After the Abu Dhabi talks

With latest Ukrainian strikes, Europe redoubles its commitment to the NATO-Russia war

European leaders rule out any discussion of NATO's expansion

Thomas Scripps
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Ukraine launched its largest drone salvo of the war so far on Sunday night. Russia reports intercepting over 1,300 but multiple targets were still hit, including the Kerch bridge in Crimea. Two civilians were killed in the Russian Federation, and six in occupied territories.

The attack—celebrated by governments in Brussels, London, Berlin and Paris—was Europe and Kyiv's response to recent talks between Ukraine, Russia and the United States. With Moscow escalating its airstrikes, aiming for maximum leverage in the negotiations, European imperialism and its client Zelensky government are making clear nothing will dissuade them from continuing the war.

For the European powers, the talks in Abu Dhabi last week were a disaster, and not only because they were once again left in the corridors as the Trump administration sought to ensure it would receive the lion's share of not just Ukrainian but also Russian oil, gas and strategic minerals. Politically the talks forced into view issues the imperialist powers have tried to hide for the last five years of conflict.

As well as negotiations over control of Ukrainian territory, the parties began to discuss the wider question of Europe's "security architecture", meaning NATO. This has sent European governments and their spokespeople into a panic. Suddenly, talk of Ukrainian sovereignty and democracy has been replaced with the insistence that the imperialist alliance and its forward deployments on Russia's borders must not be sacrificed at any price.

That the question of NATO and its expansion is now acknowledged as central to the negotiations is a blow to the alliance's propaganda. For years, imperialist governments have declared the Russian invasion of Ukraine utterly inexplicable from the standpoint of normal relations between capitalist states. It was the product of an otherworldly evil acting through the person of Vladimir Putin.

The media is now forced to remember December 2021, when in the words of the BBC's Russia Editor Steve Rosenberg, Russia put forward draft treaties "with the US and NATO which would not only have put the brakes on the alliance's eastward enlargement by giving Moscow cast-iron guarantees that, for instance, Ukraine and Georgia would never be allowed to join, but also rolled back Nato military infrastructure from countries of central and eastern Europe."

Specifically, the proposals called for a removal of NATO troops and weapons from countries that joined the alliance after May 1997: Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, the Baltic states, Romania, Bulgaria and the Balkan countries. Also included was an end to NATO expansion and a commitment not to conduct any military activity in Ukraine, eastern Europe, the South Caucasus or Central Asia.

A proposed missile agreement would bar the US and Russia from deploying short and medium range missiles within striking distance of each other, replacing the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty scrapped under President Donald Trump.

Rosenberg cites a recent edition of Russian newspaper Komsomolskaya Pravda which recalls, "Our proposals were almost laughed at."

The NATO powers were fully aware what their rejection of these demands would mean. Commenting on the Russian proposals at the time, head of the Carnegie Moscow Center Dmitri Trenin wrote, "This logically means that [Russia] will have to assure its security single-handedly, most probably by mil-tech [military technical] means."

NATO planners knew that this was the main option available to the faction of the Russian oligarchy represented by Putin, which is intent on resisting further imperialist encroachment, but, like its entire class, viciously hostile to the Russian and international working class. Incapable of an anti-imperialist policy, it mounted a reactionary Russian nationalist response: a war to annex Ukrainian territory and use this as a bargaining chip with America and Europe.

The imperialist governments counted on this and prepared—together with the far-right government in Kyiv—a bloody quagmire in Ukraine, which has now cost hundreds of thousands of lives on both sides.

Their intention was and is to trade Ukrainian dead for control of the country, and for a "strategic defeat" of Russia which opens the door to regime change and the installation of a more pliant government. Europe's commitment to delivering such a blow to Russia has made it the most belligerent in seeking the continuation of war at all costs, railing against any pragmatic settlement envisioned by the Trump administration.

To cover their tracks, the imperialist powers launched a propaganda offensive to deny the context of the war. Any reference to NATO expansion or imperialist threats against Russia was denounced as the work of pro-Putin stooges. Pseudo-left groups either embraced this

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reactionary campaign wholesale or adapted to it by heavily downplaying the Ukraine war in their political commentary and activity.

The International Committee of the Fourth International has fought these apologetics for imperialist war from the beginning.

Within hours of the Russian invasion the ICFI issued the statement, "Oppose the Putin government's invasion of Ukraine and US-NATO warmongering!" which explained, "The Biden administration, by refusing to discuss Russia's objections to Ukraine's integration into NATO, used Ukraine as bait. It incited the invasion, which will now be used as a pretext for escalating confrontation with Russia."

