

The UK-Russian confrontation in the Black Sea: An ominous warning

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On Wednesday, a British warship entered waters claimed by Russia near Crimea, a peninsula in the Black Sea. A Russian border patrol boat fired several warning shots and a Russian fighter jet bombed the path of the British destroyer HMS Defender, Moscow said. The Kremlin has since released footage of the incident. The British government denies that the Russian side fired shots and dropped a bomb, and insists that not much should be made of the incident.

However, the Kremlin summoned British Ambassador Deborah Bronnert to the Foreign Ministry and issued a note of protest to the British military attaché. Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov warned that should such an event occur again, "we can bomb... on target."

Wednesday's confrontation in the Black Sea highlights the enormous danger of war and is a serious warning. Similar incidents have led to the outbreak of wars in the past.

The crisis in the Black Sea is the result of a decades-long US-led imperialist encirclement of Russia following the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. The imperialist interventions and military build-up on Russia's borders dramatically escalated in 2014, when the US and EU backed a far-right coup in Kiev that toppled the pro-Russian government of Viktor Yanukovich. The coup triggered an ongoing civil war in the Donbass in East Ukraine and Russia's annexation of Crimea.

In February, the Ukrainian government announced plans to "recover Crimea" and the Donbass, provoking a major military crisis in the region. In May, NATO staged the massive Defender 2021 exercise in the Balkans and Black Sea region, which involved non-NATO members Ukraine and Georgia.

Under these conditions, the actions of the British ship

HMS Defender had the character of a provocation. The ship was in the Black Sea ahead of the Sea Breeze naval exercise set to take place from June 28 through July 10. Co-hosted by the US and Ukrainian navy, it will involve a staggering 32 countries, 5,000 troops, 32 ships, 40 aircraft and 18 special operations. The Kremlin has called upon the US to cancel the exercise, warning of an inadvertent military confrontation.

Onboard the HMS Defender on Wednesday were senior Ukrainian and British government officials, including Ukraine's Deputy Minister of Defense and the British Minister for Defence Procurement. They signed a major bilateral naval agreement that day which provides for substantial military aid by Britain for the Ukrainian navy and the creation of new naval bases in the Black Sea.

Highlighting the seriousness of the crisis, Conservative British MP Tobias Ellwood said on British radio, "We should recognize this is a dangerous game. Su-24 Russian jets buzzing ships, there's huge scope for an accident to occur, misinterpretation leading to an actual kinetic engagement, and it could be a bit of time before someone grabs that red phone and calms things down." Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko stated, "This situation is explosive, even if all parties remain prudent. Unintentional incidents, which can result in a real conflict, are not ruled out."

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical tensions have grown significantly. Claiming that there is "no money" for the most basic needs of workers and refusing to undertake any serious measures to stop the pandemic, capitalist governments have increased global military spending in 2020 to a stunning \$2 trillion.

US imperialism, in particular, has responded to the

pandemic by seeking to divert growing class tensions outward. The Biden administration has proposed a record military budget of \$753 billion for this year, including \$24.7 billion for the modernization of nuclear warheads. The UK is increasing its stock of nuclear warheads by 40 percent.

While there are indications that the Biden administration is trying to ease tensions with Moscow in order to focus on war preparations against China, there are sharp conflicts over foreign policy within the US ruling class. There are also growing tensions between the imperialist powers and within NATO. A proposal for a EU summit with Russia by Germany's Angela Merkel and France's Emmanuel Macron has provoked major conflicts within the EU.

Whatever the intentions of individuals, shifting alliances and tactical maneuvers, the danger of war is objectively rooted in the crisis of the world capitalist system. In a lecture explaining the origins of World War II, David North, the chairman of the editorial board of the WSW and chairperson of the Socialist Equality Party (US), stressed:

It is not necessarily the case that the ruling classes want war. But they are not necessarily able to stop it. As Trotsky wrote on the eve of World War II, the capitalist regimes toboggan to disaster with their eyes closed. The insane logic of imperialism and the capitalist nation-state system, of the drive to secure access to markets, raw materials and cheap labor, of the relentless pursuit of profit and personal riches, leads inexorably in the direction of war.

Wednesday's incident occurred one day after the 80th anniversary of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. The Nazis' imperialist war of annihilation claimed the lives of at least 27 million Soviet citizens, among them an estimated 2 million Soviet Jews and over 3 million Soviet prisoners of war. Yet beyond a few perfunctory remarks by German politicians, the imperialist powers met the anniversary of the beginning of the bloodiest war in human history with deafening silence.

The policies of Russian President Vladimir Putin's

regime, oscillating between seeking deals with the NATO powers and military threats, are reactionary through and through. On the anniversary of the Nazi invasion, Putin penned an article in Die Zeit first denouncing NATO aggression in Ukraine in 2014, then appealing to the European imperialist powers for support. This followed shortly Putin's cordial summit with Biden, which restored ambassadorial relations that Moscow had broken after Biden called Putin a "killer" in March.

The Kremlin's decision to then drop a bomb near a British warship opens the way to a catastrophe. It is apparent that, should Moscow indeed "bomb ... on target," as Ryabkov threatened to do, in a future Black Sea incident, this could rapidly escalate into a full-scale military confrontation between nuclear-armed NATO powers and Russia.

Moscow's policy, combining reassuring statements with reckless stunts, reflects the class character of the Putin regime. It is the heir of the Stalinist bureaucracy that in 1991 restored capitalism and destroyed the Soviet Union, which German imperialism failed to accomplish in World War II. Bitterly hostile to the working class, it relies on both close relations with imperialist finance capital abroad and the ceaseless promotion of nationalism at home; it will use such an incident to appeal to nationalist sentiments and divert social opposition within Russia itself.

The only social force capable of fighting against imperialist war is the international working class. It is propelled into revolutionary struggles by the same objective contradictions that drive imperialism toward war. Across the world, workers have been radicalized by decades of austerity, war and the experience of the pandemic, and are beginning to fight back. The critical task now is to fight for the establishment of a Trotskyist political leadership for these struggles in the working class through the building of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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