Interview on the War in Ukraine with Noam Chomsky

written by Noam Chomsky, Stephen R. Shalom | October 9, 2022

Noam Chomsky has been a leading voice on the U.S. left for more than half a century and one of the world's most-cited scholars and public intellectuals. He has published more than 150 books on linguistics, U.S. foreign policy and current affairs, and the media, the most recent of which are *The Precipice*: *Neoliberalism, the Pandemic and the Urgent Need for Social Change* (with C.J. Polychroniou; Haymarket, 2021), *The Secrets of Words* (with Andrea Moro; MIT Press, 2022), and *The Withdrawal: Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, and the Fragility of U.S. Power* (with Vijay Prashad; The New Press, 2022). He agreed to respond to some questions on the war in Ukraine posed by Stephen R. Shalom, a member of the *New Politics* editorial board and editor of *Perilous Power: The Middle East and U.S. Foreign Policy*, a series of dialogues between Noam Chomsky and Gilbert Achcar (Paradigm, 2009). Shalom sent Chomsky a set of questions by email to which he responded. Shalom then added a brief reply at the end and Chomsky contributed a brief rejoinder.

Questions

1. **SRS:** There are some (like Code Pink or DSA's International Committee) who argue that the peace movement should oppose weapons deliveries to Ukraine by the U.S. government because the provision of weapons undermines diplomacy. Others say that Ukraine needs to be able to defend itself in order to negotiate an acceptable end to the war (such as the terms that Ukrainian president Zelensky put forward at the war's beginning) and maintain that denying Ukraine weapons amounts to forcing it to capitulate. What is your view?

NC: Personally, I don't accept either of the positions you formulate. Ukraine should receive weapons for self-defense — though this seems to me to have little to do with negotiating an acceptable end to the war, including Zelensky's proposals. I should add on the side that I'm quite surprised at how few seem to agree with providing military aid: a mere 40% in the US-Europe.

But my response is misleading. Too much is omitted. First, there is an enormous disparity between the two positions. The latter ("others") almost totally dominate public discourse. The former are barely heard. We are speaking of a debate between an elephant and a flea. Second, there is a good bit more to be said about these positions.

The flea calls for "ceasefire and total withdrawal of Russian troops" from Ukraine, and argues that a turn towards diplomacy offers a better hope for ending the horrors of Putin's criminal aggression than continuing the flow of weapons, which escalates the war. To the very limited extent that its stand even receives notice within public discourse in the US, the reaction is dismissal if not obloquy.

The position of the elephant, in contrast, is almost universally accepted, and without critical

analysis. For these reasons, it merits close attention.

This position is based on several assumptions. It appears to be assuming that prolonging the war will improve Ukraine's negotiating position. Maybe. The US stance goes far beyond: US officials and many commentators hold that with western military aid, Ukraine can win the war, driving Russian forces out of all of Ukraine. That stance brings forth a critical assumption: If facing defeat, Mad Vlad — a monster who will do anything to extend his power – will quietly pack his bags and slink away to oblivion.

Perhaps, but there is clearly another possibility, suggested obliquely by US-UK military analysts, including the British official quoted in the *Washington Post* article cited below. In his words, "We assumed they would invade a country the way we would have invaded a country." When the US-UK 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 US-UK 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."

There's little doubt that Putin could adopt the US-UK style of war, even well short of using tactical nuclear weapons. The Ukrainian military understands that very well. Ukrainian commander in chief Gen. Valery Zaluzhny writes 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.

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

Returning to the elephant, it is therefore calling for a remarkable gamble: let's gamble that Putin will quietly accept total defeat and personal destruction rather than moving on to emulate the US-UK style of war.

Maybe, but it's quite a gamble with the fate of Ukrainians, and well beyond. It is, perhaps, surprising that all this passes with almost no comment.

Turning to what more is omitted, the official US stance is that the war must go on in order to severely weaken Russia, in fact, to weaken it so severely that it will not be able to undertake aggression again – that is, more severely than Germany was weakened at Versailles in 1919. Just what that entails, I'll leave to the imagination, but we can be confident that adversaries don't ignore it.

The policy was made explicit at the US-run Ramstein Air Base meeting in April, often reaffirmed since. But that is only the most recent illustration of a long history of US avoiding diplomacy. This is not the place to review it again (I've done so repeatedly, including many interviews in *Truthout*). The record reveals that the policies of effectively integrating Ukraine into the US-military command have been consistent for years. They were extended last September in an official White House statement calling for further integration of US-Ukrainian forces. The statement also formally designates Ukraine as a "NATO Enhanced Opportunities Partner." Progress in this program has been such that US military journals have referred to Ukraine as a "de facto" member of NATO. Furthermore, the State Department has acknowledged that the US does not take Russian security concerns into consideration. In this and many other ways, the US has impeded the prospects for a diplomatic settlement – for principled reasons, as made clear at Ramstein and since.

