

How the Democratic Party prepared the war in Ukraine

Part Two: From the 2016 election to the brink of nuclear war

Patrick Martin
29 March 2022

Part One | Part Two

The 2016 election and the Mueller investigation

The “Russian question” was put back on the US agenda in the course of the 2016 presidential election. Democrat Hillary Clinton ran openly as the preferred candidate of the national-security apparatus and a strident advocate of stepped-up intervention in the territories of the former Soviet Union.

Soon after the Republican convention nominated Trump, and on the eve of the Democratic convention that would do the same for Clinton, the Democrats began a carefully prepared attack on Trump for his alleged ties to Russia. The signal came from the *New York Times*, which questioned Trump on the NATO pledge to go to war if any member state, including the small Baltic republics Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, came into military conflict with Russia. Trump gave an ambiguous response, and a media barrage began immediately.

A column by Paul Krugman in the *Times* branded Trump “The Siberian candidate,” (a takeoff on the Cold War thriller, “The Manchurian Candidate”), suggesting he was a Russian agent. Similar columns, with less lurid headlines but equally inflammatory arguments, appeared in *The Atlantic* magazine, the *Los Angeles Times*, and elsewhere. Clinton took up this theme and made it central to her general election campaign.

The WSWWS wrote that the anti-Russia media campaign was “a measure of how central the military buildup and war preparations against Russia are to US imperialist policy around the globe.” The commentary continued:

It also provides a window into the real character of the Democratic Party and the Clinton campaign. At its heart, it consists of a fusion of identity politics—the relentless promotion of race, gender and sexual orientation as the motive forces of US society—and a viciously pro-war imperialist policy. The objective of this poisonous mix is to sow divisions in the working class while fashioning a new constituency for imperialist war from among privileged layers of the upper-middle class and the pseudo-left satellites of the Democratic Party.

The Democrats were not just using the corporate media to advance the “Trump is a Russian agent” smear. Clinton contacted the military-

intelligence apparatus directly, leading to the opening of an FBI probe of Trump and his entourage, which would ultimately be transformed into the Mueller investigation. At the same time, Trump’s campaign chairman Paul Manafort came under fire for his past work as a lobbyist for the pro-Russian ex-president of Ukraine, Yanukovich, and was forced to step down, only three months before the election. He was replaced by Steve Bannon, an out-and-out fascist.

The Clinton campaign mobilized hundreds of former national security officials to endorse her candidacy and denounced Trump as a danger to the overseas interests of the United States. These included many of the architects of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the broader “war on terror,” and the use of torture in secret CIA prisons and illegal mass spying by the National Security Agency.

The near-unanimous support for Clinton in the military-intelligence apparatus was in sharp contrast to the indifference and outright hostility among wide sections of the working class, particularly after the eight years of the Obama administration had resulted in a general decline in their living standards and social conditions. Trump was able to capitalize on these sentiments, as well as making a demagogic appeal to mass disaffection with the “forever wars” in the Middle East. He won a narrow victory in the Electoral College, despite losing the popular vote by three million.

This shock result touched off a furious response within the capitalist state. Within weeks of the election, before Trump had even taken office, leaks from the CIA and other agencies generated media reports of supposedly massive Russian interference in the presidential election. There were claims that politically damaging transcripts of Clinton’s closed-door talks to Wall Street audiences, published by WikiLeaks before the election, had been leaked to the anti-censorship group by Moscow, and that Russian military intelligence had hacked the Democratic National Committee to obtain emails proving that the DNC favored Clinton over her principal primary challenger, Senator Bernie Sanders.

A huge hue and cry arose over an alleged Russian media campaign that at most had produced a small number of Facebook ads promoting Trump’s campaign. Even if these ads could be attributed to Russia, the total outlay was in the range of \$100,000, a drop in the bucket for an election contest whose total cost approached \$10 billion.

Enormous pressure was placed on the White House through the corporate media and leaks from the FBI. In response, Trump fired FBI Director James Comey, setting off a political firestorm in Washington. Trump was compelled to agree to the appointment of a special prosecutor, former FBI Director Robert Mueller, to investigate all aspects of supposed Russian intervention into the 2016 election and any coordination between Russia and the Trump campaign.

In the early stages of this political crisis, the WWSWS published a statement of the Political Committee of the Socialist Equality Party, written by Joseph Kishore and David North, “Palace coup or class struggle: The political crisis in Washington and the strategy of the working class.” The “palace coup” against Trump was based not on mobilizing any genuine popular opposition to his ultra-right policies, but on “behind-the-scenes plotting with elements within the military/intelligence establishment and corporate-financial elite.”

