Military clashes raise danger of major escalation between Russia and Ukraine

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The past week has seen a significant escalation of fighting between the Ukrainian army and Russian-backed separatists in the Donbass region. While the Western media is decrying an alleged "Russian aggression," the military clashes have, in fact, taken place against the backdrop of a series of major provocations by the Ukrainian government which is calculating to receive NATO support in a potential war with Russia.

The level of tensions between Russia and Ukraine is greater now than at any time since a US-German-backed coup by far-right forces toppled the Yanukovich government in February 2014. The coup, part of a decades-long strategy by imperialism to encircle Russia, triggered the annexation of Crimea by the Kremlin and a civil war in the east of the country, which has claimed the lives of over 13,500 people.

Earlier in March, Kiev approved a strategy aimed at "recovering Crimea." The peninsula in the Black Sea is of major geopolitical importance and and home to the naval base of Russia's Black Sea fleet. Any move by Kiev to seize it would be tantamount to a declaration of war.

On March 25, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky approved a new military strategy which emphasizes the need to prepare for the mobilization of the entire population in a war against Russia that would be conducted on Ukrainian soil. The strategy acknowledged that no such war could be won without NATO support and mentions Ukraine's planned accession to the military alliance no less than 19 times.

In a recent interview, the commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian armed forces, Colonel General Ruslan Khomchak, discussed a possible offensive to retake the separatist-controlled Donbass in East Ukraine. Acknowledging that such an offensive would require huge civilian casualties, Khomchak stressed that Zelensky "has every power to give the command or take a decision."

At the same time, a hysterical anti-Russian atmosphere is being whipped up in Ukraine. Over the past months, Zelensky has cracked down on key outlets and TV channels of the pro-Russian faction of the Ukrainian oligarchy. The leader of the opposition, the billionaire Viktor Medvedchuk, who has close ties to the Kremlin, has been sanctioned. On Friday, the head of the Independent Miners' Union, Mikhail Volyntsev, spoke in the Ukrainian Rada (parliament), accusing Russia of a supposed attack on Ukraine's electrical grid.

This week, reports have emerged of significant Russian troop movements in Crimea and East Ukraine, involving infantry fighting vehicles and anti-tank missiles. Reports have also indicated that Belarusian troops are being mobilized on the border of Ukraine.

On Wednesday, the Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov has warned that "Ukraine may take provocative actions which could lead to war." He accused the US of using Ukraine as a means to create conditions for war, stating, "The West is preparing for nothing less than war with us." That same day, Russian president Vladimir Putin met with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French president Emmanuel Macron to discuss the situation in Ukraine.

On Friday, US President Joe Biden spoke with Zelensky for the first time since he took office. Biden pledged "unwavering support" for Ukraine against Russia. Throughout the week, there were at least three high-level calls between the American and Ukrainian government, involving Secretary of State Antony Blinken, the Joint Chiefs Chairman General Mark Milley and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin. The *Wall Street Journal* described the crisis as a "test" for the Biden administration.

Since coming into office, the Biden administration has made clear that it would pursue an extremely aggressive course toward Russia. In one of his first foreign policy acts as president, Biden bombed an Iranian-backed Iraqi

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militia position on the Syria-Iraq border, a move that was targeted against not just Iran, but also Russia. At a NATO summit last week, the NATO powers launched a “NATO 2030” effort to prepare for nuclear war against Russia and China. Just before the summit, Biden called Putin a “killer without a soul” in an interview—an extraordinary attack on the head of state of another country—triggering a diplomatic crisis. Underlying the growing danger of war and the increasingly reckless moves of the imperialist powers and their allies is the profound crisis of the world capitalist system which has been significantly accelerated by the coronavirus pandemic.

In Ukraine, the social and political crisis is particularly sharp. Over a year into the pandemic, the coronavirus is ripping through the impoverished population completely unchecked. On April 1, 421 people died, and new daily infections hit the second highest number in the pandemic. Over 33,200 people have officially died from the virus, but the real number is likely much higher. With hospitals overwhelmed and some people reportedly taking medication meant for animals, an adviser to the Ukrainian health ministry recommended people who contracted COVID-19 to be prepared “to die at home.”

The same imperialist powers that have pumped billions of dollars into Ukraine’s far right and military to prepare for war against Russia have refused to provide any meaningful help with COVID-19 vaccine distribution. The Zelensky government has rejected the Russian Sputnik V vaccine, arguing that accepting it would mean a “geopolitical blow.” As a result, only 220,000 people out of a population of 44 million had received the first jab of a vaccine and only two individuals were fully vaccinated as of March 30. Millions of migrant workers have lost their jobs, while many more were laid off or experienced significant income losses. In the war zone in East Ukraine, millions of people lack access to drinking water, with some villages having no access to water at all, according to UNICEF. Like capitalist governments across the world, the Ukrainian government, far from doing anything to alleviate the social suffering, used the crisis to carry out further social attacks on the working class.

While the Ukrainian oligarchy’s reckless provocations are no doubt in part an effort to divert the enormous class tensions outward, the main driving force behind the conflict is the historic decline of US imperialism and its efforts to offset it by military means. Aiming to gain full control over the vast resources of the former Soviet Union, the US and NATO have systematically encircled Russia since 1991 and orchestrated numerous coups on its borders, including two in Ukraine, in 2004 and 2014.

A 2019 document by the RAND Corporation, one of the most important think tanks advising the US government, outlined a strategy of forcing Russia to “overextend” itself militarily in conflicts on its borders. The aim of this strategy is to weaken the Putin regime economically and politically while enabling the US to focus more directly on its main strategic rival: China. The military conflict in East Ukraine is a central part of that strategy.

The report noted, “The Ukrainian military already is bleeding Russia in the Donbass region (and vice versa). Providing more U.S. military equipment and advice could lead Russia to increase its direct involvement in the conflict and the price it pays for it.” It then warned that such a strategy could come at a significant cost to the US itself and was extremely risky, yet it is precisely this strategy that the US has been pursuing.

Over the past seven years, the US has spent hundreds of millions of dollars on the Ukrainian military, and US military advisers play a major role in training the Ukrainian army. The RAND Corporation acknowledged that all its proposed strategies involved the risk of an uncontrollable military escalation, including the deployment of nuclear weapons—risks US imperialism is clearly prepared to take.

The working class is confronting the catastrophic consequences of the 1991 dissolution of the USSR by the Soviet bureaucracy, which grew out of the Stalinist betrayal of the socialist October revolution of 1917. As the ICFI wrote at the time, the dissolution of the USSR did not mark the end of socialism, much less a period of the “triumph of capitalism.” Rather, it opened up a new period of imperialist wars of plunder and social revolution. 30 years later, this assessment has been fully confirmed. The critical question now is the construction of a socialist anti-war movement in the working class, based on these historical lessons. *For more on the dissolution of the Soviet Union, click* here.

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