There's endless discussion of how we should fight the war, virtually nothing about how we might bring the horrors to an end – horrors that extend far beyond Ukraine. The radical imbalance is striking and instructive.

The rare calls for moving to a diplomatic settlement regularly elicit bitter condemnation, even when they come from revered warhawks like Kissinger: "Munich," "Putin lover," and worse. In this regard, the US differs from the mainstream of world opinion, not only in the Global South but even Europe, where "77 percent of Germans believe that the West should initiate negotiations to end the Ukraine war."

It's worthwhile to digress for a moment on US doctrinal isolation, a background for discussion of these matters that should not be overlooked. To take one of myriad examples, the current issue of the major establishment journal *Foreign Affairs* – moderate and independent by US standards — has an article on Ukraine and the world by two representatives of the more liberal wing of policy planning and discussion, Fiona Hill and Angela Stent. They find incomprehensible the unwillingness of the Global South – most of the world – to join the US in its obviously noble efforts. The South even sinks so low as to "argue that what Russia is doing in Ukraine is no different from what the United States did in Iraq or Vietnam" – which would indeed be a serious error, but for reasons the authors could not comprehend. The South doesn't even share our distress "that Russia has violated the UN Charter and international law by unleashing an unprovoked attack on a neighbor's territory," an unimaginable crime. The only explanation the authors can think of for this remarkable lack of understanding of the world is Putin's propaganda machinations.

It will be interesting to see if there is a word of critical comment.

2. **SRS:** Some think the United States should use its leverage (weapons supplies, etc.) to pressure Ukraine into making particular concessions to Russia. What do you think of that idea?

NC: I haven't heard of that proposal, but if raised, it should be dismissed. What right does the US have to do anything like that?

3. **SRS:** You have said that in any negotiated conclusion to the Ukraine war, "Crimea is off the table." What is your view of the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and why do you think Crimea is off the table? Is it a matter of right or of might?

NC: When was "right" an operative concept in world affairs?

I don't pretend to be a military expert, but all of them seem to agree that for Ukraine to conquer Crimea would be at best a bloody slaughter, if even imaginable. If so, it's off the table for now. On the "Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014," it's not as simple a matter as in the US propaganda version. There's a substantial scholarly literature on the complex events of 2014, which I can't try to review here; historian Richard Sakwa's work, for example. On Crimea, I can only refer you to what I've written, which also discusses a bit of the background as reviewed by John Quigley, the U.S. State Department representative in the OSCE delegation that considered the problem of Ukraine after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

4. **SRS:** You have suggested the analogy between a U.S. military alliance with Ukraine and a Chinese military alliance with Mexico, the latter being simply unimaginable. But the left has certainly supported Cuba's right to receive arms (other than nuclear missiles) from the Soviet Union. More generally, don't we support the right of the victims of great power bullying to receive defensive weapons from rival great powers, even though the bullies are unhappy and the motives of the weapons providers are of course themselves far from altruistic?

NC: The abstract right of victims of great power violence to be supplied with defensive weapons – including Ukraine – does not arise, at least for me. The wisdom of doing so, however, constantly arises. How much of the left called for Russian supply of weapons to Iraq to defend itself from the devasting US-UK invasion? How much of the left called for Russia and China to provide advanced weapons to the NLF that would lead the US invaders to escalate their horrendous assault?

I find the analogy to Cuba rather odd. As scholarship recognizes, Cuba was a "virtual colony" of the US until Castro's victory. In a few months, it was under attack from Florida bases. Kennedy invaded, and when that failed, launched a murderous terrorist war and imposed harsh sanctions that have crushed the economy, becoming more brutal over the years, opposed by the entire world (US-Israel excluded) though all adhere to the sanctions in fear of US retribution. I don't see any useful analogy to Ukraine.

5. **SRS:** While agreeing with you that NATO's eastward expansion was provocative and unwarranted, I wonder whether you haven't overstated the degree to which the United States could have in the preceding months prevented the Russian invasion? For example, you cite the recent *Washington Post* investigation of the period leading up to the Russian invasion as showing, according to a summary by George Beebe and Anatol Lieven, that Washington eschewed negotiation. But my reading of the *Post* report suggests a different conclusion. While confirming the U.S. government's public position that it was unwilling to rule out the possibility of Ukraine eventually joining NATO (impossible in any case as long as Russia's annexation of Crimea and presence in Donbas stand), the report also shows that Biden assured Putin that there was no immediate prospect of Ukraine joining NATO and that the U.S. was willing to discuss the issue of the placement of U.S. weapons systems in Europe (one of Putin's "red lines"). In early January, deputy secretary of state Wendy Sherman "offered talks and trust-building measures in a number of security areas, including the deployment of troops and the placement of weapons on NATO's eastern flank along the border with Russia." Later in the month, secretary of state Antony Blinken offered to discuss security concerns with Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov and made no headway. The British defense minister met with his Russian counterpart with an offer to talk and was told Russia had no intention of invading Ukraine. And French president Macron got a commitment from Putin to meet with Biden, which Putin reneged on. So what do you make of these facts?