This statement identified three separate social sources of the opposition to the Trump administration: his ruling class opponents, with differences centered primarily on foreign policy; sections of the upper-middle-class, oriented to issues of race and gender, and incapable of genuine independence from the ruling class; and the working class, driven by profound socio-economic concerns, above all the massive growth of economic inequality and social distress.

In relation to the factions of the ruling class opposed to Trump, the statement pointed out:

Their differences with the Trump administration are centered primarily on issues of foreign policy. Their real concern is not with Russia’s supposed “subversion” of American democracy, as if this could compare to the subversion of American democracy by the ruling class itself, but with Russia’s actions in Syria, which have frustrated US efforts to overthrow the government of Bashar al-Assad. They are determined to prevent Trump from weakening the anti-Russia policy developed under Obama, which the Hillary Clinton campaign was dedicated to expanding.

The statement declared that the working class would gain nothing from the removal of Trump and the shift in US foreign policy sought by his ruling class opponents. It outlined the principled basis for the working class to oppose both sides in this bitter factional struggle within the ruling class, maintaining its political independence from the efforts of the Democratic Party to divert mounting opposition to the Trump administration into the blind alley of militarism and anti-Russia chauvinism.

The Mueller investigation continued for nearly two years, culminating in a report, delivered in April 2019, which found no evidence that Russian actions in the course of the 2016 election played any significant role in its outcome, or that there was any direct collusion between the Trump campaign and the Russian state. While indicting more than a dozen Russian officials and agents—all of whom were inaccessible to the US courts and unlikely to respond to the charges against them—the Mueller probe indicted only a few minor Trump advisers on charges of lying to investigators, essentially crimes triggered by the probe itself.

But long before it ended as a legal whimper, the Mueller investigation and the unrelenting pressure from the military-intelligence apparatus had succeeded in accomplishing one of the main goals of the Democratic Party: reorienting American national security strategy to target Russia and China openly.

As elaborated in the new National Security Strategy document approved by Secretary of Defense James Mattis—the recently retired general who had been given a waiver of the rules requiring a civilian chief at the Pentagon—US military policy was to be shifted away from the “war on terror,” which had been the ostensible focus since the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Now the central axis was to be preparation for “great power conflict” with Russia and China, defined as “revisionist powers” because they presented challenges to the global domination of the United States.

Congressional Democrats hailed the new strategic orientation. They had

supported the waiver for Mattis and the selection of other retired generals for top positions in the Trump administration, including national security advisor, secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, and, later, White House chief of staff. The Democrats and their media allies promoted these retired military brass as “adults in the room” who would restrain Trump’s wilder impulses and prevent him from making concessions to Russia that he was supposedly preparing because of his political debt to Vladimir Putin.

The CIA Democrats and the first Trump impeachment

This drive towards a more aggressive military posture was reinforced by another political operation involving the Democratic Party. This was the influx of a large number of military-intelligence operatives seeking seats in the House of Representatives. Nearly 60 ran as candidates for Democratic Party nominations, the largest single occupational group, surpassing elected officials, lawyers, and businessmen and professionals. Some 30 won their primaries, most for seats that would be competitive in the general election.

The WWSWS first identified this process—without precedent in US political history—in a series of articles under the title, “The CIA Democrats,” published in March 2018. We explained that after the November election there would be more former CIA agents and military officers in the House Democratic caucus than former supporters of Bernie Sanders, adding that this “marked the further ascendancy of the military-intelligence apparatus within the Democratic Party.”

The WWSWS traced the continuity between the right-wing basis of the 2016 Clinton campaign and the huge number of former intelligence agents, military commanders and civilian war planners now choosing the Democratic Party as their preferred political vehicle:

Clinton ran in 2016 as the favored candidate of the military-intelligence apparatus, amassing hundreds of endorsements by retired generals, admirals and spymasters, and criticizing Trump as unqualified to be the commander-in-chief.

This political orientation has developed and deepened in 2018. The Democratic Party is running in the congressional elections not only as the party that takes a tougher line on Russia, but as the party that enlists as its candidates and representatives those who have been directly responsible for waging war, both overt and covert, on behalf of American imperialism. It is seeking to be not only the party *for* the Pentagon and CIA, but the party *of* the Pentagon and CIA.

As the fall campaign developed and polls showed the Democrats heavily favored to win back control of the House of Representatives, it became clear that the CIA Democrats would have a critical and perhaps decisive voice in the new Congress. Ultimately, they made up 13 of the new members of the House, which convened in January 2019. They would soon be able to play an outsized role.

In August 2019, a leak from a CIA operative working in the White House revealed that Trump had pressured Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in an official phone call to come up with political dirt on former Vice President Joe Biden. This was in relation to the lucrative position his son Hunter had taken on the board of directors of Burisma, a Ukraine energy company. The appointment of the younger Biden, who had no relevant qualifications or experience, was a transparent effort to curry

favor with his father, who had been put in charge of US policy in Ukraine.

