European powers answer Russian nuclear warnings with further military escalation

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Barely days after Moscow formally warned NATO that an attempt to blockade or isolate the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad could provoke the use of nuclear weapons, the governments of Europe are responding not with attempts to step back from the brink, but with declarations of increased military support for Ukraine, accelerated rearmament and preparations for a direct confrontation with Russia.

The public posture of the European governments is one of extraordinary brinkmanship. Each Russian warning is dismissed as intimidation or bluff, while each new confrontation is invoked as the justification for still greater military escalation.

On Thursday, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz appeared in Münster alongside Dutch Prime Minister Rob Jetten and NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte at the headquarters of the 1st German-Netherlands Corps.

Merz declared that the Ukraine war "concerns us very directly," pledged that Germany and its allies would support Kiev "with all our strength," and said Berlin was working "at full speed" to ensure the credible military deterrence of Russia. He explicitly connected this policy to increased investment in Germany's "military strength" and "economic resilience."

Jetten declared that Europe confronted a "new security reality" and had to demonstrate that it was prepared to do "whatever it takes" to defend itself. He pointed to rising military expenditure, F-35 deployments, accelerated joint arms production and German-Dutch intelligence cooperation that has been raised to an "unprecedented level."

Rutte was even more explicit. Russia, he said, was attempting to frighten NATO into reducing its support for Ukraine. His answer was to "keep calm, carry on, and continue the support for Ukraine." He added that NATO's response to Russian actions would be to provide still more support to Ukraine.

The setting underscored the military significance of these declarations. According to NATO, the German-Netherlands Corps is a "warfighting headquarters" capable of commanding an international force of 50,000 troops and is responsible for NATO forces assigned to the defence of Estonia and Latvia on Russia's Baltic frontier. The meeting took place immediately before Rutte received the "International Award of the Peace of Westphalia" on behalf of NATO.

These statements come directly after Russia sent NATO a diplomatic note warning that it was prepared to employ "the entire arsenal of forces and capabilities at its disposal, including nuclear weapons" if NATO attempted to isolate Kaliningrad. The document also referred to the possibility of Russian strikes against "decision-making centers" in NATO countries from the outset of such a conflict. Kaliningrad, situated between Poland and Lithuania, is one of Russia's most heavily militarised regions.

At the same time, Lithuania is advancing a constitutional amendment that would abolish Article 137, which prohibits weapons of mass destruction and foreign military bases on Lithuanian territory. On September 22, the Lithuanian parliament voted 99 to 13, with five abstentions, to advance the amendment. Further votes are required before the constitutional change can take effect. Its adoption would remove the existing constitutional obstacle to the future stationing of nuclear weapons in a NATO state directly bordering Kaliningrad and Belarus.

The Kremlin responded Thursday. Spokesman Dmitry Peskov warned governments contemplating the stationing of nuclear weapons close to Russia that they were "deeply mistaken" if they believed this would increase their security. Such moves, he said, would instead produce "further escalation and increased tensions." Referring to European participation in the Ukraine war, Peskov added: "If you take part in a war on someone's side, you cannot avoid consequences of various kinds."

Putin personally reinforced the warning later Thursday. Speaking at the Valdai Discussion Club in Moscow, he declared that a direct attack on Russian territory, specifically including Kaliningrad, would place the use of "all the weapons at our country's disposal" "inevitably and immediately" on the agenda.

He then issued an extraordinary warning about the dynamics of the confrontation itself. "The logic of escalating, increasingly harsh retaliatory measures leads to a fatal point of no return," Putin said. He warned that this point could arrive "very quickly and unexpectedly" and referred explicitly to arsenals capable of destroying "all life" or reducing the planet to a catastrophic state.

These threats by the Kremlin offer no progressive alternative to NATO's escalation. The Putin regime speaks for the Russian capitalist oligarchy. Its answer to imperialist encirclement and military pressure is Russian nationalism, military retaliation and nuclear threats—a reactionary strategy that itself pushes the world further toward catastrophe.

But it would be politically criminal to dismiss Moscow's warnings on this account.

The European powers are operating on the assumption that Russia can be subjected indefinitely to deep strikes, economic

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warfare, expanding NATO deployments and preparations around its internationally recognised territory without eventually responding directly against the states organising and enabling this campaign.

No government can know where the limit lies.

