War tensions mount as EU powers hold talks in Moscow, Washington

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8 February 2022

After thousands of US troops arrived in Eastern Europe this weekend to threaten Russia's western borders, the European Union (EU) powers held high-level talks yesterday. French President Emmanuel Macron traveled to Moscow to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin, while German Chancellor Olaf Scholz went to Washington for talks with US President Joe Biden, both to discuss NATO propaganda claims that Russia is preparing to invade Ukraine.

Events yesterday put paid to any claim that the European imperialist powers represent a kinder, gentler alternative to the US-led military escalation against Russia. While the EU powers both called for diplomacy, they unambiguously aligned themselves with the US plans to deploy tens of thousands of troops in Eastern Europe and back the entry of Ukraine and other states on Russia's borders into the NATO military alliance.

Yesterday evening, after four hours of one-on-one talks in the Kremlin, Putin and Macron gave a press conference. While Putin claimed that Macron's proposals could be "the basis of our further joint steps," he baldly warned of the danger of a world war if Ukraine joined NATO. "I think this is a question of the safety not only of Russia but of the whole world," he said, adding: "If everybody wants peace, what's so bad about not placing offensive missile systems near our borders?"

Addressing a French reporter, Putin said: "Ask your readers, do you want war with Russia? Because that's what will happen if Ukraine, which has made a pledge to take back Crimea by force, joins NATO … you will fight a war against Russia."

After the 2014 NATO-backed coup in Kiev led by far-right Ukrainian nationalists, the Crimea, a Russian-speaking peninsula with a Russian naval base at Sevastopol, voted to rejoin Russia. The NATO powers have refused to recognize the vote and have instead supported the Ukrainian regime as it threatened to storm the Crimea. Putin noted that such an attack would trigger Article 5 of the NATO founding treaty, requiring the NATO powers, including the United States and the major European powers, to enter into a war against Russia.

"Russia is one of the world's leading atomic powers. There would be no victors," Putin warned, adding that Macron "does not desire such an outcome. Neither do I."

Macron flatly rejected Putin's positions, however, and insisted on an "Open Door" policy allowing Ukraine to join NATO. He issued only vague proposals that there be "transparency" on missile bases that NATO would station on Russia's borders were Ukraine to join NATO. At the same time, Macron lectured Putin, denouncing Russia for allegedly violating principles of international law.

"These rights have been violated on our continent: the use of force, the inviolability of borders, non-interference in internal affairs, the failure to respect fundamental rights and human rights," he said.

Macron's allegations were echoed by EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell at a press conference with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in Washington. "We are living, to my understanding, in the most dangerous moment for security in Europe after the end of the Cold War," Borrell said, blaming the crisis entirely on Russia. "Nobody masses 140,000 heavily armed soldiers on a country's border" without posing "a strong threat," Borrell said, denying the US stance was at all alarmist. "This is not alarmism. This is simply the facts."

In reality, it is the NATO powers who are leading an aggressive war drive against Russia, based on an entirely false premise, that Russia is preparing to invade Ukraine. Even the head of NATO's puppet regime in Ukraine, President Vladimir Zelensky, has publicly declared that the Russian military is not poised for a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Nonetheless, top NATO and EU officials endlessly claim that a massive military buildup is necessary to counter a Russian threat to Ukraine.

The hypocrisy of Macron's accusations was staggering: NATO is guilty of everything he accused Moscow of doing. In the 30 years since the Stalinist regime's 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union removed the main military obstacle to

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imperialist wars, the NATO powers endlessly used force. Repeated invasions or interventions against Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Libya, Syria and Mali collectively cost millions of lives. While NATO dismembered Yugoslavia along ethnic lines and bombed its capital Belgrade in the 1990s, it organized a putsch inside Ukraine in 2014.

The European powers' shift to the right over this period is undeniable. In 2002-2003, before the US invasion of Iraq, based on the Bush administration's lies that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein had "weapons of mass destruction," Paris and Berlin joined Moscow in criticizing and opposing the US war drive. The war hysteria seizing European ruling circles amid the current US war drive against Russia was on full display in a recent *Le Monde* column by editorialist Sylvie Kauffmann.

"No, we will not reopen over Ukraine the great conflict in the West over the 2003 invasion of Iraq and its supposed weapons of mass destruction. There will be no remake of the saga of the 'smoking gun,' the proof of Saddam Hussein's crimes that certain Europeans vainly asked from the US. … [T]he watchword is finally clearly formulated among the allies: unity!", she wrote, adding: "The Russian president not only threatens the Ukrainians' right to choose what camp they are in, but they are also questioning the settlement of the Cold War, which the United States won."

This orientation was on display as German Chancellor Olaf Scholz spoke with Biden in Washington to pledge that Berlin would align itself with Washington against Russia. Biden stressed that he would halt the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline between Russia and Germany, which successive US administrations have opposed, if NATO declares that Russia had invaded Ukraine. "If Russia invades—that means tanks or troops crossing the border of Ukraine, again, then there will be no longer a Nord Stream 2," Biden said. "We will bring an end to it."

Under pressure from reporters, Scholz did not explicitly commit to ending the pipeline project but pledged to work closely with Washington and the entire NATO alliance. "We have intensively prepared everything to be ready with the necessary sanctions if there is a military aggression against Ukraine," he said, adding: "We are absolutely united, and we will not be taking different steps."

Behind the reckless militarism of the NATO imperialist powers lie growing class and international tensions tearing apart the world capitalist system. NATO welcomes a war crisis as a distraction from the vast human cost and social crisis caused by its policy of mass infection from the COVID-19 pandemic. Over 2 million people have died in the NATO countries, and millions fall ill every week as governments lift all remaining public health measures in the face of growing working class anger. They are responding by trying to turn internal class tensions outwards into a war drive.

NATO's geopolitical calculations were laid out by French officials who insisted that a hard line with Russia could force it to submit to NATO and function as a base for use against China. Former social democratic foreign minister Hubert Védrine told the *Journal du Dimanche* that "aggressive dialog" with Russia is essential. "No one will make a written pledge that [Ukraine] will never be able to join NATO," he said, adding: "[t]he Russian elites must not be happy about sliding towards China. We should rely on this wariness, which gives us a lever upon which to act."

Indeed, the bankrupt post-Soviet capitalist regime in Moscow, unable and unwilling to appeal to international working class opposition to war, sees no way out of this crisis. It is split between factions supporting an aggressive policy in Eastern Europe that could trigger war and others advocating abject capitulation to NATO. These latter factions made their views known in an open letter signed by Russian Colonel-General Leonid Ivashov, echoing NATO's lying propaganda presenting Russia as the aggressor in Ukraine.

Calling on Moscow "to abandon the criminal policy of provoking a war in which the Russian Federation will find itself alone against the united forces of the West," Ivashov demanded that Putin implement "Art. 3 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation and resign."

These remarks underscore that none of Washington's capitalist rivals offers any alternative to the war drive the Biden administration is leading against Russia. The only force that can be mobilized against the war danger, as against the COVID-19 pandemic, is the international working class, based on a struggle for socialism and against imperialist war.

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