As part of his efforts to force the government in Kiev to undertake political dirty work against his most likely opponent in the 2020 election, Trump then withheld arms shipments to Ukraine for several weeks. The exposure of this delay, and the apparent quid-pro-quo of demanding political favors as the price of supplying weapons, was turned into a political sensation by the corporate media.

A decisive step in this campaign came when an op-ed by seven freshman Democratic members of the House of Representatives appeared in the *Washington Post*, calling for a formal impeachment inquiry. Six of the seven co-signers were among the CIA Democrats, and the seventh also had a military background.

The Democratic congressional leadership immediately moved to begin that inquiry. The House Intelligence Committee held a series of public hearings where current and former foreign policy officials involved with US relations to Ukraine testified about the significance and seriousness of the cutoff of weapons shipments. Many of the witnesses had been involved in the 2014 operation to subvert and overthrow the elected government of Ukraine and transform that country into a base of operations for US imperialism against Russia.

The WSWS pointed to the extraordinary character of this line-up against a sitting president by his own appointees as well as career national-security operatives. We wrote in a perspective column:

The ferocity with which the entire US national security apparatus responded to a temporary delay in sending anti-tank missiles and radar to Ukraine raises the question: Is there a timetable for using these weapons in combat against Russia?

Indeed there was, and that timetable now drives US foreign policy following the installation of the Biden administration. But the first Trump impeachment fell short of its goal. He was impeached (indicted) by the House of Representatives in December 2019, but a brief Senate trial ended in his acquittal on February 5, 2020, as only one Republican senator voted to convict.

The 2020 election and Biden's drive to war against Russia

The selection of Joe Biden as the Democratic presidential nominee—the very outcome that was foreshadowed in the first Trump impeachment—represented an intensification of the pro-military focus of the Democratic Party.

The convention that nominated Biden was dominated from start to finish by appeals to restore America as “a country that wins wars,” as New York Governor Andrew Cuomo put it. He was followed by speakers like former secretary of state Colin Powell, one of the architects of the Iraq War, another former secretary of state, John Kerry, and a large group of representatives of the military-intelligence apparatus who accused Trump of undermining NATO and strengthening Russia.

As SEP national secretary and 2020 presidential candidate Joseph Kishore observed, in a commentary on the convention:

Over the past nearly four years, the Democrats have worked to suppress all popular opposition to the Trump administration and direct it behind the reactionary campaign for a more aggressive foreign policy in the Middle East and against Russia.

At every point, the Democrats ceded all opposition to Trump to the military and the generals, including when Trump staged his coup attempt on June 1, threatening to invoke the Insurrection Act and branding protests over police violence as “terrorist.” This is their most important constituency, along with Wall Street and the intelligence agencies.

The election of Biden as president in November 2020 set the stage for a renewal of the campaign of confrontation with Russia that had been blocked temporarily by the defeat of Hillary Clinton in 2016.

The Democratic Party responded to Trump's fascistic January 6 coup attempt, which nearly succeeded in overturning the results of the election, by covering-up the far-reaching attack on democratic rights and pledging “unity” with Trump's Republican Party co-conspirators. A central component of this “unity” within the ruling class was the escalation of military conflict against Russia.

This was signaled by Biden's appointments to high positions at the State Department. For secretary of state, he chose his long-time foreign policy adviser Antony Blinken, who had played a key role in Obama administration policy in Syria in 2013-2014, and in the formulation of the US response to the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, before rising to deputy secretary of state.

Even more significant was Biden's choice for the third-ranking position at the State Department, deputy secretary for political affairs. Victoria Nuland was notorious as the principal architect of the Maidan coup and a longtime supporter of US military aggression, having served as a top foreign policy adviser to Vice President Dick Cheney during the Iraq war, as US ambassador to NATO, and then as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's top spokesperson, in the course of a 37-year career in the State Department. She is also married to Robert Kagan, longtime neo-conservative strategist most closely identified with the Bush administration's decision to invade and conquer Iraq.

The accession of Biden, Blinken and Nuland was followed by greatly increased aggression on the part of the Ukrainian regime. In February, the Zelensky government shut down three popular television stations run by pro-Russian opposition leader and billionaire Viktor Medvedchuk, on the grounds of “national security.” In March, Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council approved a strategy for retaking Crimea, including restoring “full Ukrainian sovereignty” not just over the peninsula, but over the port city of Sevastopol, home of the Russian Navy's Black Sea fleet.

