

# USA: Diplomacy instead of resistance? Chomsky loses his bearings on Ukraine

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**In the [interview](#) with Alternative Radio's David Barsamian reproduced in Green Left Issue 1350, Noam Chomsky has no proposal for ending the Russian invasion, except one word — diplomacy.**

He said: "It is one possibility. The other is just to drag it out and see how much everybody will suffer, how many Ukrainians will die, how much Russia will suffer, how many millions will starve to death in Asia and Africa, how much we'll proceed toward heating the environment to the point where there will be no possibility for a liveable human existence."

For Chomsky, that apocalypse would be the fault of the United States-run North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance: "With near 100% unanimity, the United States and most of Europe want to pick the no-diplomacy option. It's explicit. We have to keep going to hurt Russia."

And the Ukrainian people, what do they want? In a conflict with such huge stakes, don't their views count?

Chomsky says nothing about Ukrainian aspirations — maybe the fault was not his but his interviewer's. Yet this gap is one of five absences in an interview that confirms [historian Ronald Suny's](#) dictum: that the first casualty of war isn't only truth, it's also "whatever is left out".

## **First absence: Ukrainians**

Chomsky's call for diplomacy immediately poses the question of conditions. Should negotiations happen while Russian troops occupy 20% of Ukrainian territory and their artillery reduces town after town to rubble?

No one, including Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky himself, is against diplomacy — he has said the conflict must eventually be solved through negotiation. But no figure in Ukrainian public life is calling for a ceasefire with Russian occupying forces in place, a precondition of Chomsky's diplomacy-not-war position.

Next, given negotiation, what price would its advocates think the Ukrainians should be prepared to pay to end the war? How much territory stolen by Russia to concede? What international commitments to abandon?

The Ukrainians themselves aren't in much doubt on these questions, as the latest polling of [ORB International](#) and the [Centre for Insights in Survey Research](#) (CISR) confirms. To end the war, only 37% would not be prepared to join NATO and only 28% to recognise Crimea as part of Russia.

Less than 1% think some part of Ukraine rightfully belongs to Russia, while 80% want to join the European Union and 57% NATO.

Ninety-four per cent have a very or somewhat favourable view of Zelensky, while 97% believe that Ukraine can repel the invasion.

Such evidence explodes the theory that the Ukrainians would like to negotiate but are being held back by warmongers like US President Joe Biden and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

### **Second absence: weapons**

Negotiations during a war take place based on the balance of forces between contending sides. What the Ukrainians most demand to tilt the balance their way is arms, with 65% nominating “providing modern weapons and ammunition” as the international support most needed, according to a CISR poll.

Chomsky again has no comment. He attacks the US and NATO for “pouring” arms into Ukraine from 2014 onwards but doesn’t acknowledge that without that support the Ukrainian army would have had much less chance of repelling the initial Russian assault.

In fact, the “flood” of arms fell short of what was needed at the time, leaving much of the real flood — of tens of thousands volunteering for the Ukrainian army and the territorial defence — without weapons.

Since for the Ukrainians [the weaponry they have received to date is still insufficient](#), opposition to increasing this “flood” amounts to help for the Russian invasion.

### **Third absence: NATO’s expansion was welcome**

Chomsky’s interview is largely devoted to reviewing [how NATO’s eastward expansion evolved](#), against the advice of US foreign policy analysts and diplomats attuned to Russian state sensitivities, like Cold War ideologue [George F Kennan](#).

Here another key question fails to be asked and answered: why was NATO’s eastward expansion politically possible?

Polish leftists Jan Smoleński and Jan Dutkiewicz [answer](#): “Being at the receiving end of Russian imperialism, many Eastern Europeans looked forward to membership in NATO as a means of securing their sovereignty. NATO, in other words, would not have ‘expanded’ into Eastern Europe if the Eastern European nations had not wanted it and actively pursued it.”

Russia’s 300-year history of seizures of non-Russian lands in Eastern Europe has been a constant, and was acknowledged by Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin in his reflections on the [Red Army’s defeat at the 1920 Battle of Warsaw](#). [He told German communist leader Clara Zetkin](#) that “in the Red Army the Poles saw enemies, not brothers and liberators”.

That experience made Lenin even more sensitive to the experiences and rights of the peoples recently liberated from Czarism’s “prison house of nations”, the Ukrainians included.

However, Lenin’s approach, which in 1922 entrenched the right of self-determination and secession into the Soviet constitution, was destroyed under Joseph Stalin. Following his 1939 pact with Adolf Hitler, a “Soviet” version of Russian expansionism took place in Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, parts of eastern Poland and Finland.

The invasions of Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968) and the suppression of the [1960s’ Ukrainian movement for a return to a Leninist nationalities policy](#) only increased the desire for

independence and protection from Russia, ending in independence for all Soviet republics in the 1990s — and a string of applications for NATO membership.

#### **Fourth absence: Russian imperial ambitions**

Chomsky condemns Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion, saying "these serious provocations [by the US and NATO] provide no justification for it", and ascribes it to "criminality and stupidity on the Kremlin side".

