

Russian foreign minister warns of a new “cold war”

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Tensions between the United States, its NATO allies and the Russian government continue, despite the Kremlin’s pull back of troops last week from the border with US-ally Ukraine and the announcement by the right-wing oppositionist Alexei Navalny—clearly acting on cue from the White House—that he was ending his hunger strike. Against the backdrop of a possible meeting between the American and Russian presidents in June, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned Wednesday of the start of a new “cold war.”

After canceling the deployment of navy warships to the Black Sea in mid-April, the US is now sending a Coast Guard vessel into the waters, which Moscow considers key to its geopolitical survival. Russia’s fleet is starting military combat exercises there this week, including live-fire drills with helicopters.

A diplomatic conflict between Russia and US-allied states in eastern Europe, the Baltics, and the Balkans is also ratcheting up, with Moscow adding embassy staff from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovakia to a list of individuals instructed to leave the country. Already a total of sixteen American, Czech, Polish, and Bulgarian diplomats have been expelled, with the prospect of dozens more. Russian government representatives have also been kicked out of these countries.

Following on the heels of the Czech government’s accusation that Russia was involved in an explosion at a munitions depot in 2014—a charge that the Kremlin denies—Bulgaria is now claiming Russian involvement in similar incidents on its territory in 2011 and 2012.

Several days ago, Russia’s foreign ministry announced it is drawing up a formal list of “unfriendly states.” In addition, the Kremlin declared that it has proof of a plot to assassinate Belorussian President Alexander Lukashenko and his family and American

involvement in that plot. It has yet to reveal any details, a fact which is also true of recent allegations by the US security services that Moscow sought to influence the 2020 elections.

Even as the United States ceaselessly denounces Russia for “meddling” in US affairs, the American press continues its nauseating promotion of Navalny as President Vladimir Putin’s noble opponent, with the clear aim of building a movement that will toss out the current Kremlin leader. These very same forces have long brayed for the blood of Julian Assange, who has been detained and mercilessly tortured for years because of his opposition to imperialism.

On Tuesday, the *New York Times* featured an opinion piece by the Russian journalist Oleg Kashin titled, “Aleksei Navalny Is Russia’s True Leader” that spins a fantastical tale of the immigrant-hating, right-wing politician, declaring him a “brave, proud, unbroken man standing up to an inhumane system” and the “profound” leader of a movement of “thousands.” According to Kashin, an operative in the opposition milieu who was recently denounced by Navalny himself as a “liar and scoundrel,” Putin wakes up every morning, asks his magic “mirror who Russia’s true leader is” and it “answers: Aleksei Navalny.”

The little that is truthful in Kashin’s commentary is when he notes—clearly not recognizing the implications of his observation—that Navalny realized in 2007 that “criticizing corruption was more convincing than slogans advocating democracy.”

The supposed “human rights” defender Navalny, who was, in fact, recently stripped by Amnesty International of his “prisoner of conscience” status because of “hate speech” in videos in which he advocated the murder of ethnic minorities and round-up of immigrants, came to understand that “anti-corruption” was the best vehicle

through which to cover-up his reactionary political and economic program. Easy and cheap and capable of being filled with virtually any political content, it is the slogan traditionally seized by right-wing politicians.

In reality, Navalny has little support within the broader population. But in addition to the patronage of the US and NATO, he has the backing of sections of the Russian oligarchy who seek a greater share of the spoils of the Russian economy and to benefit from a closer relationship with American imperialism. It is noteworthy that the media arm of Gazprom, Russia's state-owned energy giant, owns the country's major liberal, pro-Navalny news outlet—Ekho Moskvyy.

Leading figures in the Stalinist Russian Communist Party (KPRF), including the party's parliamentary representative from Moscow and the former governor of Irkutsk, have also recently argued that the KPRF should get behind the oppositionist. A few days ago, Gennady Zyuguanov, head of the KPRF, announced he would not expel the two for their pro-Navalny positions, pulling back from provoking a major split in his organization.

President Putin fears that, backed by the US, layers of the Russian political and economic elite, and sections of the upper-middle class in major cities, Navalny will be able to challenge his government. Leonid Volkov, a top adviser to Navalny, recently stated on Twitter, the Kremlin is vulnerable to “pressure from inside and outside.”

On Wednesday, a Russian court banned Navalny's Anti-Corruption Fund (FBK) from publishing on the internet, organizing and leading protests, participating in elections, and using bank deposits. The court is also considering whether the FBK should be designated an “extremist organization,” akin to outfits like ISIS. It ordered the closure of the FBK's regional offices until that determination is made. The pro-US media outlet Meduza has now also been labeled a “foreign agent.”

The relentless efforts of Washington to bring down the Putin government in Moscow and break apart Russia unfold alongside the escalating US confrontation with Beijing. The fact that both governments face an intransigent foe in the US is driving them towards each other.

When asked on Tuesday to respond to Putin's recent comment that Russia would draw “red lines” that, if anyone should cross, would have dire consequences,

Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin expressed his agreement and stated that the two countries “continue to understand and support each other in safeguarding our respective sovereignty, security and development interests.” He described the latest round of anti-Russian sanctions imposed by Washington as “power politics and hegemonic bullying.”



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