Amid pandemic, Washington escalates war threats against Russia

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The US-led NATO alliance, which includes most of the world's wealthiest countries, has suffered 115.3 million COVID-19 cases and 1.89 million deaths. It is passing through a winter pandemic surge that the World Health Organization (WHO) projects will claim 700,000 more lives in Europe alone. Moreover, the new Omicron variant, which will likely evade current COVID-19 vaccines, is now spreading in both America and Europe.

On Thursday, Biden pledged there would nonetheless be no "shutdowns or lockdowns" to halt the contagion, only continued use of existing vaccines. This means leaving the flow of profits to Wall Street untouched, at the expense of millions of lives lost to the pandemic.

Against this backdrop, Washington, assisted by its NATO allies, is stoking military tensions that serve to distract from mounting internal opposition to its criminally irresponsible policies on the pandemic, and that risks triggering all-out war with Russia, or also China.

NATO is launching a military build-up on Russia's borders. It is arming Ukraine with Javelin anti-tank missiles, guided-missile warships to be built by Britain, and anti-air missile batteries. The Ukrainian regime in Kiev has not contested Russian reports that it is massing 125,000 troops on its border with Russia.

Then, on Friday, as 521,291 NATO inhabitants fell ill and 3,876 died of COVID-19, Biden called for NATO to prepare for war with Russia, a major nuclear-armed power.

Preparing for a phone call tomorrow with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Biden recklessly declared that he rejects Russia's "red lines," that is, that he will take actions even if Russia warns they cross a red line and will lead to war. Speaking of Ukraine, Biden declared, "We're aware of Russia's actions for a long time and my expectation is we're going to have a long discussion with Putin. I don't accept anybody's red lines."

Biden's rejection of Russian "red lines" was in response to Putin's warning last week that NATO arming Ukraine with missile bases was a "red line" that could lead to war with Russia. Cruise missiles fired from these bases would need just six minutes to reach the center of Moscow.

Washington presents its policy, of course, as a defense of Ukraine against Russian aggression. After Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov alleged that 94,300 Russian troops are massing near the Ukraine-Russia border, and that "the likelihood of a large-scale escalation from Russia exists," US Secretary of State Antony Blinken denounced Russia.

After claiming that China is preparing to invade Taiwan and warning of "terrible consequences," Blinken said, "We've seen this playbook before, in 2014 when Russia last invaded Ukraine. Then, as now, they significantly increased combat forces near the border. Then, as now, they intensified disinformation to paint Ukraine as the aggressor to justify pre-planned military action."

This is a pack of lies. Blinken himself admitted that "we don't know whether President Putin has made the decision to invade," and that "uncertainty about intentions and timing" remains. That is to say, Washington and Kiev are alleging only that Russian troops are located on Russian soil, and that they do not know what these troops will do. Yet on this flimsy basis, they are insisting that NATO countries must effectively ignore the pandemic and instead prepare for war with Russia.

Examining the 2014 events shows that the aggressor is not Russia, but NATO. In February 2014, when Biden was Barack Obama's vice-president, Washington and Berlin backed a putsch led by the neo-Nazi Right Sector that toppled pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich. It brought to power a far-right regime that included the Svoboda Party, which the European Union had formally condemned in 2012 for racist and anti-

Semitic views. It also pledged to ban the speaking of the Russian language and murder ethnic Russians in Ukraine.

As far-right militias launched raids into Russian-speaking areas of eastern Ukraine like the Donbass and the Crimea, these regions voted to secede. The fascistic regime in Kiev had no firm claim on the Crimea. It was annexed by Russia in 1783, the year the United States won independence from Britain, and was only ceded to Ukraine by Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev in 1954, when its internal status within the Soviet Union was of little importance.

Yet ever since 2014, NATO has fraudulently claimed that Crimea's vote to rejoin Russia constituted a Russian "invasion" of Ukraine justifying NATO preparations for war.

NATO is not defending Ukraine, but arming it and goading Moscow to attack. In this regard, it is worth pondering Democratic Senator Chris Murphy's statement Sunday that "Ukraine can become the next Afghanistan for Russia if it chooses to move further."

Murphy was referring to the Democratic Carter administration's decision in 1979 to try to provoke a Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The policy, proposed by Democratic strategist Zbigniew Brzezinski, involved arming Islamist *mujahedin* against the Soviet-backed Afghan regime. Moscow ultimately intervened to support the Afghan government, trapping the Soviet army in a bloody, decade-long war with CIA-backed Islamists allied to future Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. Two years after suffering a shattering defeat in 1989, the Stalinist bureaucracy dissolved the Soviet Union.

In 2014, amid the mounting crisis of US wars in the Middle East, as Russia and Iran backed President Bashar al-Assad against NATO in the Syrian war, Brzezinski called to repeat this policy.

A few months after the Ukraine putsch, Brzezinski gave a speech at the Wilson Center, during which he proposed to trap Russia in a war in Ukraine. After a Russian invasion of Ukraine, he cold-bloodedly explained, NATO could sacrifice Ukrainian cities like Kharkov and Kiev to wear down the Russian army, the way urban warfare at Stalingrad wore down the Nazi armies in World War II. He said:

"There is a history to be learned here from urban resistance in World War II … If the major cities, say Kharkiv, say Kiev, were to resist and street fighting became a necessity, it would be prolonged

and costly. And the fact of the matter is—and this is where the timing of this whole crisis is important—Russia is not yet ready to undertake that kind of an effort. It will be too costly in blood, paralyzingly costly in finances. And would take a long time and create more and more international pressure. …

"[W]e should make it clear to the Ukrainians that if they are determined to resist, as they say they are and seemingly they are trying to do so (albeit not very effectively), we will provide them with anti-tank weapons, hand-held anti-tank weapons, hand-held rockets …"

This is the reckless policy the Biden administration is now working to implement. The most serious warnings are in order for workers in NATO countries, former Soviet republics, and internationally. This would not be the first time in history that a desperate ruling class has concluded that a war will provide a way out of an explosive internal crisis for which it has no progressive solutions.

The pandemic is a trigger event, massively intensifying class and international tensions. Deeply destabilized, the Biden administration and the imperialist governments across Europe are flailing about desperately, looking for a target at which to lash out.

The decisive question today, to save millions of lives, is to mobilize the working class and unite it in a powerful international movement against war and for a scientific policy to halt the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic and eliminate transmission of the virus.