Is the world on the brink of nuclear war?

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Is the world on the brink of nuclear war? The question arises directly from the events of the past several days, as the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine escalates into an open confrontation between nuclear-armed powers.

Russia declared this week that it is ready to use nuclear weapons if NATO moves to blockade Kaliningrad, the Russian territory on the Baltic between Poland and Lithuania. The warning was issued through Russian embassies in Belgium, Britain and Ireland on September 28 and 29, and in a diplomatic note to NATO.

Stating that NATO was preparing an "air and naval blockade" of Kaliningrad, the Russian embassy in Ireland stated, "There should be no mistake — Russia would be ready to use all its arsenal, including nuclear weapons, to defend its territory if NATO countries try to isolate Kaliningrad region from the rest of the country."

NATO spokesperson Allison Hart responded on Tuesday, stating, "NATO is a defensive alliance and none of our activities or exercises pose a risk to any part of Russia." She denounced "the threat of force, including any irresponsible nuclear rhetoric."

This statement is flatly false, as the NATO alliance is arming and guiding Ukrainian strikes deep inside Russia. NBC News reported in October 2025 that the Trump administration would provide Kiev intelligence to help it "strike at oil and gas facilities inside Russia." On July 30, the European Commission paid Kiev €3.47 billion, including funding for "long-range jet-powered drones." On the night of September 19–20, Ukraine launched its largest drone attack of the war on Moscow and the surrounding region. On August 28, Ukrainian forces struck a Tu-95 strategic bomber, part of Russia's nuclear forces, at Engels air base.

Moreover, NATO's "activities and exercises" are directed at Kaliningrad itself. In mid-August, according to a Western military source cited by Reuters, dozens of NATO aircraft flew an unannounced operation around the enclave. The operation showed they could cut off its radio and radar links and its air defenses. Since January, 14 European states have treated Russian-linked tankers that change flags or switch off their transponders as "stateless vessels" open to boarding, and Sweden seized one in March.

On September 11, Polish Foreign Minister Rados?aw Sikorski said of Kaliningrad, "There are hardly any troops there." He proposed that NATO "exercise so aggressively on our side as to make [Putin] uncertain of what we will do." He added, "We should not be thinking about our confrontation with Russia only as being confined to Ukraine."

The European powers are proceeding on the assumption that Moscow is bluffing. At the Euronews Defense and Space Summit in Brussels on Wednesday, NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte declared, "I don't take this seriously. … Everybody knows that [Putin] can never win against NATO."

The logic is one of relentless escalation. The European powers have tied their policy to a Ukrainian victory. "Putin needs to feel that war is coming to Russia itself," EU Defense Commissioner Andrius Kubilius declared Wednesday.

Ukraine's military position, meanwhile, is deteriorating. In July it intercepted just 29 of 195 Russian ballistic missiles, and it enters the winter without the air defenses it needs to protect its power grid. Each further setback will be met by further escalation: the introduction of ground forces, or the opening of new fronts, including Kaliningrad.

The stakes for Moscow could hardly be higher. Kaliningrad is to the Baltic what Crimea is to the Black Sea. It is the headquarters of the Baltic Fleet and the base of Russia's nuclear-capable Iskander missiles. Since Finland and Sweden joined NATO, it has been surrounded by the alliance on land and sea.

In one respect the exclave is more sensitive than Crimea. Its status has been internationally recognized since the Potsdam Conference of 1945 transferred it to the Soviet Union. Action against Kaliningrad would be an attack on territory that no government disputes is Russian.

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Russia's nuclear doctrine permits a nuclear response to conventional aggression that creates "a critical threat" to its territorial integrity.

Nikolai Sokov, a former Russian diplomat and Vienna-based nuclear analyst, told Reuters in an interview published Wednesday, "They (Russia) expect more action, including a blockade of the Baltic Sea — just below the level of war in European calculation, but for them this will be open war. I see a risk of mutual miscalculation."

A blockade of Russia may be "just below the level of war in European calculation," but by international law it is an act of war. The definition of aggression adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1974 includes "the blockade of the ports or coasts of a State by the armed forces of another State."

Given the risks, it is staggering that there are no calls for negotiations and no talk of a settlement. The only debate in the European capitals is over how far and how fast to escalate.

This is the recklessness of imperialist powers beset by a deepening social, economic and political crisis, pressing the war forward with no regard for where it leads. The Putin regime, which speaks for the capitalist oligarchy and is incapable of making any genuine appeal to the international working class, answers with nuclear threats.

The contrast with 1962 is stark. When the United States and the Soviet Union came to the brink over Soviet missiles in Cuba, the danger was openly acknowledged. President John F. Kennedy announced the crisis on national television on October 22, and for the following week the world followed every development. Kennedy and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev exchanged letters, and the two governments, fearing the consequences, negotiated through back channels until they found a way to step back. Today there is neither acknowledgment nor negotiation.

There is a vast chasm between the scale of the danger and the public's awareness of it. Millions sense that something is deeply wrong but cannot believe their governments would gamble with nuclear war. To the extent the danger is presented at all in the media, it appears as the inexplicable menace of the Russians, Putin's "nuclear rhetoric" and "hybrid warfare." It is never presented as a response to what the NATO powers are doing.

As of Wednesday evening, the *New York Times* and CNN had not reported Moscow's warning. Those in the media who do comment are pressing for further escalation. The *Washington Post* wrote Monday, "A better message from Trump would be that the U.S. will allow Ukraine to do more if Russia doesn't ease up."

The Democrats have attacked US President Donald Trump for being insufficiently aggressive against Russia. On September 24, 21 Senate Democrats declared that the "appeals for de-escalation" at Trump's summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping "do nothing to halt the flow of Chinese dual-use goods keeping Vladimir Putin's war machine alive." The signers included Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer, Elizabeth Warren and Adam Schiff.

The war in Ukraine, provoked by three decades of NATO expansion to Russia's borders, is part of a struggle for global dominance being waged on every continent. More than four years into the war, a new and catastrophic stage is being prepared behind the backs of the population. The working class, which will pay the price, must be alerted. The governments cutting jobs and social programs to finance rearmament are the same ones leading toward a war that could turn nuclear.

The fight against war must be connected to the class struggle that is already developing. The same crisis that is driving the ruling class toward war is driving workers into struggle against layoffs, against the destruction of social programs and against attacks on democratic rights.

The working class is the only social force capable of stopping it, but it can do so only if it understands what is being prepared and fights consciously against the war and the capitalist system that produces it. The first task is to break the silence on the danger. We urge our readers to circulate this statement as widely as possible.

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