As Ukraine attacks Russian ships Merz and Rutte drive escalation of war against Russia

Johannes Stern
23 November 2026

As the Ukraine war continues to spread, with attacks on Russian ships in the Baltic and Mediterranean seas, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz and NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte announced a further intensification of the military confrontation with Russia at another meeting in Berlin on Monday.

Just four days after the Berlin war summit of the "Coalition of the Willing," the NATO Parliamentary Assembly met in the German capital. Merz and Rutte reaffirmed the enormous commitments of military and financial aid to Ukraine, called for the strengthening of NATO's eastern flank and once again raised the prospect of Ukrainian membership in NATO.

Rutte declared that every new military incident in Europe must be met with even greater support for Ukraine. Merz called for a "stronger, more European NATO" and underscored Germany's leading role in the military confrontation with Russia. At the same time, around 6,000 soldiers in Lithuania are rehearsing war on the Russian border under the command of Germany's 10th Panzer Division.

Ukraine war spreads to the Baltic and Mediterranean seas

The events of recent days demonstrate just how acute the danger of an uncontrolled escalation has become.

On Sunday, Ukrainian naval drones attacked the Russian corvette *Merkury* in the Libyan port of Benghazi. President Volodymyr Zelensky confirmed Ukrainian responsibility on Monday and declared that the warship had been sunk. The Russian cargo ship *Angara*, which was reportedly carrying military equipment, was also struck. The sinking of the corvette has not yet been independently confirmed.

On Saturday, the Russian military cargo ship *Sparta II* had already caught fire in the Gulf of Finland following a suspected Ukrainian drone attack. After the damaged vessel temporarily drifted into Finnish waters, it was towed away by Russian ships.

The war has thus spread to two further strategically vital maritime regions. The Baltic Sea is of decisive importance for supplying the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad. In the Mediterranean, the attacks are connected to Russia's military presence in North Africa and its transport links.

On Monday, Moscow warned of a dangerous increase in attacks in the Baltic Sea. At the same time, the Russian Foreign Ministry accused Estonia of allowing Ukrainian drones to use its airspace and thereby risking an open war with Russia.

The situation is being further exacerbated by new military incidents. According to Polish authorities, three Russian projectiles landed in Poland on Friday during massive Russian air strikes on Ukraine. No one was injured. NATO discussed the incident on Monday. Merz demanded that Russia immediately cease its "dangerous provocations."

Under these conditions, there is a growing danger that a military incident, a miscalculation or a deliberate attack could trigger a spiral of escalation culminating in the use of nuclear weapons. In late September, Russia warned NATO in an official letter that it would respond to a blockade of Kaliningrad with all available military means.

Berlin and NATO intensify the war drive

But instead of seeking de-escalation, Merz and Rutte announced a further intensification of the confrontation.

Asked about the attacks on Russian ships and the danger of the geographical expansion of the war, Rutte declared: "For every incident in Europe, more support for Ukraine, not less." This was "the best response one can give."

At the same time, he emphasized that, according to his figures, Ukraine was killing or seriously wounding between 40,000 and 50,000 Russian soldiers every month. These figures have not been independently confirmed. The presentation of such enormous losses, however, underscores the extent to which NATO views the war as a means of weakening Russia militarily.

Merz reaffirmed the NATO countries' commitment to providing Ukraine with €70 billion in military support in both 2026 and 2027. The German government would support Kyiv for as long as necessary. He also announced a further strengthening of the defenses along NATO's entire eastern flank.

Particularly provocative were his statements concerning Ukraine's accession to NATO. He described the failure to admit Ukraine to the military alliance in 2008 as a historic mistake. Had Ukraine become a NATO member at the time, the present war "could probably have been prevented." In reality, the Russian intervention was a reactionary response to the military encirclement of Russia and NATO's advance to the Russian border.

With this statement, Merz backed French President Emmanuel Macron's demand last Thursday that Ukrainian membership in NATO be placed back on the agenda. In any case, the planned security guarantees following a ceasefire would have to come very close to Article 5 of the NATO treaty.

Russia has repeatedly described NATO's expansion into Ukraine as a red line. At the Berlin summit of the "Coalition of the Willing," the European powers had already reaffirmed preparations for a multinational force to be stationed in Ukraine following a ceasefire—another of Moscow's red lines. Thousands of Western soldiers recently trained in Poland under the name "Koalicja" to rehearse the deployment and logistical support of such units.

© World Socialist Web Site

Bundeswehr rehearses direct war against Russia

The German government is pursuing the military confrontation particularly aggressively. On Monday, Rutte explicitly praised Germany's leading role, declaring: "Your investments in defense are enormous and growing." The German brigade in Lithuania was playing a key role on NATO's eastern flank.

