

Washington's nuclear brinkmanship threatens catastrophe

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Next month will mark 60 years since the Cuban Missile Crisis, which was, up to that time, the closest the world had come to nuclear war.

The final stage of the crisis began on October 22, 1962, when US President John F. Kennedy announced in a nationally-televised speech that the US Navy was implementing a “quarantine” to block the further transfer of nuclear-capable missiles from the Soviet Union to Cuba, just a hundred miles south of Key West, Florida.

Though the US naval blockade continued into November, the crisis was effectively ended on October 28 with an agreement worked out between the US and the USSR. In return for withdrawing Soviet missiles from Cuba, the United States made a secret promise to withdraw its missiles from Turkey. In the intervening six days, the world was on the brink of a potentially civilization-ending nuclear war.

The crisis is relevant to the current US-NATO conflict in several respects. First, it is worth repeating that while the US now dismisses any concerns that Russia has over the effective integration of Ukraine into NATO and the massive military armament of a country on Russia's border, the US was itself prepared to risk nuclear war over a Soviet military presence in the Western Hemisphere.

Second, while initiating the “quarantine,” Kennedy spoke for a faction of the American ruling class that sought, at the apex of the crisis, to find some way out through a negotiated settlement. The Kennedy administration resisted those within the military and political establishment calling for the bombing and invasion of Cuba—and war with the Soviet Union—a fact that ultimately contributed to his assassination one year later.

“If this planet is ever ravaged by nuclear war,” Kennedy stated in a speech after the crisis, “if 300 million Americans, Russians and Europeans are wiped out by a 60-minute nuclear exchange, if the survivors of that devastation can then endure the fire, poison, chaos and catastrophe, I do not want one of those survivors to ask another, ‘How did it all happen?’ and to receive the incredible reply, ‘Ah, if only one knew.’” Kennedy spoke these words only 17 years after

the conclusion of World War II, which culminated in the US dropping of nuclear weapons on civilian populations in Japan.

In the context of the current crisis, what is most striking is the absence of any section of the political establishment in the US, or for that matter, the European powers in NATO, opposed to the ever greater escalation of a conflict with Russia that is raising the danger of nuclear war to its highest point since the harrowing events of October 1962.

The Putin government in Russia, driven into a corner by the massive intervention of the US and its European allies in the Ukraine war, is responding with threats. In the aftermath of its military debacle in northern Ukraine, both Putin and Dimitri Medvedev, deputy chairman of Russia's Security Council, have threatened to use nuclear weapons if NATO intervenes further in the conflict.

These threats, articulating the desperate response of the Russian oligarchy to imperialist encirclement, are very real. Russia has hundreds of intercontinental ballistic missiles, along with submarine-based missiles, capable of launching across the world and leveling every major city in the US in under two hours.

The universal proclamation from the American and European powers is that no retreat is possible. Putin's “references to nuclear weapons do not shake our determination, resolve and unity to stand by Ukraine,” said EU Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell. German Defense Minister Christine Lambrecht added that Putin's “reaction to Ukraine's successes only encourages us to continue supporting Ukraine.” Putin's “rhetoric on nuclear weapons,” Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte said, “leaves us cold.”

On Wednesday, the *Washington Post* encouraged the White House to continue to escalate the war over Ukraine, which both Biden and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken made clear they would do in speeches before the United Nations this week.

“Putin is getting desperate,” wrote the *Post* editorial board. “Ukraine and the West must keep the pressure on.” Citing

Putin's threats to use nuclear weapons, the *Post* concluded, "The only thing worse than failing to prepare for Mr. Putin to carry out his threats would be to be cowed by them."

What does it mean for the United States to not be "cowed"—or, as others have said, "deterred"—by the very real danger of nuclear war? It means the American ruling class will pursue the escalation of the war regardless of the consequences. In measuring the costs of escalation, which could lead to the annihilation of civilization, against the consequences of accommodation, it has decided that the risk of nuclear war is the preferable outcome.

This speaks to an incredible level of recklessness and war frenzy that has gripped the ruling class, along with significant sections of the upper-middle class.

Within the state apparatus, there are active discussions over what to do in the event of nuclear war. An extraordinary hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee on Nuclear Strategy Tuesday included discussions over whether the residency of the vice president should be moved outside of Washington. Senator Angus King asked whether Washington should "disperse our leadership," because, "If the president, the vice president and the leadership is gone, we're decapitated, there's no one to make the decision to launch [nuclear weapons] because of a lack of a second strike."

Regardless, the war must go on. As the WSWS wrote earlier this week, "Having walked up to the edge of the abyss, the response of the American ruling class is: 'Forward to victory!'"

What explains this social-political pathology? There are, first of all, geopolitical interests. The US and the NATO powers provoked the war in Ukraine with the aim of dragging Russia into a conflict that would lead to regime-change or the fracturing of the giant landmass of the country to facilitate its direct exploitation by imperialism. It is the culmination of three decades of endless war following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, through which the US has sought to offset its economic decline with military force.

Throughout the conflict, the US has opposed any negotiated settlement that does not involve Russia's complete capitulation. In the aftermath of the Russian debacle in northern Ukraine, the American ruling class smells blood. Even as it escalates its conflict with Russia, moreover, the US is issuing ever more belligerent threats against China, laying the basis for another catastrophic war, in this case over Taiwan.

Second, there is the crisis within the United States and all the major capitalist countries. The impact of the ongoing pandemic, with 20 million dead internationally and more than one million in the US alone, is combined with an escalating economic crisis, surging inflation, a developing

selloff on the financial markets, and, most dangerously for the ruling class, the growth of class struggle. This would not be the first time that a desperate ruling elite sought some sort of resolution of its internal crisis through war abroad.

In this regard, it should be stressed that while all discussion in the media is over the possibility that Russia will use nuclear weapons, it remains a historical fact that the only country ever to use such weapons in war is the United States itself. If the American ruling class will not be "deterred" from an escalation that could provoke a nuclear response, what would deter it from preparing a "preemptive" strike itself? American military doctrine has never ruled out this possibility.

The great danger in this situation is that the working class is not aware of the threat that it confronts. The media, a propaganda arm of the state, does nothing to alert the population. All the lies used by the ruling class to justify its policies go unchallenged. The affluent upper-middle class, for which the pseudo-left organizations around the Democratic Party speak, is, if anything, even more hysterical in its demand for war, believing that nothing could possibly impact its comfortable lifestyle.

Among the masses, there is no broad support for war, only a disbelief that their government would be willing to sacrifice millions of people. But historical experience—and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic—shows that capitalist governments are perfectly capable of such murderous calculations.

If the catastrophe that threatens mankind is to be averted, the hostility of the working class to war must be made conscious and organized. It must be fused with the growing struggles of workers throughout the US and internationally. And it must be armed with a socialist, internationalist and revolutionary program that combines the fight against war with the fight against capitalism.



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