

75 years of NATO: From Cold War to hot war

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On April 4, the NATO military alliance marked its 75th anniversary. NATO was founded in 1949 less than four years after the end of World War II, in the initial years of the Cold War, as an alliance aimed against the Soviet Union. Today, it is plunging mankind into a Third World War.

The anniversary was marked by a meeting of NATO foreign ministers in Brussels that was devoted to a major new escalation of the war against Russia in Ukraine. Only a few weeks after French President Emmanuel Macron proposed to send ground troops to Ukraine to fight Russian forces, NATO is preparing to take over the Ukraine Defense Contact Group that coordinates aid to Ukraine. Ukraine's war against Russia is emerging as an operation commanded by NATO.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said NATO support for Ukraine was “rock solid” and vowed, “Ukraine will become a member of NATO.” The foreign ministers of Germany, France and Poland—Annalena Baerbock, Stéphane Séjourné and Radosław Sikorski—stated in *Politico* that NATO powers have given Ukraine over €200 billion. They pledged: “Our support will continue for as long as it takes and as intensively as needed.”

The NATO powers are presently backing Israel's genocide of the Palestinians in Gaza, which has killed over 40,000 people. This is seen as part of an expanding global war.

“We know that our security is not regional—it is global,” NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said in his anniversary remarks. “The war in Ukraine illustrates this clearly. Russia's friends in Asia are vital for continuing its war of aggression. China is propping up Russia's war economy. In return, Moscow is mortgaging its future to Beijing. North Korea and Iran are delivering substantial supplies of weapons and ammunition. In return, Pyongyang and Tehran are receiving Russian technology and supplies that help them advance their missile and nuclear capabilities.”

The claim that NATO serves the “defence” and “security” of Europe has been a propaganda lie since its foundation. As

the Trotskyist movement always insisted, NATO was from the outset a war alliance of the great imperialist powers.

When NATO was founded 75 years ago, the magazine *Fourth International*, which at the time was published by the American Socialist Workers Party under James P. Cannon, declared: “The North Atlantic Pact is not just another military alliance. ... The immense significance of this event transcends by far its effect on the ‘cold war’ for which it is immediately designed.”

The crisis of the old imperialist powers of Europe—whose “efforts to ‘pacify’ the insurgent peoples of the East is proving one of the most costly and colossal failures in history”; for whom “it has become well-nigh impossible to achieve ‘stability’ at home with their own resources alone”; and who “are admittedly impotent without outside help, either individually or collectively, to cope with the power of the Soviet Union”—had “obliged American imperialism to become the caretaker of world capitalism.”

“But it can only fulfil this role effectively on a global scale,” the editorial of the *Fourth International* warned. “For this reason, we have predicted time and again that the road to world domination must be the road to world war.”

These lines are once again of burning relevance today. Seventy-five years after its foundation, NATO is closer to triggering a third world war than ever before.

At NATO's foundation in 1949, as the division of Germany was sealed and revolution triumphed in China, NATO pursued a violent, counterrevolutionary policy. The US, France and other NATO imperialist powers waged brutal colonial wars in Indochina, Korea, Algeria and beyond. NATO went on to back coups in Greece and Turkey and against left-wing, nationalist governments across Africa and Latin America to curb the influence of the Soviet Union.

In the American ruling elite, however, a conflict broke out over whether to fight the Soviet Union through “containment” or through a military “rollback,” risking nuclear war. In the initial period of the Cold War, those in favour of “containment” gained the upper hand. However, US imperialism never gave up its long-term goal of

reversing the achievements of the October Revolution and destroying the Soviet Union.

The Cold War ended, however, in 1991, when the Stalinist bureaucracy took the final step in its historical betrayal and liquidated the property relations created by the October Revolution, restored capitalism and dissolved the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union.

NATO, which had always justified its existence with the danger allegedly posed by the Soviet Union, did not dissolve itself. As the *Fourth International* had written in 1949, the founding of NATO “transcends by far its effect on the ‘cold war’ for which it is immediately designed”, and that “the road to world domination” was “the road to world war.”

American imperialism saw the dissolution of the Soviet Union as an opportunity to re-establish its world domination and reverse the defeats it had suffered in Korea, Vietnam and elsewhere. Not satisfied with the fact that Gorbachev, Yeltsin and later Putin had opened up the Soviet Union to exploitation by international capital, they wanted Russia’s colonial subjugation.

America’s European allies, pursuing their own imperialist interests, followed its lead. NATO is the instrument with which they pursue this goal. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, NATO or its members have been waging war practically without interruption.

The US first attacked Iraq in 1990. In 1999, NATO bombed Serbia without a UN mandate—in violation of international law—and forced the secession of Kosovo. In 2001, NATO invoked the mutual defence clause, for the first and only time, and occupied Afghanistan, conducting a war that lasted 20 years and ended with the destruction of the country and the return of the Taliban. Although subsequent wars against Iraq, Libya and Syria took place outside the official NATO structures, they were supported by most NATO member states.

Parallel to the wars in the Middle East, NATO systematically advanced towards Russia and incorporated the whole of Eastern Europe and—with the Baltic states—parts of the former Soviet Union.

The world’s most powerful military alliance grew from 12 to 32 members. Last year, it spent \$1.3 trillion on defense, or 60 percent of global military spending. The US military budget alone totalled \$905 billion, more than the next 15 countries combined. In contrast, China only spent \$220 billion and Russia \$109 billion on defense.

NATO has systematically prepared for war with Russia since 2014, when the US and Germany backed a coup to install a pro-Western puppet regime in Kiev. NATO relentlessly armed Ukraine, ultimately provoking the desperate, reactionary attack by the Putin regime in 2022. NATO then waged a war on Russia using Ukrainians as

cannon fodder, at the cost of hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian lives, that threatens to escalate into nuclear conflict.

This madness is rooted in the insoluble contradictions of the international capitalist system. Private ownership of the means of production and the bourgeois nation-state based upon it cannot be reconciled with the global character of modern production, which unites billions of workers in a single social process. The only answer imperialism knows to this is the violent redivision of the world.

To wage this war, the NATO imperialist powers must build fascistic police-state regimes at home, to suppress mounting opposition in the working class at having to bear the vast costs of militarism and the consequences of the war. The rise of Trump, Meloni, the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) and other neo-fascists is only the sharpest expression of the rightward development of all bourgeois parties.

But the crisis of the capitalist system also creates the conditions for socialist revolution. *Fourth International* magazine’s April 1949 editorial ended with the words: “The general staffs have carefully calculated all contingencies and eventualities—all but one. That one is the alliance of the peoples of the world who above all want peace. Not the manoeuvrings of the Kremlin, but the class struggle in Shanghai and Indonesia, in Milan, the Ruhr and Detroit will prove the Achilles heel of this unholy compact of death, reaction and dictatorship.”

These words are as relevant today as they were then. Only an international mass movement of the working class, combining the struggle against war with the struggle against capitalist exploitation, can stop the path to world war and nuclear catastrophe.



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