

Noam Chomsky: The War In Ukraine Has Entered A New Phase



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Seven months on, the war in Ukraine has entered a new phase. Ukrainian forces are running a counteroffensive in the east and south regions of the country while Russia is still bent on annexation plans. Meanwhile, the West, with the U.S. at the forefront, continues with its [explicitly stated strategy](#) of weakening Russia to the point of regime collapse, thereby leaving no room for negotiations. All these developments indicate that peace remains distant in Ukraine and that the war may in fact be poised to become even more violent. Worse, argues Noam Chomsky below in an exclusive interview for *Truthout*, congressional hawks are increasing the risk of terminal war with the Taiwan Policy Act of 2022, which was just recently approved by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and appears to be modeled on programs from prior to the Russian attack that were turning Ukraine into a de facto NATO member.

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Urgent Need for Social Change (with C. J. Polychroniou; Haymarket Books, 2021).

C.J. Polychroniou: Noam, after seven months of conflict, Russia and Ukraine find themselves in a situation that is hard to get out of. Russia is suffering great losses, and a recent Ukrainian counteroffensive has recaptured dozens of towns and villages in the northeast of the country. Under these circumstances, it seems that neither side is eager to pursue a peace settlement. Firstly, are you surprised by Russia's problems on the battlefield, and, secondly, do you agree with the statement made recently by the minister in charge of the Hungarian Prime Minister's Office that Moscow still has a major advantage over Kyiv and that it can declare victory whenever it wants?

Noam Chomsky: First, let me make it clear that I have nothing original to say about the military situation, and have no expert knowledge in this area. What I know is what's reported, almost entirely from Western sources.

The general picture is that Russia has suffered a devastating defeat, demonstrating the utter incompetence of the Russian military and the remarkable capacities of the Ukrainian army provided with advanced U.S. armaments and detailed intelligence information about the disposition of Russian forces, a tribute to the courage of the Ukrainian fighters and to the intensive U.S. training, organization and supply of the Ukrainian army for almost a decade.

There's plenty of evidence to support this interpretation, which is close to exceptionless apart from detail. A useful rule of thumb whenever there is virtual unanimity on complex and murky issues is to ask whether something is perhaps omitted. Keeping to mainstream Western sources, we can indeed find more that perhaps merits attention.

Reuters [reports](#) a "western official" whose assessment is that:

'There's an ongoing debate about the nature of the Russian drawdown, however it's likely that in strict military terms, this was a withdrawal, ordered and sanctioned by the general staff, rather than an outright collapse.... Obviously, it looks really dramatic. It's a vast area of land. But we have to factor in the Russians have made some good decisions in terms of shortening their lines and making them more defensible, and sacrificing territory in order to do so.'

There are varying interpretations of the equipment losses in the Russian flight/withdrawal. There is no need to review the familiar picture. A [more nuanced](#)

[version](#) is given by *Washington Post* journalists on the scene, who report scattered and ambiguous evidence. They also review online video and satellite imagery indicating that the destroyed and abandoned military vehicles may have been at an equipment hub. Examining the videos, Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges, former commander of U.S. Army Europe, concludes that the destruction was mostly at a staging area where “Russian forces stopped for fuel or were waiting for a mission when they fled,” the total amounting to a tank company that typically has about 10 or 11 tanks.

As one expects in a war zone, there is ample ambiguity, but little doubt that it was a major victory for Ukraine and its U.S.-NATO backers. I don’t think that Putin could simply “declare victory” after this humiliating setback, as the Hungarian prime minister suggests. On the prospects for a peace settlement, so little is reported or discussed that there is little to say.

Little, but not nothing. In the [current issue of *Foreign Affairs*](#), the major establishment journal, Fiona Hill and Angela Stent — highly regarded policy analysts with close government connections — report that:

‘According to multiple former senior US officials we spoke with, in April 2022, Russian and Ukrainian negotiators appeared to have tentatively agreed on the outlines of a negotiated interim settlement. The terms of that settlement would have been for Russia to withdraw to the positions it held before launching the invasion on February 24. In exchange, Ukraine would promise not to seek NATO membership and instead receive security guarantees from a number of countries.’

On dubious evidence, Hill and Stent blame the failure of these efforts on the Russians, but do not mention that British Prime Minister Boris Johnson at once flew to Kyiv with the message that Ukraine’s Western backers would not support the diplomatic initiative, followed by U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, who [reiterated](#) the official U.S. position that Washington’s goal in the war is to “weaken” Russia, meaning that negotiations are off the table.

Whether such initiatives continue, we do not know. If they do, they would not lack popular support, not only in the Global South but even in Europe, where [“77 percent of Germans believe that the West should initiate negotiations to end the Ukraine war.”](#) Surprisingly, more than half of Slovaks are reported to [favor a Russian victory](#).

Suppose that negotiations fail or are not even contemplated. What then? The general expert consensus seems to be that there will be a protracted war, with all of its tragic consequences. General Austin and other U.S. officials have held that Ukraine can drive Russia out of all of Ukraine, presumably including Crimea. Suppose the prospect arises.