But what explains such behaviour? Here another piece of the jigsaw gets lost: Russian great-power chauvinism's drive to keep "its own" and assert its "historic destiny".

This imperative produced criminal operations that Washington itself overlooked or even applauded, given they took place inside Russia's accepted sphere of influence.

The vilest was [Washington's response to the Kremlin's wars in Chechnya](#), the second of these "understood" by George W Bush as [a contribution to the "war on terror"](#).

Putin's own speeches, notably his [February 21 announcement of recognition of the "people's republics" of Donetsk and Luhansk](#), spell out the imperial doctrine.

Directly counterposing it to Lenin's approach, Putin said: "When it comes to the historical destiny of Russia and its peoples, Lenin's principles of state development were not just a mistake; they were worse than a mistake, as the saying goes. This became patently clear after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 [...] The virus of nationalist ambitions is still with us, and the mine laid at the initial stage to destroy state immunity to the disease of nationalism was ticking. As I have said, the mine was the right of secession from the Soviet Union."

Just as in the Spanish state and Turkey, the only "nationalism" that Putin — as representative of a dominant nation — can detect is that of those who are fighting to escape its rule.

#### **Fifth absence: Russian anti-war movement**

No one reading the interview with Chomsky would know that an [anti-war movement exists in Russia](#), which, despite [conditions of severe repression](#), continues to patiently eat away at Putin's pro-war consensus.

This movement is also the heart of the struggle for democratic rights and embraces a growing group of activists espousing the rights of the marginalised non-Russian nations within the Russian Federation.

It sees the fight to drive the Russian armed forces out of Ukraine as an organic part of the struggle for a democratic, non-chauvinist, feminist and tolerant Russia. For that reason, it is defeatist in relation to Putin's war, to never call for negotiations.

If Putin ever managed an outcome to the war he could sell as a win, it would not only amputate a part of Ukraine: domestic Russian struggles for democratic rights and against racism, discrimination against non-Russian peoples and violation of women's and LGBTIQ rights would suffer.

#### **Russia's self-defence?**

Does the reinsertion of these five factors into the discussion dismantle Chomsky's core argument — that NATO expansion and US-NATO refusal to entertain Russia's security concerns were key in

Putin's decision to go to war?

Ukrainian socialist Taras Bilous considers this question [in detail](#). He concludes that the pre-war security guarantees Russia demanded — no Ukrainian membership of NATO and no military cooperation between the US and former Soviet republics — would amount to the division of Europe into US and Russian spheres of influence, with Ukraine locked into the latter.

Such an arrangement would not be necessary to guarantee Russia security within its own borders. That could be helped by arms control and reduction agreements, which were offered by the US but dismissed as “secondary” by Putin.

In any case, “the caution Western states have shown toward Russia even after the full-scale invasion began shows the hollowness of Russian security concerns. Russia has the best security guarantee — nuclear weapons. The Kremlin itself never tires of reminding us of this”, Bilous said.

Putin's proposed “security guarantees” were thus not about security at all but “his desire for the return of Ukraine to Russian control, or at least the conquest of new Ukrainian territories”.

None of this means that the US and NATO have been blameless or that its 2008 invitations to Georgia and Ukraine to apply for membership weren't grossly provocative, given knowledge of how the Kremlin would react.

What it does mean is that US and NATO actions — and operations by the Ukrainian army — didn't leave invasion as Putin's only option, unless, [as dawned on dissident Communist Party Duma deputies after February 24](#), he was planning invasion all along.

## **Conclusion**

All major power blocs in world politics are commanded by revolting hypocrites with blood on their hands who claim to be guided only by principle.

Putin invades Ukraine, unleashing death, destruction, and rape as a weapon of war, all in the name of “denazification”, “demilitarisation” and defence of Russian language rights.

Biden calls Putin a “war criminal”, while maintaining a criminal blockade of Cuba and former President Donald Trump's acceptance of Moroccan rule over the Sahrawi people.

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, backed by the European Commission, trumpets the Ukrainians' right of self-determination while denying it to the nations of the Spanish state.

China, while asserting support for universal human values and United Nations principles, conducts a near-genocidal policy of “correction” of the Uyghur people.

In a world in which the Russian invasion of Ukraine is speeding up the hardening of rival capitalist blocs, the pressure on progressives to align with this or that side also grows — be it in the name of “democracy” or supporting a “multipolar world” against the old imperialisms.

Here, thinking and acting on the basis that “the main enemy is always at home” simply leads to befuddlement.

To achieve a world of solidarity, peace, sustainability and mutual respect among peoples, the only path is to support democratic and social rights, including the key right to self-determination of all oppressed nations, no matter the bloc they inhabit.

It means fighting for dissolution of military alliances and progressive disarmament.

It means convincing the working people of oppressor nations that their interests lie not with their own nation but in supporting the rights of the peoples their country oppresses.

And in Ukraine's case, it means solidarity with the people's resistance to invasion and with the Russian anti-war movement's resistance to Putin's hateful chauvinist warmongering.

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**Dick Nichols** is European correspondent of *Green Left* and *Links — International Journal of Socialist Renewal*. Written in a personal capacity.

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