Blinken visited Ukraine in May, accompanied by Nuland, for meetings with Zelensky to prepare for an eventual visit by the Ukraine president to Washington—the same invitation he had unsuccessfully sought when Trump was in the White House. The visit came only a week after right-wing elements held a march in Kiev to celebrate the 78th anniversary of the establishment of the 14th Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS, also known as the 1st Galician, comprised of Ukrainian and German volunteers who fought for Hitler against the USSR.

Zelensky, Blinken and Nuland all have Jewish backgrounds (Nuland's father was born in the Bronx of Ukrainian immigrant parents), but they shamefully said nothing about the neo-Nazi celebration in the capital of Ukraine. Instead, they discussed the ongoing military build-up in which these fascist elements play a key role.

A series of military exercises that summer ensued with NATO and Ukrainian forces operating together. In May came Defender 2021, a major land exercise across all of Eastern Europe involving 28,000 troops from 26 countries. Germany, which invaded the Soviet Union and killed 27 million people during the Second World War, provided the main base of operations.

In June came Operation Sea Breeze, the largest ever naval maneuvers in

the Black Sea, begun just days after an incident in which Russian warplanes dropped bombs near a British warship that crossed into Russian territorial waters off Crimea.

In July, Cossack Mace included forces from Ukraine, Great Britain, Denmark, Sweden, Canada and the United States. It involved “defensive actions ... followed by an offensive to restore the borders and territorial integrity of the country that has been attacked by a hostile neighboring state.” This was followed by Three Swords 2021, a land exercise involving Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania and the US.

In August, Ukraine convened the inaugural “Crimea Platform” summit in Kiev in an effort to build international support for a military offensive against Russia to “return” the Crimean peninsula to Ukraine. Officials from 44 countries took part, including representatives from all 30 NATO members. Zelensky opened the conference by denouncing Russian “aggression,” and declaring, “I will personally do everything possible to return Crimea so that it becomes part of Europe together with Ukraine.”

The participants of the summit issued a Joint Declaration that stated, “Participants in the International Crimea Platform do not recognize and continue to condemn the temporary occupation and illegal annexation of Crimea, which constitutes a direct challenge to international security with grave implications for the international legal order that protects the territorial integrity, unity and sovereignty of all States.”

Given that Russia regarded Crimea as part of its national territory, and Sevastopol in particular as vital to its security, this declaration was little short of a declaration of war. This was followed by Zelensky’s long-awaited visit to the United States, where he met Biden at the White House, as well as Blinken, Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin, and Secretary of Energy Jennifer Granholm. Biden declared his support for the Crimea Platform, while boosting military aid by another \$60 million—more than the derisory \$55 million in coronavirus vaccines going to Ukraine.

The Ukrainian population has one of the lowest vaccination rates in the developed world, with only 34.5 percent of the population fully vaccinated, the second-lowest rate in Europe (ahead only of Bulgaria), trailing Mozambique, Guatemala, and occupied Palestine. But the Zelensky government refused offers of the Russian-made Sputnik vaccine against coronavirus.

The key result of the Zelensky trip was a new strategic defense framework agreement signed by Lloyd Austin and Ukrainian Defense Minister Andrei Taran. This laid the basis for the formal signing of the US-Ukrainian Charter on Strategic Partnership, on November 10, 2021, by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba.

As the WSWS explained after the details of this agreement were made public last month, the agreement was openly that of an offensive military alliance, endorsing the goals of “retaking” Crimea and the separatist-controlled Donbass and pledging both “sanctions” and “other relevant measures until restoration of the full territorial integrity of Ukraine.” The last phrase is a circumlocution for war.

The WSWS analysis continued:

Washington also explicitly endorsed “Ukraine’s efforts to maximize its status as a NATO Enhanced Opportunities Partner to promote interoperability,” that is, its integration into NATO’s military command structures.

Ukraine’s non-membership in NATO is and was, for all intents and purposes, a fiction. At the same time, the NATO powers exploited the fact that Ukraine is not officially a member as an opportunity to stoke a conflict with Russia that would not immediately develop into a world war...

It will fall to historians to uncover what promises the Ukrainian oligarchy received from Washington in exchange for its pledge to

turn the country into a killing field and launching pad for war with Russia. But one thing is clear: The Kremlin and Russian general staff could not but read this document as the announcement of an impending war.

There is little that needs to be added to this historical record. The Democratic Party has played the central role in preparing a NATO war against Russia over more than a decade. Joe Biden, as a leading Senate voice on foreign policy, as vice president tasked by Obama with running Ukraine policy, and now as president, is deeply implicated in this long-running operation. Now that this policy has produced the war that has long been its goal, American imperialism is pressing ahead toward its ultimate aim—the dismemberment of Russia, and the creation of a series of vassal states, dominated by the United States and the European powers—even at the risk of provoking a nuclear war.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact