Harsh Critique of Chomsky on Ukraine

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On April 8, Noam Chomsky was in a dialogue with Bill Fletcher, Jr. live on *The Real News*. Fletcher is a syndicated columnist, a regular media commentator and the former president of the TransAfrica Forum. The discussion was called "A Left Response to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine." Though Chomsky denounced the Russian invasion of Ukraine, calling it a crime of aggression, it wouldn't be far wrong to say Chomsky placed all of the blame for Russia's attack on the U.S. government. The U.S., he said, crossed obvious "red lines" when it was clear that Russia would react violently.

The title of the event should have been "Chomsky Calls for Realpolitik for the 21st century." All the authorities he quoted in support of his arguments were strategists, diplomats, and ambassadors, like George Kennan, Jack Matlock, Chas Freeman, CIA directors and the like. These are "realists," political theorists in a tradition going back all the way to Machiavelli that rejected talking about how states *should* act and instead talked about how they *did* act and how a "prince" or statesman had to be realistic and not try to go against the flow. Realists want nations to respect great powers' "spheres of influence," "national interests," the balance of power, etc. and rail against human rights, democracy, equality or other moral considerations as a major concern for foreign policy.

Now, what has any of that have to do with us on the Left? Where are the matters dear to us like democracy, equality, class and national self-determination? In fact, not a single leftist was mentioned by Chomsky in his hour-long interview.

Fletcher mentions that in his final speech before the invasion, Putin didn't emphasize the supposed threat of NATO but claimed that Ukraine had no legitimate reason to exist. Chomsky agrees (13:55) that Putin has said those things, but then immediately minimizes them and brings up a Putin quote that "anyone who wants to reestablish the Soviet Union with its former borders is out of its mind." He says Russia is really not that strong with an economy the size of Italy. Then he makes an astounding comment. At 15:40 he says, "It's not about to conquer anybody, inconceivable." That's a pretty bizarre statement, seeing that Russia was invading Ukraine right as he spoke. Did he mean Russia is not going to conquer all of the old Soviet Union's empire? Well, he sure didn't say it.

In the next sentence, Chomsky says, "Ukraine is indeed a special case as it's been for 30 years." He then goes on to say there were other statements about Russia's war goals made by Russia's foreign minister that explained the main desire of Russia was for neutralization and demilitarization of Ukraine, and security for the Donbas region. So Chomsky wants us to think that Lavrov and other Putin flunkies are controlling what Russia really wants, not the gent who speaks to his underlings from one side of that very long table.

Chomsky detailed the assurances made to Gorbachev and others that if the Soviet Union (in 1990) allowed Germany to reunite and join NATO then NATO would not advance "one inch" further eastward. These verbal promises were made though there was nothing as solid as a treaty defining this. On the other hand Chomsky did *not* mention the written and signed 1994 Budapest Memorandum which guaranteed in writing that Russia and the US and Britain would respect

Ukraine's then existing 40-year-old borders. When Fletcher brings it up (19:21) and the general question of security, Chomsky ducks the question and starts talking about neutrality which he says has worked well for Mexico, Austria and Finland.

Fletcher brings up the Budapest Memorandum again (21:30) and asks how Ukrainians could expect Russia to abide by a treaty since in 2014 Russia violated the Memorandum, seized Crimea, and supported the Donbas separatists.

Chomsky answers, "Certainly Ukraine could not assume that Russia would abide by treaty" and then goes off on the fact that the U.S. doesn't abide by treaties and gives example after example. Then he seemingly goes back to Fletcher's question and says the issue is "Are the circumstances such that the great powers will live up to their commitments?" and then he goes on a riff of what would the situation have been now if the U.S. had listened to the warnings of statesman like Kennan. Other than saying something vague about "circumstances," he doesn't explain how Ukraine was supposed to deal with a Russian government that ignored its own written pledge not to invade.

Chomsky elaborates that statesman warned that Russia would accept NATO expansion and humiliations, but only up to a point. Its red lines were in Georgia and Ukraine (25:45) which are "deep within the Russian geo-strategic heartland as recognized on all sides." What kind of a Leftist talks like that? What Leftist thinks Mexico or Cuba is part of the U.S. "heartland" just because it borders or is near to the U.S.?

