

Bernie Sanders backs imperialist provocations against Russia

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23 February 2022

On Tuesday, shortly after Joe Biden announced what he called a “first tranche” of sanctions against Russia, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders announced his support for the measures. In a six-sentence statement, Sanders blamed Russia for the war danger and presented the United States as democratically working to resolve the conflict through peaceful means. Sanders justified the sanctions as politically progressive and even environmentally friendly.

The statement reads, in full:

Vladimir Putin’s latest invasion of Ukraine is an indefensible violation of international law, regardless of whatever false pretext he offers. There has always been a diplomatic solution to this situation. Tragically, Putin appears intent on rejecting it. The United States must now work with our allies and the international community to impose serious sanctions on Putin and his oligarchs, including denying them access to the billions of dollars that they have stashed in European and American banks. The U.S. and our partners must also prepare for a worse scenario by helping Ukraine’s neighbors care for refugees fleeing this conflict. Finally, in the longer term, we must invest in a global green energy transition away from fossil fuels, not only to combat climate change, but to deny authoritarian petrostates the revenues they require to survive.

No American politician, let alone Sanders, is in a position to criticize others for waging pretextual wars in violation of international law. For 31 years, Sanders has sat in Congress, a body which is responsible for approving and funding ruthless wars of aggression, for laying waste to entire societies and killing millions of people under false pretenses and in blatant violation of international law.

Over this three-decade span, Sanders has played a critical role providing a “progressive” spin to the war aims of American imperialism, legitimizing the US government’s aims and false justifications as it staggers from one bloody crime to the next. The routine goes as follows: the ruling class allows Sanders to cast “no” votes when his “aye” vote is not required and promotes his image as “anti-war” in order to capitalize on his support when the time comes to sell the population the latest humanitarian lies for its wars of imperialist plunder.

Sanders’ long record promoting American imperialism

On August 22, 1990, as Sanders was running for Congress, *Washington Post* columnist David Broder wrote that despite the then-Burlington

mayor’s past opposition to US intervention in Central America, on foreign policy questions candidate Sanders “sounds downright mainstream.”

Sanders “supports the embargo of Iraq and deployment of American troops to Saudi Arabia,” Broder writes, quoting Sanders as saying, “‘We cannot turn our back’ on the threat from ‘dictator-despot’ Saddam Hussein.” A 1999 press release by a group of anti-war protesters quotes a former Sanders aide as saying Sanders told his staff, “I’m not going to let some damn war cost me the election.”

Though Sanders voted against the 1991 invasion of Iraq, so did 178 Democrats, two-thirds of those in the House of Representatives. The majority party, however, supplied sufficient votes for the war resolution, along with a near-unanimous Republican minority, that the measure passed easily. Sanders supported sanctions against the Iraqi government and opposed lifting them after the war had concluded. According to the *Vermont Digger*, Sanders opposed removing the US-imposed blockade on the grounds that it would facilitate Hussein’s efforts to procure weapons. Later in 1992, when outgoing President George H.W. Bush launched dozens of cruise missiles into Baghdad, Sanders told the *Burlington Free Press* that he supported the attack, declaring: “The credibility of the United Nations is damaged if the UN resolutions are not enforced.”

Sanders supported the Clinton administration’s repeated bombing campaigns in Iraq, telling the *Rutland Herald* in 1996 that Hussein “must learn that military aggression will not be tolerated by the international community.” The US had a humanitarian obligation, Sanders said, to not “allow the green light for an unstable tyrant to continue to commit atrocities.” He told the Associated Press: “I continue to support the current NATO airstrikes.”

Sanders gave full throated support to the Clinton administration’s 1999 attack on Serbia, justifying the 78-day bombing campaign on humanitarian grounds. After voting for a House resolution authorizing the bombing campaign—a measure sponsored in the Senate by Joe Biden—Sanders told a Vermont town hall on May 3, 1999, “To the people who say ‘stop the bombing, bring the troops home,’ I ask you to think about what happens to the 800,000 men, women and children who have been pushed out of their homes” by Slobodan Milosevic, who is “a butcher who has lined up people and shot them.”

At the town hall event, Sanders favorably cited former student radical-turned German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, a prominent advocate of the NATO bombing campaign. Quoting from an interview with Fischer in *Newsweek*, Sanders read: “I am sitting here giving an interview in NATO headquarters. I never dreamed about that, but we cannot accept Milosevic’s policy and bow our knees.” Sanders finished the quotation and said, “I think that where Herr Fischer is coming from is very close to what I’m coming from.”

In 2001, Sanders voted to support the war in Afghanistan, and although he voted against the invasion of Iraq in 2003, he supported an amendment advanced by Congressman John Spratt (D-SC) which would have

authorized US troops to engage in eliminating Iraqi weapons of mass destruction “by force if required.”

