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Noam Chomsky's Views on Russian Foreign Policy: A Critical Analysis

<https://www.e-ir.info/2020/04/30/noam-chomskys-views-on-russian-foreign-policy-a-critical-analysis/>

ARTEM PATALAKH, APR 30 2020

Among the Western critics of the West who frequently appear in and get quoted by the Kremlin-sponsored media, the left-wing thinker Noam Chomsky clearly stands out. An internationally acclaimed MIT professor, the winner of the 2005 *Prospect/Foreign Policy* Top 100 Public Intellectuals poll, a pundit whose foreign policy views are discussed in high-level academic IR journals, Chomsky is head and shoulders above the numerous extreme, marginal, ill-reputed activists who RT and Sputnik International present as 'experts,' – be it the editor of the German neo-Nazi *Zuerst* magazine Manuel Ochsenschläger or the infamous conspiracy theorists William Engdahl and Jeffrey Steinberg. Yet, the overwhelming majority of Chomsky's comments, which appear in Kremlin-backed media, predominantly concern the US and its allies rather than Russia. Their topics embrace the typical issues which the left regularly criticizes as imperialist and inhumane: US military strategy and immigration policies, the Iraqi war, Turkey's treatment of the Kurds, Israeli policies in Palestine etc. What, however, remains interesting—and infrequently discussed—is Chomsky's view of the Putin regime itself.

Putin's Early Years

In the beginning of Putin's rule, Chomsky's statements about Russia were mostly critical. At least partially, this seems to have been inertial and influenced by the Russian government's market reforms of the 1990s, of which Chomsky had utterly disapproved. In his opinion, those 'neoliberal' 'US-backed' reforms killed 'millions of people' throughout the post-Soviet space with 'the mortality rate being akin to the results of Stalin's purges' (my translation). Yet more notably, his critical attitude was caused by Russia's support of the US-led coalition in Afghanistan, which Chomsky used to attribute to the Kremlin's own then-ongoing war in Chechnya:

Russia is happily joining the international coalition because it is delighted to have U.S. support for the horrendous atrocities it is carrying out in its war against Chechnya. It describes that as an anti-terrorist war. In fact it is a murderous terrorist war itself. They'd love to have the United States support it.

From 2004 onward, following Putin's disagreement with the Iraq campaign, Chomsky started demonstrating more sympathy to Moscow, considering Russia's then-continuing increase of military exercises and military expenditures as somewhat a reasonable 'reaction to the Bush administration's militancy and aggressiveness.' One of his speeches of that period still contains a mention of 'the collapse of the Russian economy under the market fanaticism' which, in his view, had engendered the deterioration of Russian nuclear weapons. Yet, given the context, that remark reads as an expression of sorrow rather than a critical note. Incidentally, Chomsky's stance on the Chechen war also altered towards a more sympathetic one as the US bogged down more and more in Iraq:

Let's take the invasion of Iraq. Compare it to, say, Putin's invasion of Chechnya. There are a lot of differences, but let's compare it. The Russians invaded Chechnya, destroyed Grozny, carried out massacres, terror. They pacified it. C.J. Chivers of the New York Times was there a couple months ago to report that Grozny is now a booming city, there is building all over, everybody has electricity run by Chechens, you don't see Russian soldiers around. Do we praise Putin for his achievement? No. In fact, we condemn him for it. I suppose that if Petraeus could achieve even a fraction of what Putin achieved in Chechnya, he would be crowned king.

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Notably, in this interview, Chomsky makes no allusion to numerous human rights abuses in Chechnya, references to which abound in Chivers' article he cites.

International Crises Involving Russia

Since 2008, Chomsky have been mentioning Russia primarily in relation to the international crises, in which Putin's actions garnered worldwide media attention and were slammed by the West: the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, the 2014 Ukrainian conflict and the 2016 meddling in the US presidential elections. What is conspicuously similar in his comments on these events is a scarcity of remarks on the Russian actions as such. Chomsky seems much more interested in citing the critical statements of mainstream Western pundits and politicians and then refuting them, often ironically or sarcastically, on the grounds that the US commits much worse 'crimes.'

Thus, in his 2008 article on the Georgian conflict, he referred, *inter alia*, to 'a US-backed invasion' of Israel into Lebanon in 1982 'that left some 15-20,000 dead' and '[t]he US-backed Krajina expulsion' which, to his mind, was 'possibly the worst case of ethnic cleansing in Europe since World War II.' In Chomsky's view, Moscow's primary weakness was that 'Russia ha[d] "not yet learned how to play the media game,"' as a result of which '[t]he Russian propaganda system made the mistake of presenting evidence, which was easily refuted.'

