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The US sanctions drive and the danger of war

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Moscow's expulsion of 750 American diplomats and contractors after the US Congress passed a bill imposing economic sanctions on Russia, Iran and North Korea marks a historical watershed. The neo-colonial wars launched by the United States and its imperialist allies in the last quarter century are producing a generalized breakdown of international trade and diplomatic relations, posing the danger of war between the major nuclear-armed powers.

The overwhelming passage of the Russian sanctions bill, with which the US Congress committed Trump to blocking Russian trade with Europe, staggered the Kremlin. Hoping for improved relations under Trump, Russia did not retaliate for Obama's expulsion of Russian diplomats last year, after Washington issued unfounded declarations that Russia "hacked" the US elections. In the half year since Trump's inauguration, however, the faction of the US ruling class demanding a confrontation with Russia has emerged as dominant in the media and state apparatus.

The bill, passed over protests from Germany and France, will also escalate tensions between Washington and its supposed NATO allies in Europe. Yesterday, US officials confirmed that the Pentagon is reviving plans, abandoned in 2015, to arm the far-right Ukrainian regime that emerged from the fascist-led coup in 2014. The aid would include anti-tank missiles and other lethal weaponry.

As a result, Moscow is planning for an extended armed stand-off with Washington, placing the military situation in Europe on a hair trigger. “We waited quite a long time for something to maybe change,” Russian President Vladimir Putin said in a televised address this weekend. “But all things considered, if it changes, it won’t be anytime soon.”

As it threatens Russia, Washington is simultaneously escalating its campaign against China. After Friday’s missile test by North Korea, which potentially put US cities including Los Angeles, Denver and Chicago in range of North Korean nuclear weapons, US officials confirmed that they are considering economic sanctions on China. “I am very disappointed in China. Our foolish past leaders have allowed them to make hundreds of billions of dollars a year in trade, yet they do NOTHING for us with North Korea,” Trump wrote in two Twitter posts. “We will no longer allow this to continue.”

After last week’s statement in Australia by US Admiral Scott Swift that he would follow orders from Trump to launch nuclear strikes on China, the *Wall Street Journal* posted a comment titled “The Regime Change Solution in North Korea,” advocating a pro-US military coup in Pyongyang.

There is a political logic to this relentless intensification of commercial, diplomatic and military tensions between the major powers. It cannot continue very long without exploding into war.

The media is attempting to downplay the danger in the face of growing popular concern. “Sanctions are often controversial,” the *New York Times* wrote of the Russia sanctions on July 27. “But they are a nonviolent tool—and in this case a timely and appropriate one—for making clear when another country’s behavior has crossed a line and for applying pressure that could make its leaders reconsider course.”

Who does the *Times* think it is kidding? In the last quarter century since the Stalinist bureaucracy dissolved the Soviet Union, sanctions were directed at countries—often allied to Russia or China—like Iraq, Yugoslavia, Iran and North Korea, each of which Washington or the entire NATO alliance targeted for war or regime-change. Today, however, sanctions are being directly aimed at major, nuclear-armed powers central to the world capitalist economy.

The last time Washington sought to arm the far-right Kiev regime, in 2015, Berlin and Paris cut across the US initiative and negotiated a peace deal between Moscow and Kiev. Before the talks, then-French President François Hollande warned of the danger of “total war,” that is, of nuclear war, between NATO and Russia. As Washington prepares a new escalation, all-out war is doubtless again being actively discussed in chancelleries, foreign offices and military headquarters worldwide, behind the backs of the world’s people.

The election of Trump was not the cause, but a symptom of a broad collapse of the imperialist system that threatens the world with catastrophe. The US sanctions bill against Russia has overwhelming bipartisan support, led by the Democratic Party. Great-power rivalries, including between the United States and its European imperialist allies, are rooted in objective conflicts lodged in the structure of world capitalism that twice in the previous century erupted into world war.

As the major powers fight over strategic positions and trillions of dollars in trade, it is ever clearer that the contradictions of capitalism identified by the great Marxists of the 20th century as the causes of war and social revolution—the contradiction between global economy and the nation-state system, and between socialized production and private appropriation of profit—are still operative today.

The key political question is the formation of a mass, anti-war and socialist movement of the international working class. A situation in which workers allow themselves to be swept behind the contending capitalist factions can lead only to disaster. While US imperialism's attempts to assert its rapidly-collapsing global hegemony most immediately raise the threat of war, its European imperialist rivals and the reactionary post-Soviet capitalist oligarchies in Russia and China are no less bankrupt.

Washington's policy against Russia and China will doubtless accelerate ongoing moves by the European powers, led by Germany, to pour tens of billions of euros into their military forces and set up military machines "independent from," that is, potentially hostile to, Washington. This imperialist policy, carried out in the profit interests of the European banks and corporations and financed by attacks on European workers, goes hand-in-hand with the rise of nationalistic and far-right political forces across the continent.

As for the Russian and Chinese oligarchies, they oscillate between attempts to work out a deal with the imperialist powers and to confront them militarily. This was graphically revealed by Chinese President Xi Jinping's appearance on Sunday at a massive military parade at Zhurihe. "The world is not all at peace, and peace must be safeguarded," Xi said, telling Chinese troops: "Always obey and follow the party. Go and fight wherever the party points."

Should the Chinese Stalinist regime, or the Kremlin, opt for a military confrontation with Washington, this could very rapidly lead the world to a nuclear conflagration.

The most urgent task is to mobilize the sentiment against war and social inequality that is growing among the working class all over the world. As the International Committee of the Fourth International explained in its statement, "Socialism and the Fight Against War:"

- * The struggle against war must be based on the working class, the great revolutionary force in society, uniting behind it all progressive elements in the population.

- * The new anti-war movement must be anti-capitalist and socialist, since there can be no serious struggle against war except in the fight to end the dictatorship of finance capital and put an end to the economic system that is the fundamental cause of militarism and war.

- * The new anti-war movement must therefore, of necessity, be completely and unequivocally independent of, and hostile to, all political parties and organizations of the capitalist class.

- * The new anti-war movement must, above all, be international, mobilizing the vast power of the working class in a unified global struggle against imperialism.

