Conflict between US-NATO and Russia over Ukraine threatens nuclear war

Statement of the WSWS Editorial Board
28 February 2022

Sixty years after the Cuban Missile crisis, the war in Ukraine has brought the world to the point where the exchange of nuclear weapons is a real danger.

On Sunday, Russian President Vladimir Putin took the unprecedented post-Cold War action of placing the country's nuclear deterrent forces on alert. In televised comments delivered at a meeting with military officials in the Kremlin, Putin said that Russia's nuclear weapons would be transferred to what he described as a "special combat service regime."

Explaining the decision, Putin said that "Western countries aren't only taking unfriendly actions against our country in the economic sphere, but top officials from leading NATO members made aggressive statements regarding the country."

The *World Socialist Web Site* denounces the nuclear brinkmanship of the Putin government. The disaster created by the breakup of the Soviet Union three decades ago cannot be reversed through increasingly reckless militarism. In an act that reflects the desperation and disorientation of the regime, Putin and his faction of the Russian oligarchy cling to the self-deluding hope that they can threaten the imperialist powers into shifting their policies and recognizing Russian security interests in Ukraine.

Putin's recklessness, however, does not alter the fact that principal responsibility for the present crisis and all its potentially catastrophic consequences lies with American imperialism and its NATO allies.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki declared in response to Putin's statement that it is part of "a pattern we've seen from President Putin through the course of this conflict, which is manufacturing threats that don't exist in order to justify further aggression." A senior White House official was quoted by CNN as saying that Russia "was never under threat from Ukraine or from NATO, which is a defensive alliance that will not fight in Ukraine."

The claims that Moscow's action is a response to merely "manufactured threats" to Russia are contradicted by the US/NATO powers, whose statements and actions over the past three days are seen unavoidably by Putin as an effort to destroy the Russian economy and overthrow his government.

On Saturday evening, the White House, along with France, Germany, Italy, the UK and Canada, announced that it would expel some Russian banks from the SWIFT financial transaction network.

French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire had earlier referred to removing Russian access to SWIFT as a "financial nuclear weapon." He added, "The fact remains that when you have a nuclear weapon in your hands, you think before you use it." He added provocatively that "we are not reluctant to use all necessary weapons, without exception, against the Russia of Vladimir Putin."

The statement of the US and European powers on Saturday also announced a commitment "to imposing restrictive measures that will prevent the Russian Central Bank from deploying its international reserves." The *Washington Post* noted, "The United States has never taken this step against any country with nuclear weapons or an economy as large as Russia."

These acts of economic warfare are being implemented in the context of what has become de facto a war of NATO against Russia, with Ukraine serving only as the physical battleground.

The war rhetoric coming out of Germany, unlike anything seen since the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union during the Second World War, is particularly incendiary. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced Sunday that the German military will receive additional financing of $110 billion, nearly twice the amount of its annual budget, and that Germany will also be providing direct military aid to Ukraine.

On Sunday, EU Commission President and former German Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen announced that the European Union, for the first time, will begin financing the purchase and delivery of weaponry to Ukraine, escalating its direct involvement in the war.

Even the claim that NATO forces will not be directly

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involved in Ukraine was undermined by British Foreign Minister Liz Truss's declaration that she would encourage youth in Britain to join the fight against Russia.

These statements follow the announcement by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken that the US would be sending an additional $350 million in military aid to the country, bringing the total over just the past year to more than $1 billion. On Friday, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg activated, for the first time since it was created in 2003, NATO's 40,000-strong "rapid reaction force" in anticipation of a war with Russia.

Top officials in all the major NATO countries are calling for even more aggressive actions. US Congressman Adam Kinzinger has called for the declaration of a "no-fly" zone over Ukraine, which would involve NATO forces shooting down Russian aircraft. Putin is no doubt aware that the establishment of a no-fly zone over Libya in 2011 was the initial step in a war that culminated in the overthrow of the Libyan government and the torture and murder of Muammar Gaddafi.

Richard Haass, the president of the Council of Foreign Relations, tweeted Sunday morning that "the conversation" over the war in Ukraine "has shifted to include the possibility of desired regime change in Russia."

The threats directed against Russia have been accompanied by the promotion of vile anti-Russian propaganda in the media. While claiming that the US is not targeting the Russian people, it is encouraging punitive actions against Russian citizens, such as banning performances of Russian composers and musicians and canceling appearances of the Bolshoi ballet.

Putin's belief that American and European imperialism will be compelled to back down is a disastrous miscalculation. On the contrary, the US and its NATO allies have seized on the invasion of Ukraine to intensify their warmongering.

One of the worst consequences of the invasion of Ukraine is the level of disorientation it has produced within significant sections of the population. Yesterday, 100,000 people participated in a demonstration in Berlin to oppose the Russian invasion.

No doubt many who took part are motivated by humanitarian sentiments, though it must be noted that there have not been mass demonstrations against the brutal wars launched by the US and NATO during the last 15 years. In any case, the NATO powers are seeking to exploit popular confusion to press forward with their own reactionary militarist agenda. They also hope to use the campaign against Russia to distract attention from the intractable internal crises of all the major capitalist powers, above all the United States, which have been enormously intensified by the ruling class response to the pandemic.

The international working class must adopt an independent position in response to the escalating crisis. It is necessary to oppose imperialism without adapting to Russian nationalism, and to oppose Russian nationalism without adapting to imperialism.

At the international online webinar, "Stop the Drive to World War III," hosted by the *World Socialist Web Site* on Saturday, WSWS International Editorial Board Chairman David North explained, "In determining one's attitude to a given war, there is no approach more politically and intellectually bankrupt than that which focuses and obsesses on the question, 'Who fired the first shot?'

> This question abstracts a single incident from the vast complex of interacting economic, political, social and geostrategic interests and circumstances, with deep historical roots and operating on a global scale, that suddenly obtain the political equivalent of critical mass, and trigger the eruption of military violence.

Accepting the narrative that the danger of a Third World War, waged with nuclear weapons, arises out of the actions of one individual, Putin, North noted, "requires not only a suspension of all the faculties of critical thought, but also mass amnesia."

Elements of this amnesia include forgetting the background to the conflict in Ukraine itself, including the 2014 US-backed coup that placed an anti-Russian government in power, and the relentless expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe. And it requires that one forget that the United States took the lead in planning for the use of nuclear weapons by withdrawing from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, stationing offensive missiles in Romania and Poland, and undertaking a multitrillion-dollar expansion of US nuclear forces.

We encourage all of our readers to watch and share the recording of the online webinar, "Fight Covid! Save Lives! Stop the Drive to World War III"

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