US stokes tensions with Russia over claims of an impending invasion of Ukraine

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The US continues to fuel tensions with Russia, promoting unsubstantiated claims over an alleged planned invasion of Ukraine.

In recent weeks, NATO has significantly stepped up its military activities in the Black Sea. The US has sent three warships to the Black Sea and the UK announced it would deploy 600 troops in case war breaks out between Russia and Ukraine. In a further move designed to escalate tensions, the US sent two US Coast Guard boats to the Ukrainian navy on Tuesday. The two island class patrol boats will be deployed by Ukraine in the Black Sea and the Azov Sea.

Russian President Vladimir Putin emphasized in a meeting with Russian diplomats last week that Moscow needed "clear guarantees" from NATO in Eastern Europe and that the US-led alliance's latest military activities in the Black Sea constituted a "serious challenge" for Russia.

Meanwhile, the US government and media have escalated their campaign over an allegedly impending invasion of Ukraine by Russia. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken claimed last week that Washington was concerned Russia could invade Ukraine, and CNN, CNBC and Bloomberg have all published reports issuing the same warning. As is always the case in the NATO war propaganda machine, these statements and reports are based virtually exclusively on sources in US and European intelligence.

This weekend, the head of Ukraine's intelligence, Kirill Budanov, alleged that Russia had amassed 92,000 troops near its border with Ukraine and was preparing for an attack on Ukraine by the end of January or beginning of February.

Russia's foreign minister Sergei Lavrov described Budanov's statement as "warmongering rhetoric" and an indication that Ukraine, with the backing of Washington, was preparing "a provocation, to bring the conflict into a hot phase."

According to CNN, the Biden administration is discussing sending military advisers and new equipment, including new-Javelin anti-tank and anti-armor missiles as well as mortars, and an MI-17 Russian helicopter that had initially been purchased for Afghan military forces, to Ukraine. The Kremlin has made clear that it would regard further military equipment of Ukraine's armed forces as crossing a "red line."

Both Democratic and Republican lawmakers are calling for new sanctions on Russia, and Washington has already announced new sanctions on the Russian-German gas pipeline Nord Stream 2. Last week Berlin, which has so far refused to yield to pressure to stop the project, announced it would temporarily pause it.

On Monday, Russia's foreign intelligence agency compared the current tensions in the Black Sea to the build-up to the 2008 war between Russia and Washington-backed Georgia in the Caucasus, which brought the US and Russia, the world's two largest nuclear powers, to the brink of a military confrontation. The statement sent the Russian ruble tumbling. Moscow and Washington are reportedly discussing another, virtual, meeting between Biden and Putin that might take place before the end of the year.

The latest flare-up of tensions in the Black Sea region is ultimately the outcome of the US-led NATO encirclement of Russia in the wake of the Stalinist bureaucracy's dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Ukraine and the Black Sea, which connects Europe and the Middle East, have been central to the US strategy of establishing its hegemony over the landmass of Eurasia.

The US orchestrated two coups in Kiev, one in 2004 and another in 2014, which toppled the pro-Russian government of Viktor Yanukovych. The 2014 coup heavily relied on neo-Nazi forces that have since been integrated into the Ukrainian political establishment, the

state apparatus and the military.

The coup triggered an ongoing civil war in East Ukraine, in which the Ukrainian army, armed and equipped by NATO, has been engaging in a stand-off with pro-Russian separatists. Crimea, a strategic peninsula in the Black Sea, was annexed by Russia following a referendum in March 2014. Over 13,000 people have been killed in this conflict, and millions more have been displaced.

Tensions in the region have been running high throughout this year, stoked by NATO and the Kiev government.

This February, the Ukrainian government approved a new strategy document, declaring its determination to "recover Crimea" as well as the Donbass, the region in East Ukraine now controlled by pro-Russian separatists. The announcement of this policy was an open declaration that Ukraine was preparing for war with Russia, and provoked a military crisis in April.

Then, in June, the UK launched a major provocation in the Black Sea, sending a warship into waters claimed by Russia. In response, a Russian border patrol boat fired several warning shots and a Russian fighter jet bombed the path of the British destroyer HMS Defender.

Following a summit between US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin in June, at which the US sought to ease tensions with Moscow as part of its growing focus on preparing for war against China, Moscow, clearly hoping to exploit the shift in US foreign policy, launched a flurry of diplomatic activity. The Kremlin hosted CIA director William Burns, as well as Victoria Nuland, waiving earlier sanctions that had banned her from entering Russia. Like perhaps no other figure in the US foreign policy establishment, Nuland, who now serves as Biden's undersecretary of state, is associated with the blatant US orchestration of the "Maidan" in Ukraine that culminated in the February 2014 putsch.

No details about the talks, which lasted three days and took place in mid-October, were published. Shortly thereafter, Russia ended its decades-long mission to NATO and the US began claiming that Russian troops were massing along Ukraine's border, a claim initially denied by both Kiev and Moscow. The US then sent the head of the CIA to Ukraine, and several warships into the Black Sea.

Simultaneously, the EU and NATO used the attempt by thousands of defenseless refugees from the Middle East to cross the border of Belarus with Poland, a EU member state, to accuse Russia of conducting "hybrid warfare" with refugees. While the immediate crisis has somewhat subsided as Belarus's Alexander Lukashenko started deporting refugees back to the war-torn Middle East, Poland is still threatening to entirely shut down its border with Belarus.

Whatever the immediate intentions and calculations of the US and its NATO allies or, for that matter, the Ukrainian government and the Russian oligarchy, the situation is deeply unstable and with the potential for a dangerous escalation. In its increasingly reckless course toward war against both Russia and China, US imperialism is driven above all by the explosive growth of social tensions amidst the pandemic, which have begun to find an initial expression in the biggest strike wave in decades.

The situation in Eastern Europe, however, is hardly any more stable. The working class of Ukraine and Russia is suffering immensely from the pandemic, to which the ruling oligarchies, the heirs of the Stalinist bureaucracy, responded in no less criminal a manner than the capitalist class of Europe and the US.

Both Russia and Ukraine have been leading the worldwide ranking in daily numbers of COVID deaths for several weeks now. Crematoria in the Ukrainian capital now have to work around the clock to cremate the bodies of all those who are dying. Russia still sets almost daily new records of COVID deaths, with well over 1,200 people dying each day. Hundreds of thousands of children have been infected, and an untold number of them have died, yet the Kremlin rejects imposing any serious public health measures to contain the pandemic.

The only progressive way out of this situation is for the working class to enter political life on an independent basis, in a globally coordinated movement that must combine the struggle to put an end to the pandemic with the struggle to put an end to imperialist war and its root cause, the capitalist system.

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