NC: The Beebe-Lieven article gives one example of how the US might have averted the invasion had it had any interest in doing so. That greatly understates "the degree to which the United States could have in the preceding months prevented the Russian invasion." Above, I barely sampled the rich record of how the US moved systematically towards integration of Ukraine within the US military command, designating Ukraine as a "NATO Enhanced Opportunities Partner."

True, there was no "immediate prospect" of Ukraine joining NATO, which is to say that there was a prospect. And, in fact, the US was working towards that end in the months before the invasion within the "Enhanced" program that it announced a year ago. As virtually all high-level US diplomats with any knowledge of the region have pointed out, "trying to bring Georgia and Ukraine into NATO was truly overreaching…recklessly ignoring what the Russians considered their own vital national interests" (W. Bush's defense secretary Robert Gates, expressing a broad consensus in these circles).

"The Russians" include US favorites, like Clinton's friend Boris Yeltsin. And the late Mikhail Gorbachev, who accused the West and NATO of destroying the structure of European security by expanding its alliance. "No head of the Kremlin can ignore such a thing," he said, adding that the U.S. was unfortunately starting to establish a "mega empire," words echoed by Putin and other Russian officials.

To pursue the Mexico analogy, suppose that an immensely more powerful China was integrating Mexico within its military command but assured the US that there was no "immediate prospect" of its joining its global military alliance though it was working towards that end. Would we regard that as a generous offer? And if China went on to express willingness to discuss its deployment of troops and weapons on the US border, would the US thank them for the conciliatory step? Or regard it as an insult.

I've discussed elsewhere what I make of the rest of the facts. Putin's rejection of Macron's initiatives was criminal, and also stupid, since he was offering Washington its fondest wish: driving Europe into its pocket and undermining the Gorbachev vision of a common European home that would be a far better outcome than the US-run Atlanticist system, a topic I've discussed at length elsewhere and that I think is extremely important.

6. **SRS:** You have said that the United States has been unwilling to contemplate a diplomatic settlement of the conflict or to accept the neutralization of Ukraine, drawing an analogy to U.S. policy during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. But whatever the U.S. record in Afghanistan, in Ukraine U.S. officials have not ruled out diplomacy or neutralization – if that's what Ukraine wants. When Zelensky floated the idea of neutralization in March, the U.S. comment was "This is ultimately a question for our Ukrainian partners to decide – to decide the terms of diplomacy, what they are willing to pursue, what they are not willing to pursue." When asked in late April whether the United States would be open to accepting Ukraine as an unaligned neutral nation, Secretary Blinken declared (at 1:25:02):

   > "We … are not going to be more Ukrainian than the Ukrainians. These are decisions for them to make. Our purpose is to make sure that they have within their hands the ability to repel the Russian aggression and indeed to strengthen their hand at an eventual negotiating table. We've seen no sign to date that President Putin is serious about meaningful negotiations. If he is, and if the Ukrainians engage, we'll support that."

   Now of course we don't know what is being said in private or what will take place in the future, but my reading of the current evidence leaves me less convinced of the claim that Washington has been blocking negotiations.

NC: I wouldn't be so quick to dismiss the Afghan record of the '80s, now well-documented. One reason is the close similarity to current policy that I discussed. We can therefore learn a lot from it. Beyond that, without checking, I suppose that while Washington was working hard to undermine diplomatic efforts to end the

Russian invasion so as to "weaken" Russia, it was also producing banal statements about how everything's up to the Afghan people.

In the light of the well-documented record, it seems to me to require quite a leap of faith to take current US government pronouncements on diplomacy seriously. The record seems to me to show convincingly that the US has been impeding meaningful negotiations throughout, by now unequivocally by adopting the official war aims of continuing the war in order to severely weaken Russia.

These efforts to undermine diplomacy apparently continue. Hill and Stent 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."

Hill-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 US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, who reiterated the official US position that Washington's goal in the war is to "weaken" Russia.

I don't frankly see the relevance of Blinken's comments. Yes, Ukrainians have to make their own decisions. And the US has to make its own decisions, with a great deal at stake of enormous global significance that I need not review.

7. **SRS:** The Russian antiwar movement has vehemently condemned Putin's war as imperialist aggression and is supporting desertion as well as sabotage acts. They fully agree with Ukrainian socialists and anarchists who regard their country's fighting back as legitimate defense and have joined the local popular defense units (Territorial Defense). How do you assess these positions?

