

Biden threatens economic sanctions and a repositioning of NATO troops in meeting with Putin

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At a two-hour video conference call with Russia's President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday, US President Joe Biden threatened Russia with "strong sanctions" and the repositioning of NATO troops in case of a war between Russia and Ukraine. It was the second meeting of both presidents this year following a summit in June, at which Biden appeared trying to ease tensions with Russia as part of his administration's efforts to focus its war preparations on China.

Since then, however, military tensions between NATO and Russia have grown significantly, even as the US has escalated its war drive against China. Over the past month, the US has sent several warships to the Black Sea in what Putin has described as a "serious challenge" to Russia's security interests. The EU and NATO have also provoked a geopolitical crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, where thousands of refugees from the Middle East have been trapped.

While the regime of Alexander Lukashenko has begun deporting many of these refugees, the US and EU imposed new sanctions on Belarus last week which are expected to deal a serious blow to the country's economy. Despite simmering tensions with the Kremlin, Minsk is the only state remaining in Eastern Europe that maintains extremely close economic and military ties with Russia.

These provocations have come after three decades, in which NATO has continuously pushed closer to Russia's borders and staged two coups in Ukraine in 2004 and 2014, to bring pro-Western governments to power. While Putin has described any further military buildup of Ukraine by the alliance as a "red line," Biden has explicitly rejected acknowledging such "red lines" by the Kremlin.

The meeting was preceded by numerous threats against Russia from Biden, as well as Germany's new Foreign

Minister Annalena Baerbock, and a drum beat of war propaganda in the American and European press. The *Washington Post* and *New York Times* published reports this weekend alleging that Russia was planning an "invasion" of Ukraine with some 175,000 troops. As in all such war propaganda in previous years, these reports were based on leaks from anonymous intelligence officials.

At the meeting, which was described as "tense" by both sides, Biden threatened Putin with "strong economic and other measures in the event of military escalation" and "reiterated his support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity." Putin reportedly refused to promise that Russia would pull its troops from the border with Ukraine (the exact number of which the Kremlin has never confirmed). He blamed NATO for the crisis, asking again and again without success, for guarantees from NATO that it would respect Russia's security interests.

Earlier reports by CNN and Bloomberg indicated that US and EU officials are considering cutting off Russia from the SWIFT agreement. This step has been floated since 2014 as the "nuclear option" in the ongoing economic warfare against Russia. The SWIFT (Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications) is the main framework for international monetary transactions and is critical, for instance, for international credits. Cutting Russia off from SWIFT could trigger a virtual economic collapse, affecting, in particular, the country's finance sector and its exports of raw materials, upon which the entire economy is highly dependent. While the Kremlin's spokesperson Dmitry Peskov dismissed the reports as "hysterical," they sent shock waves throughout the Russian press.

Biden also warned that, in case of war, NATO would put to an end the Russian-German gas pipeline Nord

Stream 2, a project of major economic and geopolitical significance for the Kremlin.

Whatever sanctions are in the works, they are certain to first and foremost hit the working class and not Russia's oligarchs, who have long transferred a large portion of their fortunes to bank accounts abroad. The past seven years of economic sanctions by the US and EU have already significantly contributed to a precipitous decline in real wages for workers, while the oligarchs were able to continuously increase their wealth.

Biden further threatened that NATO could reposition its troops in Europe in case of a war in measures that the *New York Times* described as going well beyond what NATO did in the wake the 2014 coup. The US and NATO have pumped billions of dollars into the Ukrainian armed forces since the 2014 US-backed coup overthrew the pro-Russian government of Viktor Yanukovich. The US has also equipped the Ukrainian military with Javelin missiles.

These missiles have so far not been used by the Ukrainian army, but US Undersecretary of State Victoria Nuland, who herself played a critical role in the orchestration of the 2014 coup, declared on Tuesday that this would have to change. She said, "The Ukrainians are having to think differently about their own security, and in fact, some of the defensive lethal support that the U.S. has given Ukraine over the years they've had in storage containers, and I think we'll now see them have to put that stuff out and be thinking very hard about their own civil defense."

Just after the meeting, it was revealed that the new US defense budget proposed by Congress will involve \$4 billion for the European Deterrence Initiative, which is above all directed against Russia. The amount is over \$569 million more than had initially been requested by the White House. While the budget will apparently not include new sanctions on the Russian-German gas pipeline Nord Stream 2, Ukraine is slated to receive \$300 million from the Pentagon, \$50 million more than initially requested.

The ongoing threats and the military buildup by NATO in the region have created a highly unstable and dangerous situation that threatens to escalate into a regional war that could quickly draw in Russia and the major imperialist powers. On Friday, a Russian Aeroflot passenger flight from Moscow to came within 20 meters of a US spy plane over the Black Sea, forcing it to change its route. The Kremlin later denounced the US Air Force for nearly creating a "catastrophe". On Saturday, Belarus

accused Ukraine of violating its airspace as Ukrainian troops were engaged in military exercises on the Polish-Belarusian border.

Emboldened by the NATO military buildup in the Black Sea and hysterical war propaganda in the Western press, the Ukrainian government of Volodymyr Zelensky has engaged in open saber rattling vis-a-vis Russia. Earlier this year, the Ukrainian government issued a new national security strategy, announcing its intention to "recover" Crimea, the peninsula in the Black Sea that was annexed by Russia after the 2014 coup, and the Donbass. The strategy was effectively a declaration that Ukraine was preparing for war against Russia.

A day before the meeting between Biden and Putin, Zelensky visited Ukrainian troops stationed at the front lines of an ongoing civil war in East Ukraine with pro-Russian separatists. Speaking to the troops, he said that he was confident that, with such soldiers, Ukraine would "win" any conflict.

In a statement published on Monday in honor of the Ukrainian army, Zelensky declared, "Having absorbed the best national military traditions that have been formed in the difficult, bloody wars and armed conflicts of the past, during its most recent history the Ukrainian army has come a difficult way to form a capable and highly organized combat structure, confident in its strength and able to destroy any aggressive plans of the enemy."

The statement was a thinly veiled appeal to far-right forces in Ukraine which have been systematically integrated into the state apparatus and the military since 2014. The only significant "national military traditions" of the Ukrainian army, beyond the ongoing civil war against the separatists, involve the role of paramilitary, far-right nationalist organizations in World War II. Fighting alongside the Nazi regime against the Red Army, they participated in numerous massacres of the Jewish and Polish population. It is these forces that are again being mobilized in the interests of imperialism.



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