At 27:47 Chomsky looks back at the "current situation." He says U.S. policy now is to fight to the "last Ukrainian" and block prospects for peace, giving Putin no alternatives except "suicide" or a path to nuclear war. Not entertained is the idea that Ukrainians want to fight to live in their own country after seeing what it was like to live under Russian domination. No, it's the U.S. calling the shots.

Fletcher asks Chomsky why Putin would be worried about NATO expansion into Ukraine since he knew Germany and France were opposed to the idea and would veto it. Chomsky replies that the U.S. has overwhelming power and countries are terrified of this "violent rogue state" and goes on to talking about the U.S. war against Cuba. In short, he doesn't answer Fletcher.

One thing that stuck in my craw was that Chomsky said several times, "Crimea is off the table." Who is he to say that? It was part of Ukraine for 70 years. It was understood in writing in the Budapest Memorandum that it was part of Ukraine. So currently it's made up of overwhelmingly Russian speakers. One reason for that is a brutal ethnic cleansing during World War II. Stalin deported a quarter of a million people from Crimea, mostly Tatars. Tens of thousands died. Chomsky makes much of the fact the Crimea is home to a warm water port. So what? Russia has plenty of ports. See this list. What if it was landlocked? There are 44 land-locked countries in the world. They take goods by truck and rail to the seaports of other nations. Leftists don't have a problem with that, only "strategic" thinkers. The Left universally condemns the U.S. for forcing Cubans to allow it to maintain a military base on Guantanamo. So why should Russia have the eternal right to have one on the Crimean peninsula?

At 40:38 Fletcher asks about Putin's warfare in Chechnya and Syria and Fletcher says he sees "a line that goes from Chechnya to Ukraine" for which the U.S. has had little or no role.

Chomsky really goes off the rails here when he talks about Syria. It's worth quoting his whole statement. At 41:39 he starts:

> "Syria, it was criminal and murderous and destructive, but if we want to know the

> reasons they were not obscure. The United States, France, Germany were supporting opposition forces which by 2013, 2014 were mostly jihadi forces which were fighting against the recognized government of Syria, the government that has a seat in the United Nations and is internationally recognized. They were trying to overthrow it, that's a Russian ally. The CIA was providing advanced weapons to the opposition forces, advanced anti-tank weapons, which did stop the Assad armies. Quite predictably. It didn't take a genius to predict it . I predicted it. Others did. The Russians reacted. Russia came into the war, really for the first time, to attack the CIA's anti-tank weapons. Then they went on to support Assad's brutal, vicious effort to reconquer Syria, horrible atrocities, and so on. Technically it's not criminal, certainly not illegal, but it's criminal in the moral sense not in the legal sense. That's what happened in Syria."

Fletcher interrupts and says, "One of the things you're discounting is that there was an uprising in Syria."

Chomsky:

> "There was an uprising, it was part of the Arab Spring, a democratic reformist uprising, and Assad crushed it with extreme violence. That led on to the civil war and gradually the jihadi forces pretty much took over. You can debate the details, but by 2013, 2014 there was a largely jihadi based opposition, which the U.S. was supporting attempting to overthrow the government brutal murderous government responsible for the overwhelming most of the crimes, but happened to be the international recognized government, which was a Russian ally and when it got to the point where the CIA was providing advanced weapons, not surprisingly, the Russians moved in to destroy them. Then it went on to the destruction of the rest of Syria. Is it pretty? No, it's very ugly. Nobody believes the Russians are saints, but they're an imperial power, minor in comparison to the United States, as an economy they're on par with Italy and Spain, advanced weapons. They are…we don't have to recall Russia was invaded and virtually destroyed twice in the 20th century by Germany alone …Now the idea of an advanced, hostile military alliance run by the world's most powerful and aggressive state which is providing and enhancing strategic and defense cooperation with Ukraine and with a robust and exercised program in keeping with Ukraine's status as an enhanced NATO opportunities partner….a serious threat to Russia."

Fletcher: "Is it really a threat to Russia? We're not talking about 1941…Russia has the most nuclear weapons of any country on the planet. Who is concerned about Ukrainian security?"

