenarios that lead on to catastrophic consequences.

That's just the beginning. The impact of the war goes far beyond: to the millions facing starvation with the curtailing of grain and fertilizer exports, now partially relieved though there is little information about how much; and most important of

all and least discussed, the sharp reversal of the limited international efforts to address the looming climate crisis, a colossal crime against humanity.

While huge resources are being wasted in destruction and the fossil fuel industries are gleefully celebrating the opening up of new fields for exploitation to poison the atmosphere even more, scientists are regularly informing us that their dire warnings have been far too conservative. Thus we have recently learned that the Middle East region, not far away from embattled Ukraine, is heating [almost twice as fast as the rest of the world](#), with an estimated 9°F rise by the end of the century, and that [sea levels](#) in the Eastern Mediterranean are expected to rise a meter by mid-century and up to 2.5 meters by 2100. Of course it doesn't stop there. The consequences are almost impossible to envision.

Meanwhile the region continues to be the global center for heating the world to the brink of survivability and soon beyond. And while Israel and Lebanon may soon be sinking into the sea, they are squabbling about which will have the honor of virtually destroying both of them by producing the fossil fuels at their maritime borders, acts of lunacy duplicated around the world. Escalating the war in Ukraine in the face of such realities reaches levels of imbecility that are hard to capture in words.

Russia hopes to annex four occupied regions of Ukraine with staged referendums. Russia used this tactic before, in 2014, with the Crimean status referendum, although the two situations may be quite different. The voting in the Russian-held Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions of Ukraine is clearly illegal under international law, but I suppose this hardly matters to a power that has launched a criminal invasion against an independent country. What does Russia hope to achieve with the "referendums"? And what happens next, especially since Russia has had a difficult time so far establishing order in the occupied territories?

The referenda in this case lack any credibility. It was different in the case of the Crimea referendum in 2014. For one thing, the Russian takeover of Crimea didn't happen in a vacuum. For another, there's reason to suppose that Crimeans looked to Russia more than to Ukraine. Though the referenda were not internationally accepted, it was recognized by many that the results were not very surprising. That's not the case with the current referenda.

Like the mobilization, the staged referenda indicate Russian plans for long-time occupation and a war of attrition. Though they clearly pose another impediment for negotiations over the fate of the regions where they take place, they may not completely close the window, as Anatol Lieven [discusses](#).

It's true that international law means as little to Russia as to the other great powers that launch criminal invasions against independent countries, the U.S. well in the lead. With impunity, thanks to its power.

What does Russia hope to achieve? As we've discussed, there are two ways to approach this question.

One way is to explore the depths of Putin's mind, as George W. Bush did when he looked into Putin's eyes, saw his "soul," and pronounced it good. And as many amateur psychologists do today, with supreme confidence.

A second way is to look at what Putin and his associates are saying. As in the case of other leaders, this may or may not reflect their hidden intentions. What matters, however, is that what they say can be a basis for negotiations if there is any interest in bringing the horrors to an end before they get even worse. That's how diplomacy works.

The second way suggests that what Russia hopes to achieve is primarily neutralization of Ukraine and "demilitarization and denazification." The former means cancellation of the programs of the past years to integrate Ukraine de facto within NATO. That approaches President Zelenskyy's proposals as recently as last March for neutralization with security guarantees. The latter would be a topic for discussion in serious negotiations. It might be spelled out as an agreement to refrain from placing heavy weapons aimed at Russia in Ukraine, no further joint military maneuvers, etc. In short, a status rather like Mexico.

Those are topics for negotiations — if, of course, there is a serious interest in ending the conflict.

We might recall that most of the world, including a large majority of Germans and much of the rest of Europe, is calling for negotiations now, while the U.S. insists that priority must be to severely weaken Russia, hence no negotiations.

There are other issues to be settled, primarily Crimea and the Donbass region. An

optimal solution would be internationally sponsored referenda on the various options that have been proposed. That is presumably not possible now, but a serious effort on negotiations might improve the prospects. Recall that we have [good evidence](#) that as recently as last April there were serious Ukraine-Russia negotiations under Turkish auspices and that the U.S.-U.K. opposed them.

As to what happens next, that will depend on choices made by those involved, primarily Ukraine and Russia of course, but we can hardly pretend to be merely observers from afar. See again Lieven's commentary, just cited.

Lieven is not the only informed analyst who regards peaceful diplomatic settlement as a diminishing but still live option. Another is [John Quigley](#), who has been deeply involved in these issues since the early '90s, when he was the U.S. State Department representative in the OSCE [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe] efforts to resolve contested issues in Ukraine after the collapse of the USSR, particularly the status of Crimea and Donbass, his special concern. We have [already discussed](#) some of his current thinking, as of June 2022.

Quigley recognizes that though negotiations are currently stalled, "At some point, however, hopefully sooner than later, there will be a negotiated settlement that will need to deal with the Donbas region in Eastern Ukraine" as well as Crimea. On Crimea, he recommends pursuing Zelenskyy's suggestion that perhaps "the two sides could arrange a process of discussion about Crimea, a process that he said could last 15 years." On Donbass, Quigley writes that "if Ukraine does anything even close to implementing the Minsk agreement [the 2015 Ukraine-Russia agreement under French-German sponsorship which called for a degree of autonomy for Donbass within a federal Ukraine], Russia could say that the aim of its invasion has been accomplished," and a settlement could be reached.

Only a few days ago, French President Emmanuel Macron, who has been more closely involved in current negotiation efforts than any other figure, expressed somewhat similar views [on CNN](#). In his opinion, at the time of Zelenskyy's election in 2019, a settlement favorable to Ukraine could have been reached along the lines of the Minsk agreement. He also feels that options for diplomacy remain open.

Whether such assessments are accurate, we do not know. There is one and only one way to find out: Try. That won't happen, Quigley concludes, if "the U.S. goal

is less to force Russia out of Ukraine than to fight Russia to the last Ukrainian” — a “reasonable” assessment he reluctantly comments.

That is the one factor in the mix that we can hope to influence, something that cannot be emphasized too strongly.

President Zelenskyy urged the United Nations (UN) to punish Russia for its invasion of Ukraine by stripping it of its security council veto vote. Just a few days ago, the EU president [made similar calls](#). While, technically speaking, a country can be expelled from the UN for “persistent violation” of the principles of the Charter, isn’t this a misguided proposal? Isn’t it also true that the argument that Russia may not even be a member of the UN is invalid on account of the fact that the continuation of the USSR’s membership by the Russian Federation, which Ukraine itself accepted in 1991, is in line with long established procedures within the UN?

One can easily appreciate President Zelenskyy’s sentiments, but whatever the technicalities may be, the very fact that the proposal is being seriously considered is enlightening. Did anyone consider punishing the U.S. in this manner when it invaded Iraq, to take only one example of its “persistent violation” of the core principle of the Charter that bars “the threat or use of force” in international affairs (with exceptions irrelevant here)? These violations that are not just persistent but extremely serious, matters we need not review even though they are virtually unspeakable in the U.S. mainstream.

We should, I think, keep our minds focused on what should be the central issue for us: U.S. policy. Should we accept the official U.S. position of fighting the war to severely weaken Russia, precluding diplomatic settlement? Or should we press the U.S. government to join most of the world, including Germans and other Europeans, in seeking a way to end the horrors before they bring further tragedy, not only to Ukraine but also far beyond?

This interview has been lightly edited for clarity.

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