Similarly, Chomsky's discussions of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict are invariably accompanied with mentions of US treatment of Cuba—specifically, the arguably unlawful retention of Guantanamo Bay—and the assertion that 'the U.S. carried out the worst crime of the century in the invasion of Iraq, much worse than anything Russia has done.' Commenting on US condemnations of Russian aggressiveness vis-à-vis its neighbors, he sarcastically notes: 'American red lines, in short, are firmly placed at Russia's borders. Therefore Russian ambitions "in its own neighborhood" violate world order and create crises.'

Likewise, Chomsky accuses US media and politicians of allegedly overreacting to the problem of Russian meddling in the 2016 elections, calling the issue itself 'almost a joke.' He largely refrains from touching upon the Russian actions themselves, regarding their possible effect as paling compared to the Israeli 'overwhelming influence' which was, in his view, exerted 'openly, brazenly and with enormous support' and 'vastly overwhelm[ed] anything the Russians may have done.' Moreover, in his typical manner, Chomsky argues Washington lacks the moral authority to blame Moscow for an electoral intervention, since the US itself influenced foreign elections and even established autocracies in the past.

Chomsky persistently contends both Moscow and Washington should start cooperating with each other, believing such cooperation is needed to stave off a possible destructive war. Yet, as to the accountability for their current confrontation, Chomsky's criticism of the two sides is far from equal. Chomsky repeatedly argues—perhaps, somewhat reasonably—that the roots of the Kremlin's current anti-Westernism go back to the informal promise not to expand NATO eastward. That promise was given to Moscow by Washington in 1990 in exchange to Gorbachev's 'astonishing concession to allow a united Germany to join a hostile military alliance,' however, the successive US administrations disregarded it. Conceiving of NATO as an essentially aggressive alliance, Chomsky deems Russia's actions vis-à-vis its neighbors an 'easily understandable,' expectable and to some extent sensible response to NATO enlargement. Yet, sometimes he counts the Russian neighbors' integration into non-military Western institutions among threats to Moscow too (emphasis mine):

The country of Ukraine is split right now: Western-oriented and Russian-oriented. It's located on the Russian border, so there are major security issues for Putin. Ukraine has the only naval base leading to water (the Black Sea) in Crimea, so from Russia's point of view, the Ukraine situation is a security threat to them, especially with NATO moving into Eastern Europe. *If the Ukraine joins the EU, then Russia will have hostile relations at their border.*

While Chomsky comments on the *international* crises involving Russia quite regularly, he hardly ever discusses *domestic* Russian issues, even those that are covered negatively by the mainstream Western media, such as gay rights, elections, political prisoners etc. In one 2006 interview, however, he softly criticized Putin's internal policies: 'Putin is concentrating power in the center's hands, conducting a policy that is traditional in the Russian history and

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does not inspire admiration' (my translation and emphasis). Also, in 2019, he wrote a short letter of support to the Russian political prisoner Azat Miftakhov, a fact noted by a few Russian independent media outlets.

Chomsky's Inconsistencies

Perhaps the greatest contradiction innate to Chomsky's perspective on Russia concerns the role of public opinion in foreign policy decision-making. Chomsky consistently blames the policymakers of the US and its allies for taking (supposedly) insufficient account of public opinion. Thus, he criticized US involvement in the Vietnam war, Turkey's decision to send military troops to Iraq, the US embargo on Cuba and many other actions on the grounds that they contradicted the then desires of most citizens. Yet, as he once specified, he believes public opinion should be respected only regarding *key* foreign policy matters (emphasis mine):

I don't necessarily agree with the general opinion on everything. For example, roughly half the population of the United States thinks the world was created ten thousand years ago exactly the way it is now. But that's really not the issue for me; the point is that on *serious policy issues*, there is a tremendous gap between public opinion and public policy, and public opinion is often quite sound, in my judgment.

