

Shelling in Donbass brings Europe to brink of war

Clara Weiss
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On Thursday, heavy artillery shelling, including of residential areas, was reported in East Ukraine's Donbass region. It is the most significant military escalation of the conflict between the US-funded Ukrainian army and pro-Russian separatists since at least last spring. News of the bombardment came just hours after an "invasion" of Ukraine by Russia, which the US claimed was supposed to take place on February 16, failed to materialize. The Kremlin has always denied that it had any such plans.

The Kremlin's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, said that the situation in Donbass could "at any moment" escalate "into a new eruption of war in the immediate vicinity of our borders."

In one village in territory controlled by the Luhansk People's Republic, a kindergarten and a school were struck. The separatists blamed the Ukrainian military, while Kiev implicated the separatists.

Without providing any evidence, UK's Prime Minister Boris Johnson said it was a "false-flag operation" by Russia designed to "discredit" the Ukrainians. For weeks, US and UK media and intelligence agencies have issued unsubstantiated allegations of a planned "false flag operation" by Russia. The allegations have been so absurd that recently even an AP reporter challenged a state department spokesman over them.

The current escalation in the Donbass can only be understood against the background of US efforts to provoke a war with Russia. Following an extraordinarily belligerent speech by US president Joe Biden on Tuesday, US and NATO officials insisted that the threat of a Russian invasion remains imminent even as Russia reportedly began withdrawing some of its troops.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken alleged on Thursday that there has been no Russian troop withdrawal and that Russian troops "are preparing to launch an attack against Ukraine in the coming days." Washington-based journal *Politico* has now declared yet another supposed

date for a Russian invasion—February 20.

Blinken announced that he will attend the Munich Security Conference, which is set to begin tomorrow in Germany, along with US Vice President Kamala Harris. At the same time, NATO's general secretary Jens Stoltenberg said that the alliance is preparing a further build-up its forces along Russia's border. This kind of war-time mobilization against a "Russian threat," he said, would now have to be accepted as "the new normal in Europe."

Shortly after news of the shelling on Thursday broke, Moscow submitted its response to the US rejection of its December demands for security guarantees. The Kremlin reiterated that it wants a guarantee that Ukraine will not be admitted to NATO, that NATO will return to its 1997 borders, and that NATO will not station nuclear missiles near the Russian border and will withdraw ones currently there. The Kremlin insisted again that it is not preparing any invasion of Ukraine. Noting that the US had failed to take into account any of its security demands, the Kremlin said that it would not budge and might be "forced to respond, including through the realization of measures of a military-technical character."

For reasons that have not been made public, Moscow expelled the US deputy ambassador to Russia on Thursday.

In Ukraine, President Volodymyr Zelensky tacks between militarist tub-thumping and calls for calm. As the shelling in the Donbass escalated this week, he made a trip to the front to praise Ukrainian troops. In an interview with RBC Ukraina, he then effectively stated that his government would no longer accept the Minsk accords of 2015. While he said that Kiev would work within the Normandy format—four-way negotiations involving Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine—he insisted a new major international agreement would have to be signed.

This agreement, Zelensky demanded, would have to

provide Ukraine with “security guarantees” tantamount to those that NATO members receive since the process of Ukraine's NATO accession is dragging on. At the same time, Zelensky again denounced the war hysteria in the Western media.

In recent remarks, David Arakhmia, head of Ukraine’s Servant of the People party, has said that this “hysteria is now costing the country \$2-3 billion every month.” He described the “fake” information spread by CNN, Bloomberg and the *Wall Street Journal* as a form of “hybrid warfare” that was “worse” than the work of top Russian state propagandists. Beyond the economic concerns that drive these statements, there are no doubt fears in sections of the Ukrainian oligarchy that their country will be turned into another “Afghan trap” for Russia, as has repeatedly been threatened by US officials. In such a scenario, they could well find themselves hung out to dry.

Ukraine is becoming increasingly destabilized by the war drive against Russia. It is far from clear whether Zelensky is in control of the situation in the country. Over the past weeks, there have been many indications that preparations for the overthrow of his government and his replacement with someone more immediately compliant to the US are underway.

Adding another element of enormous instability to the situation is the fact that Ukraine’s fascists have been emboldened by the escalation of the conflict with Russia and the shameless Western media campaign promoting them as fighters for “democracy” and “freedom.” These forces, having been de facto integrated into the state and military apparatus, are heavily armed. Since November, Dmitry Yarosh, who led the fascist Right Sector during the 2014 coup and is still running his own far-right paramilitary unit, has been an adviser to the head of Ukraine's general staff, Valery Zaluzhny.

Starting in early 2021, “retaking” Crimea and the Donbass—a long-standing demand of the far-right—was made a part of Ukraine’s official military strategy. Spelling out what is no doubt being discussed behind closed doors, Oleh Tyahnybok, a member of the Ukrainian parliament and head of the neo-Nazi Svoboda party, declared earlier this month that Russia had to be “dismembered” and split into two “20 national states” in order for Crimea to be “returned” to Ukraine. Russian President Putin has repeatedly invoked this very scenario—that is, a repetition on a grander scale of the carve-up of Yugoslavia—as a principal concern.

After three decades of imperialist encirclement—a reality

for which they and their Stalinist predecessors are directly responsible—substantial sections of the Russian ruling class increasingly view a war as inevitable.

Sergei Karaganov, the honorary chairman of Russia’s Council of Foreign and Defense Policy, said in a recent interview, “[T]he dilemma we face is quite simple. If we remain in the current system (i.e., looking blankly at NATO's expansion into Ukraine), war is inevitable. ...In that sense, our concern is how to find a way to achieve a stable and equitable security system in Europe and thus avoid a military conflict. We want to change the system without a big war. Nevertheless, I don't rule out that a small war or a series of local wars could still happen. There is simply a high probability that our Western ‘partners,’ due to their forgetfulness of history or their malicious stupidity—which they have as, alas, has been demonstrated over the past decades—will try to prevent the ‘soft’ scenario, [and] will try to provoke us.

“So the situation is really acute. And [because] it is so acute that we must go all the way, because if we do not, the system will collapse anyway. And then a big war will be inevitable, and it may start on conditions beyond our control. The choice, therefore, is clear.”

Explaining why the Kremlin advanced its demands for security guarantees in December, Karaganov went on to state that Russia now had better “trump cards” for negotiating with the US than ever before. While Karaganov did not go into any details, the Kremlin has been seeking to play on tensions between the imperialist powers, especially Germany and the US, and also hopes to exploit fears of a Russo-Sino alliance as US imperialism increasingly focuses on preparing for war with China.

Whatever the geopolitical and domestic calculations of either Washington or the Kremlin, the dynamics unleashed by the crisis of capitalism and US imperialism’s military rampage over the past decades inexorably lead toward a catastrophic war. The only alternative path lies in an independent intervention of the international working class.



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