NC: The way I have always done in the past. That's basically the position that we took in the '60s and since, tactical questions aside. Why should there be any change in this case?

Furthermore, quite rightly, the Russian antiwar movement is focusing its energy and efforts on Russian crimes, scarcely raising, if at all, the misdeeds of official enemies. It is, in short, adhering to the elementary moral principle that all should observe: focus attention and engagement on the factor that is our responsibility and that we can most effectively influence.

Much to its credit.

Response by Stephen R. Shalom

I'm not sure I get the elephant and flea argument. Surely, we don't take positions based on whether they have a lot or a little support. When some on the left argued against voting for Biden in swing states in 2020, we both spoke out against this view even though the majority of opinion leaders also favored voting for Biden. In the same way, doesn't the fact that major segments of the left oppose arms to Ukraine warrant response, even though most mainstream opinion supports providing weapons?

It is true that the left didn't call for Russian supply of weapons to Iraq to defend itself from the devasting US-UK invasion. But is this the right analogy? Saddam Hussein's could hardly be regarded as a legitimate government, lacking any democratic legitimacy and responsible for huge massacres, especially against the Kurds. Iraq's population didn't support his war. The more relevant analogy to Ukraine would seem to be those governments that were justly resisting great power aggression with undisputed popular support – like Vietnam, or Cuba, or Nicaragua. And in none of these sorts of cases did the left object to the USSR or China (or others) providing weapons to the victims of aggression.

To be sure, the left didn't call for aid to the National Liberation Front that "would lead the US invaders to escalate their horrendous assault." But the Soviet Union and China provided massive amounts of military aid to Vietnam, with no objection from the global left. Indeed, the scale of the weapons provided was often greater than that provided by the United States to Ukraine (Moscow's aid included jet planes and anti-aircraft missiles along with Soviet crews; Beijing sent tanks, planes, and 150,000 anti-aircraft artillery soldiers).

Washington, of course, did escalate its horrendous assault, many times. The USSR and China refrained from supplying Vietnam with missiles that could strike the United States, and no one on the left called for that. But almost no one on the left supports delivery to Ukraine of missiles or planes that can strike Russia itself.

Regarding the Cuba example, Cuba, like Ukraine, was a dependency of a great power that established relations with the other great power. The power that considered the dependency to be within its sphere of influence was furious, but in the Cuban case the left position held that Havana had the right to establish relations with whomever it wanted and, when threatened, to receive defensive weapons from whomever it wanted. The left does not respect imperial spheres of influence. Why wouldn't the same apply to Ukraine?

The claim that Boris Johnson scuttled a diplomatic solution seems to me to go beyond the evidence and to minimize Ukrainian agency.

Finally, we agree on praising the Russian antiwar movement, but what about the position of the Ukrainian socialists and anarchists who, while opposing their government's neoliberal and xenophobic policies, have taken up arms against the Russian invaders.

Rejoinder from Noam Chomsky

On the flea-elephant, the question is not what position to take, but how to distribute energies. The elephant dominates public discourse. The various fleas are barely heard. If one chooses to focus on them, fine, but then let's be clear what is at stake. The fleas mentioned here differ from the elephant primarily on tactics: expelling the Russian invaders by force or negotiations. The latter (flea) position is either ignored or vilified in the US, but is normal elsewhere: the Global South of course but even much of Europe, ¾ of Germans for example. Another sign of the sharp deviation of the US from most of the world.

The flea position is also standard on the left. On Vietnam, the main target of the US wars was always South Vietnam. The left called for a negotiated withdrawal of US forces. It did not call for continuing the war to severely weaken the US – the official US government policy on Ukraine.

The other analogies you suggest, when unraveled, seem to me to lead to similar conclusions. In our discussion, there is no issue over sending arms to Ukraine for defense, Ukrainian agency, supporting Ukrainian leftists who fight against the invaders, opposing spheres of influence, or the rest of what you mention, with one exception. It's true that we don't know for sure whether Boris Johnson (and Lloyd Austin) "scuttled a diplomatic solution" (nor did I say so), because such matters are barely even reported in the US. It is, however, a fair surmise that their visits repeated the official policy: continue the war to severely weaken Russia, and gamble that Putin won't use his conventional weapons to devastate Ukraine in a US-UK style war, puzzling US-UK military analysts, as we've already discussed

There is no question of justifying Putin's criminal invasion. There are questions about what should be our primary concern: what we can hope to influence, US policy. It is becoming harder and harder to justify US policies. Or to ignore the reluctant conclusion of John Quigley that "It's reasonable to question whether the U.S. goal is less to force Russia out of Ukraine than to fight Russia to the last Ukrainian"