Then follows the crucial question: Will Putin pack up his bags and slink away silently to obscurity or worse? Or will he use the conventional weapons that all agree he has to escalate the attack on Ukraine? The U.S. is gambling on the former but is not unaware of the nature of this gamble with the lives of Ukrainians, and well beyond. The *New York Times* [reports](#) that:

‘Some American officials express concern that the most dangerous moments are yet to come, even as Mr. Putin has avoided escalating the war in ways that have, at times, baffled Western officials. He has made only limited attempts to destroy critical infrastructure or to target Ukrainian government buildings. He has not attacked the supply hubs outside Ukraine. While he has directed low-level cyberattacks against Ukrainian targets every week, they have been relatively unsophisticated, especially when compared to capabilities that Russia has shown it has, including in the SolarWinds attack on American government and commercial systems that was discovered just before Mr. Biden took office.’

The same report cites Putin’s warning that, “If the situation continues to develop in this way — referring to U.S. participation in the recent Ukrainian counter-offensive — the answer will be more serious.” To illustrate, Putin “described recent Russian cruise missile attacks against Ukrainian infrastructure as ‘warning strikes.’”

The Ukrainian military understands the warning very well. Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Gen. Valery Zaluzhny had [written](#) that Russian cruise missiles “could strike across the country with ‘impunity,’” adding that “limited nuclear war cannot be ruled out.”

As we all know, the escalation ladder from limited to terminal nuclear war is all too easy to climb.

To put it simply, the U.S. position that the war must continue to severely weaken Russia, blocking negotiations, is based on a quite remarkable assumption: that facing defeat, Putin will pack his bags and slink away to a bitter fate. He will not

do what he easily can: strike across Ukraine with impunity using Russia's conventional weapons, destroying critical infrastructure and Ukrainian government buildings, attacking the supply hubs outside Ukraine, moving on to sophisticated cyberattacks against Ukrainian targets. All of this is easily within Russia's conventional capacity, as U.S. government and the Ukrainian military command acknowledge — with the possibility of escalation to nuclear war in the not remote background.

The assumption is worth contemplating. It is too quickly evaded.

Also worth contemplating is the fact that "Mr. Putin has avoided escalating the war in ways that have, at times, baffled Western officials." The same puzzlement has been expressed before. The U.S. and U.K. were baffled by the Russian offensive, severely underestimating its scale from the start. "We assumed they would invade a country the way we would have invaded a country," [as one British official put it](#).

When the U.S.-U.K. invade a country, they go for the jugular, destroying communications, transportation, energy systems, anything needed to keep the country going. To the surprise of the U.S.-U.K. planners, Putin didn't do that. The press [reports](#) that, "In Kyiv and much of the western part of the country, prewar life has largely returned for civilians. People eat in restaurants, drink in bars, dance and enjoy lazy summer days in parks."

Far from the U.S.-U.K. style of war.

Western military analysts offer reasons why "[Putin's Bombers Could Devastate Ukraine But He's Holding Back](#)." Whatever the reasons, the fact remains.

The gamble with the lives of Ukrainians, and far beyond, remains as well, eliciting little attention. Something else that merits contemplation.

It's also useful finally to reiterate a familiar word of warning. Propaganda never ceases and rises to peaks of intensity at moments of crisis. Triumphant claims are always worth inspection. To take one example, much has been made of India's alleged break with Russia over the war, based on a few words by Prime Minister Modi at a Samarkand meeting with Putin. The [quoted words](#) are "I know that today's era is not of war." Omitted is that Modi went on to stress that, "The relationship between India and Russia has deepened manifold. We also value this

relationship because we have been such friends who have been with each other every moment for the last several decades and the whole world also knows how Russia's relationship with India has been and how India's relationship with Russia has been and therefore the world also knows that it is an unbreakable friendship."

The Ukrainian government is pursuing backroom negotiations for the delivery of advanced American-made weapons, according to some reports. In addition, President Zelenskyy and his government have put forward a document of long-term security guarantees from the West which would link Ukraine's future security directly to the presence of NATO forces in the country. Unexpectedly enough, Moscow immediately shut down the proposal and the vice president of the Russian Security Council called it "a prologue to the third world war." Is the so-called Kyiv Security Treaty a path toward a peace settlement or a sure way not only to keep the conflict going on indefinitely but also to escalate it to a higher level?

It is hard to imagine that any Russian government would tolerate NATO forces in Ukraine. That has been understood for 30 years by high-level U.S. officials who have any knowledge of the region, and it's even more unlikely now. What Russia might tolerate is a weakened version of this demand: long-term security guarantees with what's called in diplomacy "strategic ambiguity," coupled with termination of the plans for NATO membership for Ukraine. In the past, Zelenskyy has suggested something like that. Whether that remains an option, we of course cannot know until an effort is undertaken to reach a diplomatic settlement, as apparently it was by Ukraine and Russia as recently as last April.