The danger arises precisely because every previous threshold crossed without a Russian response encourages the conclusion that the next one can also be crossed. Ukrainian attacks on Moscow become normalised. Strikes on Russian refineries and strategic military installations become normalised. NATO exercises demonstrating the capacity to isolate Kaliningrad become normalised. The removal of constitutional restrictions on nuclear deployments becomes normalised.

Putin's own warning about the "logic of escalating, increasingly harsh retaliatory measures" underscores the danger. Once the credibility of nuclear and conventional deterrence becomes bound up with demonstrating a willingness to retaliate, each side's actions become the justification for the next escalation, and the confrontation assumes an increasingly uncontrollable logic.

The contrast within the European political establishment could hardly be clearer. Bulgarian Prime Minister Rumen Radev warned Wednesday that "no one is raising the question about nuclear risk" and asked whether Europe had even seriously assessed the consequences of attempting "a conventional victory over the biggest nuclear power." He rejected Moscow's nuclear rhetoric but called for diplomatic channels to be reopened.

Rutte responded that he did not take the Russian warning seriously because Putin "can never win against NATO." EU Defence Commissioner Andrius Kubilius rejected calls for renewed diplomacy and insisted instead that Putin must "feel that war is coming to Russia itself."

The issue, therefore, is not that the danger has gone unnoticed. Dominant sections of the European ruling class have concluded that retreat is politically and strategically unacceptable and seek further escalation.

As was the case with the world wars of the twentieth century, this recklessness has an objective basis.

The First World War arose fundamentally from irreconcilable conflicts between the imperialist powers over markets, colonies and the division of the world. But the ruling classes also entered the war amid enormous domestic tensions and a growing socialist workers' movement.

War then provided the framework for suppressing class conflict under the banner of national unity. In Germany, the *Burgfrieden* suspended political conflicts, and the SPD voted for the war credits on August 4, 1914. Shortly before this historic betrayal, the SPD had still organised mass anti-war protests involving roughly three-quarters of a million people.

There is an analogous relationship today between external military escalation and internal social crisis, although under vastly different historical conditions.

Nowhere is this clearer than in France. Tuesday's public-sector strike brought hundreds of thousands onto the streets against wage freezes, austerity and the deterioration of public services. At the same time, an explosive movement among high-school students has spread across the country. By Wednesday, protests and blockades had affected 356 high schools, while more than 2,000 people—most of them minors—had been arrested over two days. Students have protested teacher shortages, overcrowded classrooms, dilapidated school buildings and intolerable learning conditions.

On Thursday, university students began joining the movement. Around 30 university campuses were reported blocked, including in Paris, Strasbourg, Marseille, Lyon, Reims, Poitiers and Nanterre. Prime Minister Sébastien Lecornu convened an interministerial crisis meeting and ordered ministers to cancel official travel as the unrest continued to spread.

The developments inevitably evoke the experience of May 1968. Then, a student revolt became the detonator for the intervention of millions of workers and the largest general strike in French history. Today, once again, anger among youth is developing alongside increasingly bitter struggles by workers against austerity and the destruction of public services.

The decisive question is how and when broader sections of the working class intervene independently.

This is precisely what the ruling classes throughout Europe fear. Their governments confront economic stagnation, industrial decline, exploding military budgets, attacks on pensions and public services, mounting political instability and profound popular hostility to the existing parties. War does not originate simply as a device for diverting attention from these problems. It arises from the same crisis of the capitalist system and inter-imperialist antagonisms that produce the social crisis at home.

But once underway, militarism also becomes a mechanism for dealing with domestic opposition. The invocation of an external enemy provides the justification for gigantic arms expenditure, austerity, censorship, expanded surveillance, police powers, conscription and demands for "national unity." Social antagonisms are to be redirected outward, while the machinery of the state is strengthened against opposition from below.

This is why the danger cannot be overcome by hoping that either the NATO imperialists or the Kremlin will eventually behave "rationally." The only force capable of breaking this spiral lies outside the governments conducting the war.

The growing strikes and youth protests in France, and the broader development of working-class struggles internationally, point to the social force whose intervention can change the course of events. The urgent issue is to connect opposition to austerity, social inequality and state repression with the struggle against the escalation toward war between nuclear-armed powers, and to develop an independent socialist anti-war movement of the international working class.

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