

Ukrainian President Zelensky calls on NATO to step up its military intervention in the Black Sea as Russian press warns of war

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On Tuesday, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky spoke with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg amidst growing tensions with Russia in East Ukraine. Over the past weeks, fighting has escalated in the Donbass region between the Ukrainian army and Russian-backed separatists. A civil war has raged there since the 2014 US- and German-backed coup in Kiev, which heavily relied on neo-Nazi forces.

The war has claimed over 14,000 lives and displaced millions. In the past three months, an estimated 40 people have been killed in the clashes. Separatists in East Ukraine claim that at least one child was killed in the fighting this week.

Last weekend, Ukraine and NATO announced joint military exercises. Now, Zelensky is calling upon NATO to accelerate Ukraine's admission to the military alliance. He urged NATO to strengthen its military presence in the Black Sea region, claiming that such a move would act as a "powerful deterrent" to Russia.

Following the meeting, Stoltenberg tweeted: "NATO firmly supports Ukraine's sovereignty & territorial integrity. We remain committed to our close partnership."

The meeting with Stoltenberg was preceded on Friday by a call between Zelensky and US President Joe Biden, who assured Ukraine would receive the full backing of Washington. On Monday, the US State Department declared that it found reports of Russian military movements on Ukraine's border "credible" and demanded that Moscow explain the "provocations." UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson also spoke with Zelensky.

Later on Tuesday, Ukraine's foreign minister declared that Kiev would not accept an invitation to conduct peace negotiations in Minsk, where they have been taking place since 2015, involving Russia, Ukraine, Germany and France.

The accusations of Russian "aggression" and "provocations" stand reality on its head. The conditions for the current escalation were created, above all, by the

aggressive moves by US and German imperialism which, since the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, have pushed ever closer to Russia's borders, above all through the eastward expansion of NATO.

In Ukraine, two coups were orchestrated by the imperialist powers in 2004 and 2014 to install pro-Western regimes that could play a key role in the war preparations against Russia.

Whatever his promises to fight for a "peace deal," which played a key role in promoting Zelensky's election in 2019, he has effectively continued the policies of his predecessor Petro Poroshenko. Last month, the Ukrainian government proclaimed a strategy to "recover Crimea," a strategically located peninsula in the Black Sea which was annexed by Russia following the 2014 coup. It then approved a new military strategy that focuses on preparing for war against Russia with NATO support.

Two days ago the Russian press reported that Ukraine had gathered an offensive force in the Donbass region and the region around the Crimean isthmus. There have also been numerous unconfirmed reports of Russian troop movements in and near Crimea. Canada and a number of European countries have issued warnings to "be careful when flying over Ukraine." Canada discouraged its airlines from flying over East Ukraine and Crimea due to the "unstable security situation."

The escalation of the situation by Kiev is being seized upon to further the anti-Russia campaign in the US and step up military involvement in the region. Ben Hodges, a former commander of US Army in Europe, demanded in the military magazine *Defense One*, that the US develop a strategy for the entire Black Sea region and make it clear that it is "vital" to American interests. He also called for more aid to Ukraine and strategic exercises in the region. In a similar vein, the foreign policy think tank Atlantic Council demanded that the US supply the Ukrainian Air Force with fighter jets, smart munitions and cruise missiles.

Under Trump, the US had begun delivering weapons to

Ukraine, on top of channeling hundreds of millions of dollars into funding the Ukrainian military. In March, a bipartisan group of senators proposed another \$300 million aid package.

The US has also played a key role in politically and financially supporting Ukrainian neo-Nazi forces, which in turn have been integrated into the Ukrainian state and government. Zelensky's minister of Internal Affairs, Arsen Avakov, is notorious for his ties to the neo-Nazi Azov Battalion and similar far-right forces which had played a central role in the 2014 coup.

They have since been given virtual free rein to terrorize ethnic minorities and political opponents of the Ukrainian government and the far right. It is also primarily these forces that have been engaged in the fighting in East Ukraine.

The military confrontations in the Black Sea region are taking place in the context of rising geopolitical tensions, especially between the US and China but also between the imperialist powers. And the new Biden administration has embarked on an aggressive military course towards both Russia and China.

Just weeks after taking office, Biden bombed Syria, in a move that targeted not only Iran but also Russia and China. In an extraordinary breach of protocol, the US president called Russian President Vladimir Putin "a killer." In response, the Kremlin recalled its ambassador to the US.

Fyodor Lukyanov, one of the leading Russian foreign policy pundits with close ties to the Kremlin, commented that this was not enough. He insisted that now was the "time to make a break in US-Russia relations, further engagement is pointless for now."

In Russia, Zelensky's moves are seen as open preparations for war and have provoked considerable nervousness. Shamil Gareev, a military expert and reserve officer, told the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, "The beginning of the NATO Defender Europe 2021 exercises clearly coincides with the media discussion of possible temporary plans of Kiev to initiate active military actions in the Crimea and Donbass." He added, "It is not excluded that Kiev will initiate its main strike on the Donbass in May or possibly in early July."

Others are comparing the situation to the eve of the 2008 Georgian-Russian war, which brought the world to the brink of a confrontation between the US and Russia. The Kremlin has insisted that it does not want war with Ukraine but is now clearly making preparations for such a possibility.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has expressed anger, in particular, at Germany and France, accusing them of doing nothing to "bring Ukraine to its senses." On Friday, German Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer called for an even further increase in German military spending in an interview with the *Redaktionsnetzwerk*

Deutschland.

Kramp-Karrenbauer stressed that German military rearmament was not about "doing the US a favor" but rather served "our own interests." She explicitly referred to China and Russia as the main targets of the buildup, calling Russia "a very palpable threat, both on the level of conventional and atomic [warfare]."

The interview received wide press coverage in Russia and was immediately discussed by the State Duma (Parliament)'s committee for foreign affairs. While most media pundits and politicians tried to downplay it, suggesting that Berlin probably did not consider Moscow an enemy, it clearly raised concern.

In recent months, relations between Russia and Germany have soured considerably as Berlin has taken a leading role in the campaign over the right-wing Putin opponent Alexei Navalny.

There are ongoing conflicts within the German ruling class itself over its policy toward Russia. Many of these conflicts center on the German-Russian gas pipeline Nord Stream 2, which the US has sanctioned. In his first meeting with US Secretary of State Blinken, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas insisted that Germany would go ahead with the project despite US opposition.

A commentary by Daniel Brössler in the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* on Tuesday demanded that, in response to the crisis in Ukraine, "The West must threaten sanctions that hurt." It continued, "Russia's show of military force on the border of Ukraine should finally make the EU take a clear stance and act in a deterrent manner, together with the US." A war between Russia and Ukraine would have to signify the "end of Nord Stream," he insisted. "At least this must now be clearly stated."



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