

Ukrainian President Zelensky meets Turkey's Erdogan as US threatens Russia

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This weekend, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky met with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Istanbul, amid rising tensions between Moscow, Kiev and Washington.

Threats coming from Kiev and above all from the Biden administration in Washington are driving a dangerous military escalation. After Biden denounced Russian President Vladimir Putin as a “killer” last month, the Ukrainian President’s Office endorsed a strategy document, the “Crimean platform,” pledging to seize Russia’s naval base at Sevastopol in the Crimea. Ankara confirmed Friday that the US will send two warships through the Turkish straits into the Black Sea.

There are deep divisions in Turkish ruling circles over relations with NATO and Russia. Ten retired Turkish admirals were arrested last week as a bitter conflict erupted inside the Turkish state over whether to scrap the 1936 Montreux Convention regulating passage between the Mediterranean and Black Seas. Turkey, a NATO member state, has also developed close ties with Ukraine, signing multiple arms deals, notably involving the sale of Turkish drones.

These conflicts were reflected in Erdogan’s concerned, somewhat ambiguous remarks at the meeting. As both Kiev and Moscow amass forces on their shared border, he stated: “We hope for the worrying escalation observed on the field recently to end as soon as possible, the ceasefire to continue and for the conflict to be resolved via dialogue on the basis of the Minsk agreements.”

While agreeing on military ties with Ukraine, Erdogan stressed that this cooperation was not directed against any other country.

At the same time, however, Erdogan backed Ukraine over Crimea, stating: “We reaffirmed our principled stance of not recognizing the annexation of Crimea.” In a joint declaration, Turkey endorsed Zelensky’s “Crimean platform” as “a new format for resolving the issue of the

illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea.”

The NATO powers and Ukraine are reviving the conflict initiated by the 2014 coup in Ukraine, backed by Washington and Berlin, led by far-right groups in Kiev including the Right Sector militia and the Svoboda party. Anti-Russian threats by the Ukrainian far right led Russian-speaking areas of Ukraine, including Crimea and the Donbass in eastern Ukraine, along the Russian border, to secede. Crimea, a peninsula in the Black Sea, voted to rejoin Russia in 2014.

Kiev’s announcement of plans to conquer Crimea and the Donbass, now controlled by Russian-backed separatists, is a declaration that it is planning war with Russia. It is driving renewed fighting between pro-Russian separatists and Ukrainian army units in East Ukraine.

The joint declaration by Kiev and Ankara also pledged “efforts to improve the living conditions of Ukrainian citizens, in particular Crimean Tatars, who have been forced to leave their homeland, Crimea, as a result of the temporary occupation.” The Turkish government also announced on Saturday that it would help build 500 homes for Crimean Tatars in Ukraine.

Crimea was a vassal state of the Ottoman Empire before being annexed by the Russian Empire under Catherine the Great in 1783. It is home to approximately 250,000 Crimean Tatars, 11.4 percent of Crimea’s population, who share linguistic and cultural ties with Turks.

In 2016, Erdogan made clear that he viewed Crimea as part of a “Greater Turkey”, stating, “Turkey cannot disregard its kinsmen in Western Thrace, Cyprus, Crimea and anywhere else.” That same year, he warned that the Black Sea was turning into a “Russian lake.”

Exploiting ethnic tensions in Crimea has long been central to imperialist strategy in the region—that of the Nazi regime and its genocidal invasion of the Soviet Union during World War II, but also of US imperialism

during the Cold War. At that time, Turkey supported US imperialism's efforts to foster nationalist, anti-Communist forces among Crimean Tatars to destabilize the Soviet Union. The Stalinist bureaucracy's crimes against Crimea's Tatar minority facilitated these efforts.

Zelensky and the Biden administration are clearly banking on Erdogan's reactionary Turkish nationalism to press Ankara to support aggressive action. After the summit, Zelensky tweeted: "We share common values with #Turkey, including human life and support."

Washington, Ukraine's main military supporter, plays the central role in this conflict, and there are indications that behind the scenes, it is applying intense pressure on Kiev. Significantly, Biden waited more than two months after his inauguration, until April 2, to contact Zelensky. He did not call Zelensky until the Ukrainian president launched a crackdown on pro-Russian political opposition forces in Ukraine, shut down pro-Russia media outlets, and announced plans for an invasion of Crimea.

On Sunday, speaking to NBC's "Meet the Press," Secretary of State Antony Blinken threatened Moscow that "there will be consequences" for amassing troops on the Russian-Ukrainian border. "President Biden's been very clear about this. If Russia acts recklessly, or aggressively, there will be costs, there will be consequences," Blinken stated.

This week, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin is to meet in person with NATO Secretary Jens Stoltenberg to discuss Ukraine. He will also visit US troops in Germany and meet German defence minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer who has threatened Russia in a recent interview. Washington is trying to use the crisis to pressure the European powers for new economic sanctions, as the NATO powers launch an even larger military build-up, targeting Russia.

In the *Washington Post* Sunday, Evelyn N. Farkas a former deputy assistant secretary of defense for Russia/Ukraine/Eurasia under the Obama administration, wrote that "sanctions are coming, and they are a good start." Farkas claimed that failing to back Ukraine against Russia would also embolden China.

Since the 2014 coup, Ukraine has received billions of dollars in US military aid. Moreover, as it stokes a suicidal conflict with Russia that threatens to escalate into all-out regional and global war, the crisis-ridden Zelensky government is also seeking to divert from the explosive social and political discontent building up in the country. The seven-year civil war in the East is deeply unpopular. Zelensky's false promises to end it and to discontinue the

rabidly anti-Russian policies of his predecessor, Petro Poroshenko, were the main reasons for his election in 2019.

An estimated 7-9 million young Ukrainians now work abroad, at least for part of the year, in the EU and Russia. Many young men are leaving Ukraine to escape not only poverty, but also conscription.

While the Ukrainian regime unsurprisingly reveals little about this sensitive subject, it appears there is little popular support for joining the military other than for a paycheck—apart from among members of far-right paramilitary groups like the Azov Battalion and the Right Sector.

In 2015, a little more than a year since the civil war in Donbass began, a Ukrainian official revealed that 16,000 Ukrainian troops had abandoned their posts, many with weapons in hand. The Ukrainian government responded by passing a law allowing commanders to shoot deserters.

Official statistics from January 2019 revealed that 9,300 Ukrainians are classified as deserters; actual numbers are likely far higher. In recent years, the Ukrainian military has stopped using conscripts for combat operations, allowing only professional soldiers on the civil war's front line.

For workers in Ukraine facing the devastation wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has caused nearly 1.9 million cases and over 37,000 deaths, as well as the industrial collapse and impoverishment following the 2014 coup and civil war, a suicidal war with Russia has no appeal.

Nonetheless, the danger of such a war, which poses the risk of a much wider regional and even global conflagration, is very real. The course of events is exposing the disastrous military and political consequences of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism by the Stalinist regime, three decades ago, in 1991. Halting the drive to war requires building an international socialist anti-war movement in the working class, against imperialism and the capitalist system as a whole.



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