Noam Chomsky: Humanity Faces Two Existential Threats. One Is Nearly Ignored

Noam Chomsky

We live in dangerous and disconcerting times. Humanity is facing two existential threats that could end civilization as we know it — as well as other life on Earth. Yet, in the case of both global warming and nuclear weapons, international cooperation is sorely missing. What is even worse with regard to nuclear weapons is that since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there is a growing trend toward normalizing the idea of nuclear war. In fact, as Noam Chomsky argues in this exclusive interview for *Truthout*, dismissals of the true threat of nuclear annihilation have grown to highly dangerous levels and "the means for reducing the threat of terminal war are being cast out the window." But it doesn't have to be that way.

"Human agency has not ended," Chomsky points out. "There are realistic ways to protect humanity from the existential threat that nuclear weapons pose."

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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: Noam, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has triggered several unexpected and unintended consequences. One of them, which is not as widely discussed as it should be, is that the use of nuclear arsenals, perhaps with lower yields, has been almost normalized. Indeed, in the course of this war, we have heard of several scenarios for how Russia might use nuclear weapons, and, in the early days of the invasion, Russian President Vladimir Putin even ordered his country's nuclear forces on a higher alert. And, just last month, he said that Russia will use nuclear weapons to defend its sovereignty and stressed that the "era of the unipolar world" has ended. On the other hand, we have people like Francis Fukuyama saying that the possibility of a nuclear war "is not something anyone should be worrying about" because there are many stopping points before we get to that point. How did we get to a stage where people are having such a nonchalant attitude about nuclear weapons?

Noam Chomsky: Before turning to the important issues raised, we should keep firmly in mind one overriding concern: The great powers will find a way to cooperate in addressing today's critical problems, or the wreckage of human society will be so extreme that no one will care. All else fades alongside of recognition of that fundamental fact about the contemporary world, very possibly the last stage in human history. It cannot be reiterated too often or too strongly.

In the *Toronto Star*, the veteran journalist and political analyst Linda McQuaig wrote that she had just heard "what struck me as possibly the most foolish remark ever uttered on TV. And I know that's a high bar."

McQuaig was referring to "the celebrated U.S. political scientist Francis Fukuyama" and the comment of his that you just quoted. Put simply, "there's no need to be concerned about nuclear war. Take my word for it."

In defense of "possibly the most foolish remark ever uttered on TV," we might argue that it is not only commonly voiced, but in fact is implicit in official U.S. policy. Last April, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said that Washington's goal in Ukraine is "to see Russia weakened to the degree that it can't do the kinds of things that it has done in invading Ukraine." He was reprimanded by the

president, but "officials acknowledged that was indeed the long-term strategy, even if Mr. Biden did not want to publicly provoke Mr. Putin into escalation."

The long-term strategy, then, is to keep the war going in order to weaken Russia, and to a degree considerably harsher than the treatment of Germany at Versailles a century ago, which did not succeed in the proclaimed goal.

The long-term strategy was reaffirmed clearly enough in the recent North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit, providing a new "Strategic Concept" based on a core principle: no diplomacy on Ukraine, only war to "weaken Russia."

It takes no great insight to see that this approximates what may be the most foolish remark ever uttered. The tacit assumption is that while the U.S. and its allies are proceeding to weaken Russia sufficiently, Russian leaders will stand by quietly, refraining from resorting to the advanced weapons we all know Russia has.

Take our word for it.

Perhaps so, but quite a gamble, not only with the fate of Ukrainians but far beyond.

In further defense of this colossal foolishness, we might add that it is prevailing common sense. It is commonly just taken for granted that we can disregard the shocking record of the past 75 years, which demonstrates with brilliant clarity that it is a near miracle that we have escaped nuclear war — terminal war if major powers are involved.

Illustrations are everywhere. To take one, some of the most careful and sophisticated studies of public opinion on major issues are carried out by the Yale University Program on Climate Change Communication. Though climate is the main focus of their concerns, the studies range much more broadly.