In view of this, a problem with Chomsky's tough opposition to NATO's eastward enlargement of the 1990s—apparently a *serious* foreign policy question—is that the enlargement entirely matched public opinion. In the late 1990s, Americans and Western Europeans as well as Czech, Polish and Hungarian citizens were supportive of NATO's expansion that eventually happened in 1999. Remarkably, some research suggests that it is the then nascent 'neo-imperialism' in Russian foreign policy that significantly influenced the desire of these three countries to join NATO. Chomsky, however, remains insensitive to these facts, leaving one in doubt as to whether public opinion, in his opinion, is to be considered on all serious policy issues or solely when most citizens oppose the official goals of the US and its allies.

Likewise, Chomsky keeps portraying the pro-Western aspirations of some post-Soviet states, expressly or impliedly, as something involuntary and provoked by NATO's alleged pressure. On the contrary, Moscow's responses, as presented by Chomsky, usually appear rational and natural. And again, he ignores public opinion in the former case, while emphasizing its importance in the latter case. Compare, for example, these quotes of his (emphases mine)

Georgia was *chosen as a corridor by Clinton* to bypass Russia and Iran, and *was also heavily militarized* for the purpose. Hence Georgia is 'a very major and strategic asset to us,' Zbigniew Brzezinski observes.

True, the US has armed Georgia and *pressed for* admitting it (and Ukraine) into NATO, a very serious provocation to Russia.

In later years NATO moved further to the east. Now it's moving to the geopolitical heartland of Russian security interests, Ukraine. There have been several *explicit demands* by NATO that Ukraine join NATO. No matter who was running Russia—even Gandhi—they wouldn't accept this.

with this one

Putin seems to have been *genuinely popular* throughout his tenure. Crimeans, it appears, *support the takeover* by Russia. There seemed to be possibilities for social democratic developments in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, possibly even for mutually supportive linkages to social democratic Europe. Such hopes were dashed by the harsh effects of the US-backed market reforms, which devastated the economy and led to millions of deaths, along with opening the way for immense corruption as oligarchs took over state assets. Putin was *seen by the public* as a corrective to the neoliberal disaster and the decline of Russia on the world scene. Authoritarian no doubt, often brutal, but, it seems, popular.

Hence, Chomsky largely condones Putin's foreign policy on the premise that it is popular among Crimeans and Russians. Simultaneously, he depicts Georgia's and Ukraine's pro-NATO aspirations exclusively in terms of

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Washington's hawkishness which, into the bargain, triggers off Moscow's malevolence. What he ignores is the fact that Georgia is a nation with a pronounced European identity, where accession to NATO *is* a popular idea: starting from the early 2000s, it has been steadily supported by 60-80% of Georgians. As for Ukrainians, before 2014, they mainly opposed the idea of NATO accession, yet, since the beginning of Russia's aggression, supporters of Ukraine's membership in NATO (40-51% of Ukrainians) have constantly outnumbered its opposers (25-36%). And in any case, Chomsky's claim about the '*explicit demands* by NATO that Ukraine join NATO' (emphasis mine) is too far-reaching to be correct. In fact, not only has the alliance never made such *demands*, but also there has always been a strong opposition to the idea of Ukraine's membership among NATO members. Contrariwise, on Ukraine's side, high-level officials, including presidents, have voluntarily voiced their desire to join the alliance since the early 2000s. At the 2008 Bucharest summit, Kiev was expecting to obtain NATO membership, but the alliance put it on indefinite hold. Notably, both in Georgia and Ukraine, the desires to enter NATO have been repeatedly expressed since the early 2000s not solely by strongly pro-Western governments, but also moderate ones.

Chomsky's analytical inconsistency can be approached from another viewpoint, namely the weight of small countries in world politics. That Central European countries could not join NATO because this would break the promise given to Gorbachev or that Ukraine cannot accede to NATO because of being 'the geopolitical heartland of Russian security interests' implies that Chomsky considers it to be somewhat natural and normal for big powers to decide the fate of small countries. This appears odd given that Chomsky is known as an advocate of a fairer world order, and seems to reflect a more general contradiction between his 'analytical realism' and 'his normative commitments with the ideals of classical liberalism,' which is inherent, according to one study, in his foreign policy reasoning. Nevertheless, in this respect as well, one can find examples of selectivity in Chomsky's reflections. Whereas the voluntariness of Georgia's US-friendly policies deserves no respect or even mentioning, US-critical Cuba, in his account, is sympathetically presented as 'a small country that carries out . . . successful defiance' and is consequently 'subjected to "the terrors of the earth" and a crushing embargo.'

