

Russian President Vladimir Putin visits Kaliningrad as Ukrainian counteroffensive falters

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On Thursday, Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Kaliningrad, a Russian enclave on the Baltic Sea, which is separated from Russian-aligned Belarus by the Suwa?ki Gap, which runs along the Polish-Lithuanian border.

Amidst the imperialist proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, the Suwa?ki Gap has been the focal point of growing tensions between NATO and Russia. The stretch of land passes through NATO territory, and Lithuania and Poland have both systematically sought to provoke a conflict with Russia over it by first attempting to ban freight deliveries from Russia to Kaliningrad, and, most recently, ceasing to issue visas to almost all Russian citizens. Commentators have long warned that if a direct military conflict between NATO and Russia were to occur in Europe, it would likely start over the Suwa?ki Gap.

Tensions between the EU and Russia have also soared this week over the move by the EU to make the issuing of visas to Russian citizens a lot more difficult amid the ongoing conflicts over Russian gas supplies to Europe, above all, via the Russian-German Nord Stream pipeline.

Putin's visit on Thursday was clearly designed to reinforce Russia's claim to Kaliningrad. It was also one of the rare occasions in which Putin openly spoke on the ongoing war in Ukraine. In a discussion with high school students, he stated that an "anti-Russian enclave" had been created in Ukraine after the 2014 US-backed coup, posing a threat to Russia. The liquidation of this "enclave," Putin said, was the main goal of what is officially called the "Russian special operation" in Ukraine. "Therefore, our guys who are fighting there are defending both the citizens of the Donbass and Russia itself," said Putin.

His appearance in Kaliningrad came amid signs that the Kremlin is preparing for a protracted conflict with the imperialist powers which might well transcend the borders of Ukraine.

The Ukrainian army's counteroffensive to retake Kherson, a strategic city in southern Ukraine, though announced with grand fanfare on Monday, already seems to be faltering.

In an unusually blunt commentary for the *Washington Post*, David Ignatius all but acknowledged that the imperialist

backers of Ukraine do not even count on its success. The Biden administration has spent over \$50 billion since February alone on arming Ukraine, including a package that will provide for weapons deliveries for at least another three years.

Ignatius wrote:

As Ukraine mounts a new counteroffensive in the southern part of the country, Zelensky's bravado risks setting expectations too high. In truth, Ukraine probably won't liberate its territory this year, or even next. Still, as Ukrainian forces push toward the Black Sea coast, Zelensky is delivering a defiant response to President Vladimir Putin's claim that Ukraine is not a real country. Not only can Ukraine survive, it also can regain some of its occupied land.

Ignatius then went on to praise Ukraine's ability to use US-delivered High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) and other precision weapons to hit Russian military headquarters, ammunition depots and other military infrastructure. Above all, however, he stressed the Ukrainian insurgency as a key component of this war, proudly acknowledging that it had been prepared for by Washington over a period of almost eight years. He wrote:

This partisan campaign, like the HIMARS precision fire, is a product of U.S. planning and training of Ukrainian forces. Since 2014, U.S. Special Operations forces have been teaching the Ukrainians how to fight an occupying army—using special units like the ones that were so effective against al-Qaeda and Islamic State fighters.

Ignatius then quoted from an interview with Gen. Richard Clarke, who is about to retire as head of the U.S. Special

Operations Command: “What we did, starting in 2014, was set the conditions. When the Russians invaded in February, we’d been working with Ukrainian SOF for seven years. With our assistance, they built the capacity, so they grew and they grew in numbers, but more importantly, they built capability,” in both combat assaults and information operations.

According to Clarke, the SOF brigades were developed systematically in Kherson, Zaporizhzhia and the Donbass, in particular, all areas that are now at the center of the fighting. Ignatius boasted:

This guerrilla war has produced a grim body count among pro-Russian officials in the occupied areas. In the past few weeks, pro-Russian officials have been killed or injured by car bombs, roadside bombs, poison and shotguns.

In other words, the US is not concerned with any actual military “victory” of Ukraine in either this counteroffensive or the war as a whole. Rather, the calculation is that an incredibly high death toll from a protracted war and a US-armed and US-trained insurgency will contribute to the destabilization of Russia, facilitating a long-planned regime change operation and the carve-up of the country itself.

The Putin regime, which emerged out of the Soviet bureaucracy’s restoration of capitalism, is utterly incapable of responding to the threat posed by imperialism other than through a promotion of nationalism, militarism and class war at home against the working class. The invasion itself on February 24, while provoked by imperialism, was a bankrupt and desperate effort to increase its leverage in negotiations with the imperialist powers. But the opposite occurred. The invasion was seized upon by the imperialist powers as a much needed pretext to implement their long-held war plans against Russia and escalate their military build-up for a new imperialist redivision of the world.

In a remarkable essay for the think-tank magazine *Russia in Global Affairs*, Sergei Karaganov, who has long functioned as a foreign policy mouthpiece of the Kremlin, effectively admitted that Moscow had no real plan for the war but now had to prepare for a protracted conflict with NATO. He wrote that the ultimate goals of Russia’s “special military operation” in Ukraine “remained to be determined.”

In the same breath, he insisted that the officially declared goals of “demilitarizing” Ukraine and turning it into a “neutral state” in the conflict between Russia and NATO were still “realizable.” However, in order to achieve them, “Russia must be politically, morally and economically prepared for a protracted military operation, constantly teetering on the brink of an escalation with the West, including and up to a limited nuclear war.”

Karaganov then went on to discuss at length the danger that such a protracted war could end, like the First World War, in a revolutionary movement among the masses, or, as he put it “the catastrophe of 1917.” He noted the devastating impact that the “economic war” waged by NATO had on the working population, warning that this could ultimately turn public sentiment against the war.

In order to prevent a repetition of the “catastrophe of 1917,” Karaganov insisted that there had to be a purge within Russia’s political and economic elite. He called for a “complete nationalization of the Russian elites, a pushing out of all comprador and pro-Western elements and sentiments,” as well as the establishment of maximum economic autarky. Russia, he insisted, had to be turned into a “fortress.”

In a display of the same semi-delusional Great Russian chauvinism that now permeates the Russian state propaganda, Karaganov presented the war as the spearhead of Russia’s supposed mission to save civilization in an anti-Western crusade. He wrote, “We are the civilization of civilizations, the prop of the opposition to neo-colonialism, and the free development of civilizations and cultures.”

Workers in Russia and across the world must reject this reactionary promotion of Russian nationalism and the bankrupt policy of “national defense” by the Russian oligarchy. The imperialist proxy war in Ukraine is ultimately the result of the Stalinist reaction against the October Revolution of 1917, in which the working class, led by the Bolshevik Party, for the first time in history seized state power. The revolution put an end to the First World War and opened up the epoch of world socialist revolution.

The decades-long Stalinist betrayal of the Marxist program of October eventually resulted in the 1991 destruction of the Soviet Union, which paved the way for the rule of a criminal oligarchy in both Russia and Ukraine and decades of imperialist war that have now culminated in the beginning of a new world war. The only path to put an end to the unfolding disaster lies in a return to the socialist and internationalist traditions in the international working class that formed the basis for the 1917 revolution. This requires, above all, the building of the International Committee of the Fourth International, including in both Russia and Ukraine.



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