The most recent study, just released, poses 29 major current issues and asks subjects to rank them in terms of significance for the upcoming November election. Nuclear war is not mentioned. The threat is severe and increasing, and it's easy to construct all-too-plausible scenarios that would lead up the escalation ladder to terminal destruction. But our leaders and "celebrated political scientists" assure us, either directly or implicitly: "No need for concern, take our

word for it."

What is omitted from the study is terrifying enough. What is included is hardly less so. "Of 29 issues we asked about," the directors of the poll report, "registered voters overall indicated that global warming is the 24th most highly ranked voting issue."

It is only the most important issue that has ever arisen in human history, alongside of nuclear war.

It gets worse on a closer look. Republicans may well take Congress in a few months. Their leadership is not concealing their intent to find ways to hold on to virtually permanent political power, independent of the popular will, and might succeed with the help of the ultra-reactionary Supreme Court. The party — to dignify it with that word — has been 100 percent denialist on global warming since it succumbed to the Koch conglomerate onslaught in 2009, and the leadership has carried along the voting base. In the Yale study, moderate Republicans ranked global warming as 28th among the 29 options offered. The rest ranked it 29th.

The two most important issues in human history, issues of literal survival, may soon be off the agenda in the most powerful state in human history, carrying forward the grim experience of the four Trump years.

Not completely off the agenda, of course. There are voices of sanity, some with considerable prestige and experience. A decade ago, four of them — William Perry, Henry Kissinger, George Shultz and Sam Nunn — wrote an op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal* calling for "reversing the world's reliance on nuclear weapons, to prevent their proliferation into potentially dangerous hands, and ultimately ending them as a threat to the world."

They are not alone. Last month (June 21-23), the first meeting was convened of states-parties to the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). Citing "increasingly strident nuclear rhetoric," the TPNW states-parties issued the Vienna Declaration, which condemns all threats to use nuclear weapons as violations of international law, including the UN Charter. The declaration demands "that all nuclear-armed states never use or threaten to use nuclear weapons under any circumstances."

The nuclear states have refused to join the treaty, but that can change under popular pressure, as we have often seen before.

In August, the 10th review conference of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) will convene. That could offer an opportunity for an organized public to demand adherence to its provisions, which call for "good faith" efforts to remove the scourge of nuclear weapons from the Earth, and while pursuing these efforts, to sharply reduce the enormous threats they pose.

That will not happen if the two most important issues in human history are removed from attention, one almost completely while the other barely reaches a fraction of the concern it requires if there is to be a livable world.

We need not be passive observers, content to be mere instruments in the hands of the powerful. That is a choice, not a necessity.

Recently, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy warned in an interview with CNN that the world should take seriously the possibility that Russia might use nuclear weapons in Ukraine. However, on various occasions, he himself has hinted at the idea of Ukraine developing nuclear weapons even though the country is a signatory to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. I don't know if Ukraine has the capabilities to proceed with the development of a nuclear weapons program, but wouldn't it be absolutely suicidal to do so?

Completely suicidal. Even the first tentative efforts would lead to harsh retaliation, and then up the escalatory ladder. But in the light of the level of sanity exhibited by the leaders of the world, is it unthinkable?

Putin has openly stated that Russia is open to dialogue on nuclear non-proliferation, but the perspective on the part of the U.S. appears to be that Russia's invasion of Ukraine has subverted the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. I'd like your comments on this issue.

Let's recall the overriding concern: The great powers will find a way to cooperate in addressing today's critical problems, or the wreckage of human society will be so extreme that no one will care.

It follows that every option for dialogue should be seriously considered, and where at all feasible, pursued. Dialogue can in fact be pursued in an international

setting at the upcoming NPT review conference. Or the option can be simply dismissed as unthinkable, adopting the stance of the West at the G20 conference last week, where Russian foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, was treated "like a skunk at the tropical resort party, shunned by many, though by no means all."

The final qualification is of no slight significance. Those who did not join the West in shunning the skunk included the Indonesian hosts, who welcomed him, and a number of others: China, India, Brazil, Turkey, Argentina and others, along with Indonesia. That raises once again the question of just who is being isolated in the new world order that is taking shape.

That is no idle question, and it is not ignored. There are some serious reflections about it close to the centers of power. One case is an analysis of the evolving world order by Graham Fuller, former vice chair of the National Intelligence Council at CIA with responsibility for global intelligence estimates. His analysis raises issues that merit close attention.

Fuller has no illusions about the nature and roots of the war. Prime responsibility falls on the agents of the criminal aggression, Putin and his circle. That should be beyond controversy. But "secondary condemnation belongs to the U.S. (NATO) in deliberately provoking a war with Russia by implacably pushing its hostile military organization, despite Moscow's repeated notifications about crossing red lines, right up to the gates of Russia. This war did not have to be if Ukrainian neutrality, á la Finland and Austria, had been accepted. Instead, Washington has called for clear Russian defeat."

Fuller sees the conflict not as a "Ukrainian-Russian war but an American-Russian war fought by proxy to the last Ukrainian… And most of the rest of the world — Latin America, India, the Middle East and Africa — find few national interests in this fundamentally American war against Russia."

Those who refused to shun Russia at the G20 conference strongly condemned the invasion but did not take too seriously the professed outrage of the U.S. and its allies. Very likely, they were asking whether the U.S. was shunned as a pariah after carrying out its many violent criminal exploits, which there is no need to review. For many, the memories are heightened by vivid and ugly direct experience. How can they be expected to pay attention to the protestations of high principles from the leading violators of these principles, always with

immunity from anything more than occasional mild reprimands?

Europe is already suffering badly, Fuller continues, and will, sooner or later, have to "return to the purchase of inexpensive Russian energy." It has little realistic choice. "Russia lies on the doorstep and a natural economic relationship with Russia will possess overwhelming logic in the end." Beyond that, "Europe can even less afford to blunder into confrontation with China — a 'threat' perceived primarily by Washington yet unconvincing to many European states and much of the world." It will cost Europe dearly to isolate itself from China's Belt and Road Initiative, "perhaps the most ambitious economic and geopolitical project in world history," which runs right through Russia and "is already linking China with Europe by rail and sea… The end of the Ukraine war will bring serious reconsideration in Europe about the benefits of propping up Washington's desperate bid to maintain its global hegemony."

Another consequence of this desperate bid is that,

'Russia's geopolitical character has very likely now decisively tilted towards Eurasia… Russian elites now no longer possess an alternative to accepting that its economic future lies in the Pacific where Vladivostok lies only one or two hours away by air from the vast economies of Beijing, Tokyo, and Seoul. China and Russia have now been decisively pushed ever more closely together specifically out of common concern to block unfettered US freedom of unilateral military and economic intervention around the world. That the US can split US-induced Russian and Chinese cooperation is a fantasy. Russia has scientific brilliance, abundant energy, rich rare minerals and metals, while global warming will increase the agricultural potential of Siberia. China has the capital, the markets, and the manpower to contribute to what becomes a natural partnership across Eurasia.'

Fuller is far from alone. "The idea of Eurasia is once again the subject of geopolitics," reads a headline in the London *Economist*. The report reviews the renewed attention to the principle of the founder of modern geopolitics, Halford Mackinder, that control of the central Asian heartland is key to world control. These conceptions are taking new form as the Ukraine war reshapes the global strategic landscape in ways that may turn out to be profound.

The "utter corruption" of the media, Fuller writes, is one of the most disturbing

features of the current crisis: “In the midst of a virulent anti-Russian propaganda barrage whose likes I have never seen during my Cold Warrior days, serious analysts must dig deep these days to gain some objective understanding of what is actually taking place in Ukraine.”

That is sensible advice. There is more. The tendencies that are shaping world order are not immutable. Human agency has not ended. That crucially encompasses the agency of an organized public that demands an end to cynical posturing and a serious commitment to grasp the opportunities that exist for dialogue and accommodation. The alternatives are too grim to contemplate.

The campaign for nuclear disarmament goes back to the late 1950s. Yet the prospects for nuclear disarmament are dim, if not nonexistent. Nuclear disarmament requires that nation-states trust each other, which is a zero-probability event in the real world, but it is also extremely doubtful that the nuclear knowledge genie can ever be put back in the bottle. So, what is to be done? What are the most realistic ways to avoid nuclear war?

There are realistic ways to reduce the likelihood of terminal war — once again, the appropriate term for nuclear war involving great powers. The most immediate is a serious arms control regime. Elements of such a regime had been laboriously constructed since Eisenhower’s Open Skies proposals in 1955 — dismantled by Trump in May 2020 when he was wielding his wrecking ball. There were other important steps forward, among them the Reagan-Gorbachev Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) in 1987, which significantly reduced the threat of outbreak of terminal war in Europe — and, we should not forget, was impelled by enormous popular anti-nuclear protests in Europe and the U.S. Another step was the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which both sides recognized to be a “substantial factor in curbing the race in strategic offensive arms.”

The Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty was dismantled by George W. Bush, the INF treaty by Trump.

At the end of the Trump years, very little was left beyond the New START treaty, which Biden was able to rescue from demolition literally by a few days. It was due to expire shortly after his inauguration.

There is more, such as Trump’s destruction of the joint agreement (JCPOA) on Iranian nuclear programs in violation of the UN Security Council, which had

endorsed it, another contribution of the modern GOP to global destruction.

One of the great tragedies of the Ukraine war is that these means for reducing the threat of terminal war are being cast out the window. The U.S. cannot deign to descend to agreements with the skunk at the party. The tragedy is enhanced by the impending return to full power of the party of the wreckers.

Nonetheless, the same kinds of mass mobilization that helped bring about earlier steps toward sanity can be effective again. That means first resurrecting the tattered arms control regime, and then moving well beyond.

Other steps could be taken right now if sufficient popular pressures were mounted. In the coming weeks in fact, at the August NPT conference. Beyond moves to advance the TPNW and the professed goals of the NPT itself, there are further possibilities. One crucial issue that is likely to be raised again at the conference is a Nuclear-Weapons-Free Zone (NWFZ) in the Middle East. That could be a significant step towards international security. Popular pressures could help bring it to realization.

Establishment of a Middle East NWFZ has come up regularly at NPT review sessions, primarily at the initiative of the Arab states, who have even threatened to withdraw from the NPT if moves are not taken to implement it. It has almost unanimous global support, but is always blocked by Washington, most recently by Obama at the 2015 conference.

To review the basic facts once again, the call for a Mideast NWFZ is backed by the Arab states, Iran, and the Global South, G-77, now expanded to 134 countries, the large majority of the world. Europe raises no objections. The unilateral U.S. veto is accompanied with various pieties, easily dismissed. The real reasons are well understood: the massive Israeli nuclear weapons system, the only one in the region, must not be subject to international regulation. That is off the table, as *TheNew York Times* editors made clear recently in calling for a "Nuclear-Weapons-Free Persian Gulf" — *Persian Gulf*, not Middle East. A Persian Gulf NWFZ, the editors say, would be "One Way Forward on Iran," which is causing troubles once again by adhering to the unanimous consensus (minus the Master).

The U.S. refuses to officially acknowledge Israel's nuclear weapons facilities, presumably because to do so would call into question the legality of all U.S. aid to Israel, under U.S. law. That's a door that both political parties have insisted on

keeping tightly shut, but as public opinion on the matter has been visibly shifting, there are some breaks in rigid discipline. Congressional Rep. Betty McCollum, for one, has aroused much ire for sponsoring legislation to bar Israel from using U.S. military aid to attack Palestinian children.

Establishment of NWFZs is an important step toward reducing the nuclear weapons threat, even apart from the symbolism of global rejection of these monstrous achievements of human ingenuity. More accurately, it would be an important step if these could be implemented. Unfortunately, they are blocked by U.S. insistence on maintaining nuclear weapons facilities within them, matters we have reviewed before.

All of this could be on the agenda, right now, as ways of addressing the terminal threat.

Beyond that, there is the overriding concern: To repeat again, the great powers will find a way to cooperate in addressing today's critical problems, or nothing else will matter.

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Chomsky, 2021); and *Economics and the Left*: *Interviews with Progressive Economists* (2021).