The extent to which war preparations have advanced is demonstrated by the ongoing series of military exercises, "Freedom Shield II" and "Grand Eagle," in Lithuania. Around 6,000 soldiers, including members of the 37th Panzergrenadier Brigade and the 45th Armored Brigade, are training there under the command of the 10th Panzer Division.

Tanks, infantry fighting vehicles and other heavy vehicles are being transported to Lithuania across the Baltic Sea, by rail and by road. The objective is the rapid mobilization and deployment of large combat formations on the Russian border.

The Bundeswehr explicitly describes the 10th Panzer Division as a "Warfighting Division" that must be capable of conducting high-intensity warfare against a peer adversary.

Division commander Major General Jörg See spelled out the objective unequivocally: "Our objective as a Warfighting Division ... is to achieve a comprehensive capability to prevail in combat." He added: "We have no time to lose." The exercises demonstrated: "We can fight and we can win."

At the same time, the 45th Armored Brigade is being permanently stationed in Lithuania. It is scheduled to be operational with around 4,800 soldiers by the end of 2027. Last Thursday, the Bundeswehr had already established eight new battalions.

The scale of the rearmament is enormous. According to Merz, German defense spending was increased by €22 billion to €108 billion in 2026 alone. Next year, it is set to rise by a further €32 billion to around €140 billion. Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul boasted on Monday that Germany would reach NATO's target of spending 3.5 percent of gross domestic product on purely military expenditures well ahead of 2035.

The Bundeswehr is not merely being technologically modernized but is also being organizationally prepared for large-scale military operations. The reintroduction of conscription and the militarization of society as a whole are integral to this development.

The imperialist interests behind the war drive

The claim that this war policy is about "peace" and "democracy" is a lie. It conceals the concrete economic and geostrategic interests of German and European imperialism.

The growing conflicts with the United States play a central role. At last Thursday's summit, the European powers, led by Germany, sought to prevent an accommodation between Trump and Putin from undermining their own interests in Eastern Europe.

Merz explicitly rejected a new "Yalta format" in which other great powers would decide the future of Europe. Europe would not allow its fate to be dictated to it but would determine it itself.

Coming from a German chancellor, these statements are particularly revealing. Following the devastating defeat in the Second World War and the barbaric crimes of Nazism, German imperialism was forced to set aside its great-power ambitions. Today, the German ruling class is once again asserting its claim to determine the order of the continent itself as a leading European and global power.

The immediate issue is control over Ukraine and, in the longer term, access to Russia's vast raw material reserves and markets. The German ruling class is unwilling to accept a situation in which Washington, through a possible agreement with Moscow, largely determines the economic and strategic reorganization of Eastern Europe on its own.

Merz made clear just how closely military and economic objectives are intertwined at the ninth German-Ukrainian Business Forum in Berlin on Friday.

He praised the fact that the number of German companies operating in Ukraine had almost tripled since the beginning of the war. German-Ukrainian trade had grown to more than €12 billion in 2025. The German government was promoting further investment in energy, agriculture, logistics, industry and arms production.

Merz declared that the German security and defense industry was benefiting "very substantially" from cooperation with Ukraine. New joint ventures, weapons technologies and investment guarantees are intended to further expand Germany's economic influence.

His concluding remark was particularly revealing: "What we are investing in Ukraine now will be returned to us many times over as a dividend in the form of stability, export opportunities, joint projects and growth."

The imperialist character of the German offensive could hardly be expressed more clearly. Eight decades after the war of annihilation against the Soviet Union, German imperialism is once again pursuing an aggressive policy in the East. Ukraine is to be permanently integrated into the German and European economic and military sphere. In the longer term, this policy aims at a reorganization of Eastern Europe that also subordinates Russia to the interests of the Western powers.

Behind the aggressive war policy, however, lies not only the struggle for raw materials, markets and geopolitical supremacy, but also the profound internal crisis of European capitalism. Confronted with growing social tensions and increasingly powerful class struggles, governments are responding with militarism, nationalism and authoritarian measures. They are attempting to obscure social conflicts by invoking external enemies and to shift the enormous costs of rearmament onto the working class. But in doing so, they are themselves intensifying the opposition, as the Europe-wide youth protests and strikes of recent weeks demonstrate.

This growing movement provides the objective basis for stopping the imperialist escalation of war. To achieve this, it must be armed with an independent socialist perspective and united with the growing opposition to war and militarism among workers and young people in the United States, as well as in Russia and Ukraine themselves. Only such an international movement of the working class can confront the warmongers and halt the unfolding of a devastating third world war.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site