Holding NATO's expansion responsible for the Ukrainian crisis, Chomsky frequently cites John Mearsheimer's article 'Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault' in support of this viewpoint. The irony, however, is that for the prominent 'offensive' realist Mearsheimer, presenting world politics as great powers' business and taking little interest in public opinion is natural. Chomsky, by contrast, is a thinker renowned for reproaching democratic deficit and the unfairness of coercion-based international relations. He may be naturally happy to have found a prominent IR scholar whose specific ideas match his own viewpoint in a specific case—the problem is that those ideas seem to be largely derived from the basic premises of which Chomsky himself disapproves.

Another discrepancy between Chomsky's perspectives on Russia and Central/Eastern European states concerns historical references. Describing Gorbachev's agreement to the reunification of Germany as extraordinary, Chomsky notes Moscow had good historical reasons to fear a unified Germany: '[t]hey [Russians] lost 25 million people in the last World War and over 3 million in World War I.' Analogously, Chomsky treats the presence of history-based arguments as a factor increasing the validity of the Crimea annexation: 'Even apart from strong internal support for the annexation, Crimea is historically Russian; it has Russia's only warm-water port, the home of Russia's fleet; and has enormous strategic significance.' Against this backdrop, the fact that Chomsky does not mention that the former members of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact have their own (and no less justified) historical reasons to mistrust Moscow can hardly be explained without alluding to double standards in his thinking.

Chomsky's Presentation Style

What distinguishes Chomsky from the majority of Putin's sympathizers is his carefulness not to overpraise the Kremlin. Whenever commenting on Russian foreign policy, he often notes—solely in passing, but still—if a certain move contradicted international rules. Thus, in various interviews, he called Crimea's takeover 'not justifiable,' 'obviously a violation of international law' and 'a criminal act.' Occasionally, he gives negative descriptions to Putin too, such as '[a]uthoritarian no doubt, often brutal' (see the full quote above) or '[h]e's not a nice guy, I don't want to have dinner with him.' Yet, there are two issues with Chomsky's remarks of this kind. First, he resorts to them mainly if pushed by an assertive interviewer. Second, the criticism of the US and its allies, which always follows those comments, completely overshadows them both in terms of a number of words and Chomsky's emotional input.

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Therefore, these negative remarks hardly make his opinions appear balanced. Rather, the impression the reader/listener gets is that Chomsky inserts them for formal reasons, attempting not to look too supportive of an autocratic leader.

Moreover, unlike other fellow-travelers of the Kremlin, Chomsky underpins his arguments with references to research publications. However, he repeatedly cites just a handful of them, invariably underlining their high level and scholarly excellence. Thus, according to Chomsky, Itzkowitz Shiffrinson's article exposing NATO's lies to Gorbachev appeared 'in the *prestigious* Harvard-MIT journal *International Security*'; Mearsheimer's above-mentioned article was published 'in the *major establishment* journal, *Foreign Affairs*' and Richard Sakwa's book *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands*, expressing an understanding of the Ukraine crisis akin to that of Mearsheimer, is an *illuminating and judicious scholarly study*, 'the *most balanced* study' of that crisis (emphases mine). By giving such descriptions, Chomsky apparently aims to prove his own ideas are not marginal, but coincide with those of leading IR researchers. Yet, in reality, he carefully selects and compliments a limited number of publications, that are instrumental for substantiating his own viewpoint, and completely ignores the main body of IR research on the topic at issue. For instance, most articles, published in the 'major establishment' journal *Foreign Affairs* on Russia, implicitly or explicitly disagree with Mearsheimer's perspective on Putin's foreign policy. Furthermore, the publications Chomsky picks often express rare opinions or have a dubious reputation among IR scholars. Sakwa's 'most balanced study,' for example, was met with mixed reviews on the part of academics: some were strongly negative and even moderate ones noted a tendentious presentation of facts.

Willfully or unwillfully, sometimes Chomsky bases his arguments on frankly inaccurate statements. To illustrate, during the 2008 war, he wrote that 'South Ossetia, along with the much more significant region of Abkhazia, were assigned by Stalin to his native Georgia,' and then slammed Western leaders for 'sternly admonish[ing] that Stalin's directives must be respected, despite the strong opposition of Ossetians and Abkhazians.' This reads as if Abkhazia and South Ossetia are analogous to Crimea that was administratively in Russia before being assigned to Ukraine in 1954. Yet, in fact, the territory of South Ossetia historically was part of Georgia—before, when and after Georgia was in the Russian Empire. As for Abkhazia, it was part of independent Georgia in 1918-1921 and a *de facto* part of Georgia in 1921-1931, before officially becoming an autonomous region within Georgia.