On February 17, 2020, NBC News published an article titled “Sanders’ opposition to the Iraq War was more complicated than he presents,” noting that the Spratt amendment “was a messaging instrument for Democrats who wanted to indicate that they supported military action under the right circumstances,” according to the amendment’s sponsors. The Sanders-backed amendment “gave Bush the option to act without UN approval if necessary.” One supporter of the amendment, Congressman Lloyd Doggett (D-TX), said, “We’re not just a bunch of ‘give peace a chance’ protesters.”

Sanders voted to fund the US occupation of Iraq four times. In a 2015 debate with Hillary Clinton, he voiced his support for US military operations in Syria, arguing the intervention should not immediately attempt to topple the Assad government: “ISIS is now the major priority. Let’s get rid of Assad later. Let’s have a democratic Syria. But the first task is to bring countries together to destroy ISIS.” Also in 2015, Sanders declared his support for the use of drone warfare, telling NBC’s Chuck Todd that he supported drones: “All that and more.”

Sanders has also been a consistent supporter of NATO under conditions of its eastward expansion up to Russia’s borders. In 2015, he gave a major policy speech at Georgetown University in which he stressed support for NATO and claimed its origins lie in a progressive alliance against “Soviet aggression”:

After World War II, in response to the fear of Soviet aggression, European nations and the United States established the North Atlantic Treaty Organization—an organization based on shared interests and goals and the notion of a collective defense against a common enemy. It is my belief that we must expand on these ideals and solidify our commitments to work together to combat the global threat of terror.

Last week, Sanders declared his support for Biden’s decision to send thousands of soldiers to Eastern Europe to threaten Russia, telling NPR: “I think that’s a signal that we stand with NATO.”

Concocting “progressive” pretexts for imperialist war

Sanders’ attempts to present his present support for the US war drive against Russia as “progressive” are absurd. In his statement, he blames “Putin and his oligarchs” who have “billions of dollars stashed in European and American banks” as primarily responsible for stoking tensions in Eastern Europe. Though the actions of the reactionary, capitalist Putin government in no way lessen the danger of war, it is the United States which has welcomed the admission of more than a dozen new countries into NATO, including former Soviet republics and former members of the Warsaw Pact, and is now insisting on keeping an “open door” for Ukraine’s entry, in violation of past pledges that the alliance would not encroach on Russia’s borders.

Sanders is selective in his denunciation of the oligarchs ... only in Russia. He remains silent on the fact that American oligarchs are provoking the present crisis to subjugate Russia and extract its resources and cheap labor on behalf of American banks and corporations. Sanders often grandstands about his opposition to wealth inequality in the United States, but his statement supporting Biden’s sanctions and condemning Russia only facilitate the *American* oligarchs’ efforts to enrich themselves

through war and world domination.

As for Sanders’ humanitarian appeal to “help Ukraine’s neighbors care for refugees fleeing this conflict,” this might sound more genuine were it not for the fact that it is US imperialism and the Biden administration which are primarily responsible for sparking the conflict that may trigger immense levels of death and displacement.

Furthermore, the “neighbors” which Sanders hopes will help refugees include Poland, which recently deployed thousands of soldiers at its eastern border with Belarus on behalf of the European Union to keep out refugees fleeing the US-led wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria. The US does not “care for refugees” at its own southern border, where the right to asylum has been substantially curtailed and where refugees are brutalized and whipped by border guards on horseback. Sanders opposes removing restrictions on immigration into the US on chauvinistic grounds, because they will compete with American workers for jobs.

Likewise, Sanders’ arguments that the sanctions help “transition away from fossil fuels” and “deny authoritarian petrostates the revenues they require” are absurd on their face. In practical terms, the sanctions mean European NATO members face cutoff of Russian gas imports, which the US has already announced will be replaced by increased production from reactionary Persian Gulf sheikdoms like Qatar. And there may not be any environment to protect in the event the crisis triggers a nuclear exchange.

Sanders’ role exposed

The ruling class is aware of profound opposition to war in the American population. According to an AP poll released yesterday, only 26 percent of Americans believe the US should play a major role in the present conflict.

American society is in a state of collapse caused in no small part by the wars of the last 30 years, which have drained budgets, poisoned the political culture, and exposed the entire political-corporate-media-military establishment as liars and war criminals. Inflation is growing and 2,000 people are dying of COVID-19 every day as the ruling class ends restrictions and sacrifices workers and children for the sake of corporate profit.

The ruling class is desperate to re-assert its waning position as global hegemon and distract the working class from death, poverty and inequality at home with a foreign enemy abroad. Try as he might, Sanders will not be successful in legitimizing Biden’s war drive. In the process he will only expose himself.



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