

Thirty Democrats in Progressive Caucus urge Biden to open talks with Russia in Ukraine war

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Thirty Democratic members of the House of Representatives sent a letter to the White House Monday urging President Joe Biden to begin negotiations with Russia aimed at bringing the US-NATO war in Ukraine to an end. It is the first public call from within the Democratic Party for a negotiated settlement of the war.

All of the Democrats who signed the letter are members of the Progressive Caucus, chaired by Representative Pramila Jayapal of Washington, who was the first name on the list. The others all represent safe Democratic seats, mainly in urban districts, including all the members of the “squad,” the left-liberal group associated with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rashida Tlaib.

The letter begins with a declaration of support for the all-out US backing for Ukraine, accepting the framework of the war narrative presented by the Biden administration and the US national security apparatus and reinforced by a tidal wave of media propaganda, which ignores the decades-long campaign of NATO expansion eastward and its efforts to surround, weaken and ultimately dismember Russia.

Vladimir Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine, a reactionary response to this NATO campaign, is treated as the criminal decision of one man to attack an innocent neighbor, which requires a global response in defense of the right-wing regime in Kiev, brought to power in 2014 in a CIA-backed coup with fascist forces acting as the spearhead.

But the letter then reminds Biden of his concern that a direct military conflict with nuclear-armed Russia could lead to World War III, and that “[T]he risk of nuclear weapons being used has been estimated to be higher now than at any time since the height of the Cold War.”

The letter continues: “Given the catastrophic possibilities of nuclear escalation and miscalculation, which only increase the longer this war continues, we agree with your goal of avoiding direct military conflict as an overriding national-security priority.”

From this starting point, the 30 Democrats draw the

conclusion that a prolonged, years-long conflict should be avoided, making a negotiated settlement necessary. They argue, “if there is a way to end the war while preserving a free and independent Ukraine, it is America’s responsibility to pursue every diplomatic avenue to support such a solution that is acceptable to the people of Ukraine... The alternative to diplomacy is protracted war, with both its attendant certainties and catastrophic and unknowable risks.”

They sum up: “In conclusion, we urge you to make vigorous diplomatic efforts in support of a negotiated settlement and ceasefire, engage in direct talks with Russia, explore prospects for a new European security arrangement acceptable to all parties that will allow for a sovereign and independent Ukraine, and, in coordination with our Ukrainian partners, seek a rapid end to the conflict and reiterate this goal as America’s chief priority.”

The letter is not an anti-war declaration. Every one of the signers voted for the most recent legislation approving tens of billions more spending on US military aid to Ukraine. The cumulative total of some \$60 billion is the largest amount of American military aid to any single country in half a century, since the Vietnam War.

Just hours after the publication of the statement, Congressional Progressive Caucus Chair Pramila Jayapal issued a statement to “clarify” the document, declaring, “we are united as Democrats in our unequivocal commitment to supporting Ukraine in their fight for their democracy and freedom in the face of the illegal and outrageous Russian invasion, and nothing in the letter advocates for a change in that support.”

They are not opposed on principle to the US-NATO intervention, but are clearly concerned that the huge US commitment has no popular support at home and could trigger a nuclear war.

An additional concern is that the gargantuan Pentagon budget, swelled by the spending on the Ukraine war, is crowding out whatever remains of domestic social spending,

setting the stage for significant cuts in core programs like Social Security and Medicare, especially if the Republican Party wins control of Congress in the November 8 elections.

The publication of the letter takes place against the backdrop of an intensification of the war in the aftermath of the bombing of the Nord Stream II pipelines and the attack on the Kerch Bridge over the strait that connects the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea. Over the weekend, Russian, American, British, Turkish and French officials held an intense series of phone calls on what the Russian defense minister warned was an “uncontrolled escalation” of the war.

At the same time, US politicians are worrying that anti-war sentiment is growing under conditions in which the conflict has triggered a massive cost of living crisis.

The White House response to the letter was a bland statement from John Kirby, spokesman for the National Security Council, that Biden “appreciates their very thoughtful concerns” but that the government of Ukraine would have the final say on any diplomatic contacts with Russia and Putin.

“We’re not going to have conversations with the Russian leadership without the Ukrainians being represented,” Kirby said to reporters. “Mr. Zelensky gets to determine—because it’s his country—what success looks like and when to negotiate.”

This is a transparent and cynical lie. Volodymyr Zelensky takes no significant action without consulting Washington and getting its approval. Without the flood of weapons and financing from the United States, Canada, the European Union and Great Britain, the Ukrainian regime would not last a week.

It is the sophisticated and deadly missiles and artillery supplied by the Pentagon and the Bundeswehr that have played the crucial role in turning the tide in the war. By this token, the war is a conflict between NATO and Russia in all but name.

Kirby continued, “We’d all like to see this war end today, and quite frankly it could end today if Mr. Putin did the right thing and pulled his troops out.” Driving all Russian troops out of Ukraine is unlikely to be accomplished without an effort extending over several years, and costing hundreds of billions of dollars, with the continual risk of an escalation into a nuclear conflict.

The letter from the 30 Democratic representatives also reveals divisions within the congressional Democratic leadership. The Progressive Caucus is the largest grouping of Democrats in the House, with 99 of the 221 Democrats. While receiving the chairman’s signature, however, the letter was signed by less than a third of the caucus.

The timing also suggests internal conflicts. The letter was

released while House Speaker Nancy Pelosi was in Eastern Europe on a political mission to demonstrate US government support for Ukraine at the First Parliamentary Summit of the International Crimea Platform.

This group, established by the Ukrainian government last year, is set to meet in the capital of Croatia, Zagreb. Its purpose is the promotion of Ukraine’s claim to Crimea, the predominantly Russian-speaking territory annexed by Russia in 2014 after the right-wing putsch in Kiev. Crimea was part of Russia, not Ukraine, after its conquest from Turkey in 1783. It was only transferred to Ukraine in 1954 by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, at a time when both Russia and Ukraine were part of the USSR.

Pelosi issued a statement reiterating US support for restoring Ukrainian sovereignty in Crimea, an action that would require the comprehensive military defeat of Russia and would greatly intensify the danger of escalation to the use of nuclear weapons. “America joins our democratic partners to reaffirm our pledge to stand with the Ukrainian people in their fight for freedom and to hold Russia accountable,” she said, “until victory is won.”

The Democratic leader rejected the suggestion by House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy that the US government had given a “blank check” to Ukraine to finance the war and the operations of its government, and that that commitment might be cut back if Republicans won control of Congress. Regardless of the election results, Pelosi said, “I believe that the support for Ukraine and the people of Ukraine... will not stop,” adding that “support for Ukraine is bipartisan, it is bicameral.”



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