I'll stop quoting at 46:50 to talk about Syria.

Chomsky's factual account is mostly false. The U.S. was not fighting to overthrow the Assad government! It had sent small arms to Syrian opposition groups and some anti-tank weapons, but nothing that could defend them against the Assad air force (like the MANPADS they desperately requested). It specifically barred allies like Saudi Arabia or Qatar from supplying them either. By 2013 ISIS had spread over large parts of Syria and Iraq and that became the U.S. absolute #1 priority. From then on, the U.S. sent aid to military units only if they would promise to use them exclusively to fight ISIS. Despite all the handicaps, Syrian armed groups had nearly defeated Assad in 2015. Russian air force planes attacked them to save Assad not to fight the U.S. whose support for "rebels" opposing Assad had ended years before. In fact the U.S. and Russia were *cooperating* in the fight against ISIS.

Now for Chomsky's political arguments. He repeats twice and at length the fact that Assad was the

"internationally recognized" head of government in Syria and so had a right to get military aid from his ally Russia. Chomsky's love for the Hobbesian sanctity of sovereignty is bewildering. As early as the 17th century, the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius argued that the rights of the sovereign should be limited by the principles of humanity. International law and powers given to the United Nations have more and more constrained the power of sovereignty. Assad's sieges of whole cities defied UN Security Council resolutions for instance Security Council Resolution 2139 which demanded an end to his barrel bombs, his hindering of UN food convoys to areas under siege, and the release of women and children in his prisons. Likewise Russian activity in Syria was an international crime, a war crime, not as Chomsky claims merely in a "moral sense".

Chomsky talks about Russia "reacting" as if it was a law of nature, as if he was describing what happens when a person touches a live wire. There was no necessary reason for Russia to "react" and join in the mass murder of Syrians. Putin could have happily exercised his tyrannical controls over Russians no matter what happened in Syria.

Bringing up the fact that Russia was twice invaded by Germany is really beneath Chomsky. What the Kaiser and Hitler did gives Putin the right to do anything he wants for the sake of Russian security? Where have we heard that argument before? Right, that's exactly what Israel says. Jews were killed in a Holocaust so we, Israel, can do anything we want because it's all for our security.

Let's leave Syria. At 47:40 Fletcher again asks about Ukrainian security and Chomsky again ducks talking about U.S. misdeeds and crimes in Afghanistan. Later he says basically if Ukraine had been neutral like Austria or Finland there would have been no security worries.

Then he goes on to justify what Russia did in 2014, repeating the now familiar charge that there was a coup "with direct U.S. involvement." Essentially this man of the Left claims that Ukrainians had no right to overthrow a government that banned protest and shot into crowds, and whose president was notoriously corrupt. Then he gave a justification for Russian seizure of Ukrainian territory, "Russia could have just stood by and clapped as we could have stood by and clapped if a pro-Chinese government was established with Mexico calling for a military alliance with China."

Chomsky repeats that Russia had its only warm water port including naval bases in Crimea. "They were being *immediately threatened* [my emphasis] by the pro-US government that took power with direct U.S. involvement." This is false. What "direct threat" was there to its warm water port? Had Ukraine banned Russian trade through Sevastopol? Had it demanded Russian troops leave the Crimean Peninsula? The answer is "no" in both cases.

Fletcher finally asks, "Many people on the US Left think there's nothing we can do about Putin. What should we do?"

Chomsky answers that we should get the US to abandon its policy of fighting to the last Ukrainian and leaving Putin with no exit, "his back up against the wall" and accept that Ukraine will have a status like Mexico, Austria and Finland. Again he says Crimea is "off the table." Again, it's the U.S. that's being unreasonable.

Finally consider what *isn't* in Chomsky's remarks. For one, the words "solidarity with Ukraine" are absent. He never suggests we in the Left ask Ukrainians what they want, whether they think they're American pawns or whether want to fight on to defend their country. Chomsky, a self-described anarchist, does not mention what any Ukrainian anarchist or socialist is thinking, and he never talks about weapons, whether Ukraine has any right to get weapons to defend itself.

Noam Chomsky's exercise in realpolitik is depressing. He should know that the Left should not be

involved defending notions of spheres of influence or geopolitics.

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