The Biden administration, the Pentagon particularly, has been careful not to escalate its participation in the war so rapidly as to elicit the Russian reaction that hasn't occurred, baffling Washington and London. Congress is another matter. It seems hell-bent on hurtling to disaster. Calls for no-fly zones and other very dangerous initiatives have been blocked by the Pentagon, but plenty of saber-rattling continues. That extends to China, or to keep to the rules, what we should call the "Indo-Pacific area of the North Atlantic" in the light of the decisions at the recent NATO summit.

Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan was reckless enough, but congressional hawks, a bipartisan collective, are determined to raise the possibility of terminal nuclear war even higher.

A major [step in this direction](#) was taken on September 14, when the Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved the [Taiwan Policy Act of 2022](#), cosponsored by Committee Chairman Robert Menendez (D-NJ) and Lindsey Graham (R-SC).

The act calls for Taiwan to be designated as a “major non-NATO ally.” Taiwan is to be provided with \$4.5 billion in security assistance over the next four years, part of establishing “a comprehensive training program with the Government of Taiwan.” The act also seeks “more interoperability between the US and Taiwanese militaries [along with] joint US-Taiwan contingency tabletop exercises, war games and what the bill calls ‘robust, operationally relevant, or full-scale’ military exercises,” *Asia Times* reports.

Furthermore, the act declares U.S. government policy to be “to provide the people of Taiwan with de facto diplomatic treatment equivalent to foreign countries, nations, states, governments, or similar entities” and to remove “any undue restrictions” on the ability of U.S. officials at any level “to interact directly and routinely with their counterparts in the Government of Taiwan.”

Former Australian defense official Mike Scrafton [observes](#) that “The Chinese cannot but regard this as a provocative de facto recognition of Taiwan’s independence.” Under international law, which regards Taiwan as part of China, it is “a patent infringement of China’s sovereignty and a fundamental weakening of the one-China policy.” Once again, the U.S. “rules-based order,” in defiance of international law, is seen to be nothing other “than preservation of US hegemony.” If passed, “The Act would be a game-changer and reflects the American preparedness to engage in a war that would be disastrous for the region and the world.” It should lead Australia to rethink its commitment to the U.S.-dominated regional system.

The wording of the act seems to be modelled on the programs prior to the Russian invasion that were turning Ukraine into a “de facto NATO member,” in the words of the U.S. military, matters we have discussed elsewhere.

The Biden administration opposes the measure, as it did Pelosi’s action. Even more than that exercise in self-promotion, the Menendez-Graham measure would be a serious blow to the “strategic ambiguity” of the One-China policy that has kept the peace in a volatile region for half a century.

The European Union is pressuring China and India to support the idea of a price cap on Russian oil. Russia, of course, has said that it will not sell oil to countries that impose a price limit, so the question here is twofold: first, how likely is it that China and India will go along with the EU's suggestion, especially since both countries have not only increased their Russian oil purchases since Moscow's invasion of Ukraine but are buying at discounted prices, and, second, what would be the political ramifications in the event that they succumbed to pressure and did go along?

All of this is part of the reconfiguration of global order that has been going on for some time and was spurred onward by Putin's criminal aggression. A side consequence was to deliver Europe into Washington's hands. This most welcome gift was provided free of charge by Vladimir Putin when he [rejected French President Macron's last-minute efforts](#) to avert an invasion, at the end with undisguised contempt, a major contribution to Washington's Atlanticist project of global hegemony.

The core issue at stake, I think, is unipolarity-multipolarity. Since the U.S. took over the reins from Britain 80 years ago, reaching far beyond Britain's dreams, it has sought a unipolar world, and to a substantial extent it has realized that goal, in ways we need not review. There has always been resistance.

In many ways the most significant, and least discussed, form of resistance has been the effort of former colonies to find a place in the international order: UNCTAD, the New International Economic Order, the New International Information Order, and many other initiatives. These were crushed by imperial power, sometimes reaching the level of assassination (the very important case of Patrice Lumumba) if other means did not suffice. Some elements survive, like BRICS [the economic alliance of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa]. Most significantly in the modern global scene, rising China leads the effort to develop a multipolar order.

Right now, the long-term conflict is manifested in many concrete ways. One is the intense U.S. effort to impede China's technological development and to "encircle" it with a ring of heavily armed U.S. satellites. Another is the NATO-based U.S.-run Atlanticist project, now given a shot in the arm by Putin's criminality, and recently extended formally to the Indo-Pacific region. The major competing element is China's huge development and investment project, the Belt and Road

initiative backed by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, encompassing Central Asia and by now reaching well beyond. At an ideological level, the confrontation sets the UN-based international order against the rules-based international order (with the U.S. setting the rules). The latter is adopted with little controversy or even notice in the U.S.

The important specific issues raised in the question find their place within this broader framework. Their resolution depends on how the broad process of reorganization of the international order develops. A highly uncertain matter, one of great portent.

Not in the distant background is a more fundamental matter, which cannot be put aside. Unless the great powers find ways to accommodate to confront the most important threats that have arisen in human history — environmental destruction and nuclear war — nothing else will matter.

And time is short.

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Economists (2021).