A month later, Chairman of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site David North explained in "A letter to a friend on the historical and political background to the war in Ukraine:"

> The World Socialist Web Site has publicly condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine. However, this principled opposition from the political left has nothing in common with the grotesquely one-sided official US-NATO propaganda narrative, which presents the invasion as an entirely unprovoked act of aggression by Russia…
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> How is it possible to understand Russian policies apart from an analysis of the global context within which they are formulated? Given the fact that the United States has waged war relentlessly, is it irrational for Putin to view the expansion of NATO with alarm? He and other Russian policy makers are certainly aware of the enormous strategic interest of the United States in the Black Sea region, the Caspian region and, for that matter, the Eurasian landmass. It is not exactly a secret that the late Zbigniew Brzezinski and other leading US geostrategists have long insisted that US dominance of Eurasia—the so-called "World Island"—is a decisive strategic objective…
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> Again, the recognition that Russia perceived in the actions of the United States and NATO a serious threat is not a justification of the invasion. But should there not be a critical evaluation of how the policies of the United States led to and even deliberately instigated it?

The reaction from the European powers—which since Trump's presidency have led NATO's war effort—demonstrates the truth of this analysis. EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas warned of "traps that Russia is setting," explaining, "we have one aggressor and one victim. And the aggressor does not have security concerns."

Friedrich Merz, the German chancellor, said flatly, "Russia wants to talk about questions of a European security architecture. We do not need to discuss that; it already exists."

Writing for the European Council on Foreign Relations, Anton Barbashin was most explicit: "The talks in Abu Dhabi showed that Russia wants more than a deal on Ukraine: it wants to roll back the last 35 years of Europe's security order. Europeans must not let this objective become the price of peace in Ukraine."

That is: peace in Ukraine, the supposed dearly held wish of Europe's capitals, must not be secured at the cost of our imperialist interests. Put another way: the war must continue in the interests of NATO in Europe.

At stake for the European ruling class is tens of billions of euros in debt repayments, the lucrative cheap labour and rich natural resources of Ukraine, and the chance of weakening and plundering Russia in the same way.

Ukraine's debt stands at roughly €185 billion, with the largest proportion (around 40 percent) owed to the European Union—a further sixth is owed to the IMF and World Bank. These loans, charging an average "concessional" rate of interest of nearly 2 percent, have been advanced with hundreds of strict conditionalities furthering the free-market restructuring of the country's economy.

A further €90 billion Ukraine Support Loan, covering 2026-2027, is to be repaid out of Russian reparations—dependent on inflicting a crushing defeat on Moscow. Immeasurably greater riches would be made available in Russia by such a prospect.

NATO is the European powers' sole viable military mechanism for securing these opportunities in Ukraine and preparing their extension into Russia. To succeed, they must prolong a war growing crueler by the day as the grinding suffering on the frontline spreads to the rear.

Ukrainian drones have targeted Russian refineries, warehouses, ports and cargo ships. Russian strikes have hit Ukrainian power, transport and export infrastructure, causing widespread power outages amid near-freezing and falling temperatures.

Both countries' economies are suffering, with the costs being passed onto the working class. Russia is slashing social spending by 15.2 percent next year. Ukraine spends more on its debt repayments than on pensions and social programmes.

According to the latest figures from the United Nations, 372 civilians were killed and nearly 2,000 injured in Ukraine in October—the highest October toll since the full-scale invasion began and a 95 percent increase on a year ago. Russia reported 149 civilian deaths in its territory or territory it occupies, plus roughly 700 injured, in the same month.

Clashes and provocations beyond Ukraine—in the Black Sea, Kaliningrad or elsewhere—threaten direct conflict between Russia and NATO member states.

North's "Letter to a friend" stressed that "In the form of the Ukraine crisis, Russia is confronting the tragic and potentially catastrophic consequences of the dissolution of the Soviet Union," carried out by the Stalinist bureaucracy turned oligarchy.

Hoping for a place at the table of world capitalism, they and their monopolies were put on the menu instead. Their only response is war under the national banner, whether in the service of the imperialist powers as with Kyiv or in a desperate game of brinkmanship with them as with Moscow.

The working class pays the price for both. Its only way out of the disaster is through a turn back to the socialist internationalist traditions and struggles which formed the Soviet Union as the first outpost of a world socialist revolution. Workers in Russia and Ukraine must unite with each other and with the workers in Europe and America against the war and its ruling-class architects.

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