Washington threatens preemptive strike against Russian missiles

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On Tuesday, the United States government issued its most direct and public threat of a military strike against Russia since the height of the Cold War.

The US ambassador to NATO, Kay Bailey Hutchison, told a press conference at NATO headquarters in Brussels that if Russia failed to stop its development of a new cruise missile that Washington claims is in violation of the 1987 Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), the Pentagon was prepared to "take out" the missile.

Asked by a reporter what the US intended to do about the new class of Russian missiles, Hutchison replied, "The counter-measures would be to take out the missiles that are in development by Russia in violation of the treaty."

She continued: "Getting them to withdraw would be our choice, of course. But I think the question was what would you do if this continues to a point where we know that they are capable of delivering. And at that point we would then be looking at a capability to take out a missile that could hit any of our countries in Europe and hit America in Alaska."

To emphasize her threat, the US ambassador declared that Russia had been put "on notice." This is the same kind of language used by Washington to threaten military action against Syria and Iran.

The former Texas Republican senator, who became the US ambassador to NATO last year, was speaking of the cruise missile referred to by the Russian military as the Novator 9M729. Moscow has repeatedly insisted that the missile does not violate the restrictions imposed under the INF, which banned ground-launched medium-range missiles capable of striking targets at distances between 500 and 5,500 kilometers (310-3,100 miles).

Hutchison's remarks, delivered on the eve of a NATO defense ministers' meeting, ratcheted up already dangerous tensions with Russia and ignited fears throughout Europe and internationally.

"If she is saying that if the diplomatic route doesn't work we will destroy the missiles, that's obviously dangerous and risks triggering a war that could go nuclear," Daryl Kimball, the head of the Arms Control Association, said. "I cannot recall anything like this in the post-cold war period."

Moscow issued an angry response to Hutchinson's reckless threat.

"The impression is that people making such claims are unaware of the degree of their responsibility and the danger of aggressive rhetoric," Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova told reporters. "Who authorized this woman to make such allegations? The American people? Do ordinary Americans know that they are paying out of their pockets for so-called diplomats who behave so aggressively and destructively?"

More to the point, do the American people even know that their government is threatening to launch a preemptive war against nuclear-armed Russia, raising the potential for the extinction of life on earth? A US news media fixated on the dribble of allegations of teenage transgressions by Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh has all but ignored the war threat.

While Washington has repeatedly charged Russia with violating the INF treaty signed in 1987 by the US and the Soviet Union, it has yet to provide any evidence to support its allegations.

The unsubstantiated character of the US charges was underscored in a statement by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg to reporters on Tuesday. "All allies agree that the most plausible assessment would be that Russia is in violation of the treaty," he said. "It is

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therefore urgent that Russia addresses these concerns in a substantial and transparent manner."

For its part, Moscow has charged the US with violating the treaty with its deployment of the Aegis Ashore missile defense installations in Romania and preparations for a similar deployment in Poland. While the Pentagon insists that the installations are anti-missile systems, the Russian military has charged that they can be repurposed to launch land-based Tomahawk cruise missiles—banned under the treaty—against Russian territory.

The threatening tone adopted by Hutchison was echoed by US Defense Secretary Gen. James Mattis, who spoke to reporters in Paris on his way to the NATO meeting. Referring to a potential US action in relation to the allegations of Russian violations of the INF treaty, he stated: "I cannot forecast where it will go, it is a decision for the president, but I can tell you that both on Capitol Hill and in the State Department there is a lot of concern about this situation, and I'll return with the advice of our allies and engage in that discussion to determine the way ahead."

The reference to "concern" on Capitol Hill includes the vociferous campaign waged by the Democratic Party to vilify Russia and its president, Vladimir Putin, and to indict Trump for "collusion" and being too "soft" on Moscow.

This posture was spelled out last month by Senator Robert Menendez, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, at a hearing on US-Russia arms treaties. He called for "policies to confront Russia for its multiple and ongoing transgressions, including military aggression, malign influence and repressive policies." He added: "Given the reality of Russia's current nuclear capacity, we must collectively use every diplomatic tool in our arsenal—economic, political and military—to achieve our goals."

Leading Democrats will no doubt welcome Hutchison's threat of a preemptive strike against Russia; it is the logical conclusion of their own politics.

Spurred on by NATO's relentless military buildup on Russia's borders, Washington's continued pursuit of regime-change and threats of military strikes against the Russian-backed government of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, and the steady escalation of punishing sanctions against Russia and its economy, the threat of war between the world's two largest nuclear powers has never been greater.

Underlying this drive to war is not merely the recklessness and arrogance of Trump and his aides, but the global crisis of the capitalist system, which finds its sharpest expression in the long-term economic decline of the United States. Dominant sections within the US ruling class support the use of Washington's military might to offset this decline, including through confrontation with both Russia and China over the domination of the Middle East and the entire Eurasian land mass.

That the danger of world war is discussed neither in the media nor by the two major capitalist political parties as they prepare for the midterm elections in the US is no accident. The ruling class justifiably fears that if masses of working people were made aware that they and their families are threatened with nuclear incineration, an already tense social situation, marked by rising anger over social inequality and falling living standards, would explode into open revolt.

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