At times the words Chomsky uses to describe Russian foreign policy appear too radical. This seems to partly stem from his strong negative emotions about US foreign policy and, perhaps, the possible incompleteness of his knowledge of Russian politics. To illustrate, on his part, it was certainly an overstatement to say that Putin's foreign policy moves are 'largely interactive' with NATO's actions and that '[t]here is very little evidence' pointing to Moscow's own expansionist aspirations of restoring a strong Soviet-style country. In fact, there is sufficient research showing that Moscow's frequent coercive measures, aimed to keep other post-Soviet countries in its orbit, largely rest on Russia's own identity traits. Some of those coercive moves are completely unrelated to NATO. To exemplify, in September 2013, the Kremlin pushed Armenia into joining the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union instead of signing an association agreement with the EU, even though Yerevan had declared no intention whatsoever to join NATO. Simultaneously, the Kremlin launched a wide-ranging political and media campaign to prevent Kiev from concluding the same agreement, despite that the then Ukrainian government was not seeking NATO membership either.

Portraying Moscow's foreign policy assertiveness *solely* in terms of Washington's prior actions is typical of Chomsky's reasoning, yet, it oversimplifies the complexity of political life. His inclination to explaining Russia's switch to anti-Americanism under Putin *solely* by reference to the US 'triumphalism' of the 1990s and the unsuccessfulness of the market reforms—in which, Chomsky believes, '[t]he Clinton programs,' that 'were designed to essentially destroy the Russian economy,' 'played a major role in driving Russia to severe economic and social collapse, with millions of deaths'—neglects intricate domestic processes that brought Russian *siloviki* to power in the early 2000s. Similarly, the depiction of Putin's every anti-Western move as a rational step dictated by Russian national interests indirectly overpraises the autocrat's intellect and disregards the influence of his personal biases and other psychological features on his foreign policy, scientific accounts of which abound.

Chomsky's leaning towards giving prominence to the belligerent actions of the US and its allies, while almost ignoring

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those of Putin, mirrors his general belief that intellectuals should expose the wrongdoings of their own countries and not others. To his mind, this springs from the 'responsibility of the writer as a moral agent is to try to bring truth about matters of human significance to an audience that can do something about them.' While such intentions are unquestionably lofty, nevertheless, adherence to this principle implies an intellectual's duty to raise criticism towards other countries too when he/she communicates to foreign audiences. Yet, Chomsky's 2019 interview for Russia's state-owned First Channel included no disapproving remarks about Russian political life. Neither did the Russian editions of his books on international affairs, such as *Hegemony or Survival* and *How the World Works*, include any preface critical of the Russian government.

Conclusions

When discussing Russia-related affairs, Noam Chomsky touches upon a small number of issues and repeatedly uses the same arguments. Those issues mainly regard the foreign policy matters which have captured the significant attention of US mainstream politicians and media outlets. Much, if not most, of Chomsky's reasoning about Russia usually regards not Russia itself, but the actions of the US and its allies that Chomsky considers to be worse than those of Russia. All these observations may imply that Russia interests him not *per se*, but solely to the extent that references to its actions are useful for corroborating his criticism of the US. In this regard, for Chomsky, Russia is similar to Iran, Cuba or China, toward which he seems to demonstrate largely the same sort of sympathetic attitude.

What sets Chomsky apart from many other fellow travelers of the Kremlin is that he tends to use references to IR scholars and occasionally insert critical remarks about Putin. On the other hand, the most off-putting feature of his argumentation is his extreme selectiveness concerning the examples he makes, the studies he cites and the basic premises he applies to foreign policy analysis. Although Chomsky explicitly states he sees his duty in condemning the unlawful actions of the US specifically, it seems if his stance on autocracies like Russia were more balanced, his criticism of the US would also look more convincing. Indeed, the commentators blaming Chomsky for double standards would probably see no problem with, for instance, his interview entitled 'If you criticize policy, you are anti-American. That only happens in dictatorships,' had it not been given to the dictatorship-backed broadcaster RT.

About the author:

Artem Patalakh holds a PhD in Political Studies from the University of Milan. He has published a number of academic articles on soft power, democracy and human rights promotion, Russian and EU foreign policies and the geopolitics of the post-Soviet space.