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By Clara Weiss
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Paris summit on Ukraine overshadowed by inter-imperialist conflicts

At the December 9 summit in Paris, the heads of state of France, Germany, Ukraine and Russia agreed to a ceasefire in East Ukraine until the end of the year. The talks in the so-called “Normandy format” notably excluded the United States and left all contentious issues in the conflicts unresolved. The civil war in East Ukraine was triggered by a US- and EU-backed far-right coup in Kiev in February 2014 and has claimed the lives of over 13,000 people and displaced over one million.

Both Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky and Russian president Vladimir Putin called the talks “a success.” A joint communiqué stated that “The sides commit to a full and comprehensive implementation of the cease-fire, strengthened by the implementation of all necessary cease-fire support measures, before the end of the year 2019.” They also agree on the exchange of 250 prisoners of war. The summit reportedly also involved an explicit endorsement by all participants of the Steinmeier Formula, a vague plan by the former German foreign minister and current president Frank-Walter Steinmeier aimed at realizing the 2015 Minsk Agreement.

However, there was no concrete agreement achieved on the status of the East Ukrainian separatist regions. Ukraine and Russia were also unable to agree on a new gas contract, leaving Ukraine in danger of running out of gas this winter. Another meeting within the Normandy format is scheduled to take place within the next four months.



Russian President Vladimir Putin, French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy arrive for a working session at the Elysee Palace Monday, Dec. 9, 2019 in Paris. (AP Photo/Thibault Camus, Pool)

Zelensky had been put under enormous domestic pressure from the US-backed far-right and substantial sections of the oligarchy seeking to prevent him from making any concessions to Russia. On Saturday and Sunday, thousands of supporters of the far-right in Ukraine gathered in Kiev to demonstrate against a rapprochement with Russia. The parties supporting the protests included the anti-Semitic neo-Nazi party Svoboda, which played an important role in the 2014 coup. Ex-President Petro Poroshenko addressed the far-right rally on Sunday.

The Ukrainian delegation in Paris included, apart from Zelensky, the interior minister of Ukraine, Arseny Avakov, who is notorious for his ties to the country's paramilitary fascist organizations and has been praised by Democrats in the impeachment inquiry against US President Donald Trump in Washington. Ruslan Homchak, the commander-in-chief of Ukraine's armed forces, was also part of the delegation.

Also on Saturday, US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper declared that the US Department of Defense was planning another tranche of \$250 million for Ukraine's military. The withholding of lethal aid to Ukraine's army and fascist paramilitary organizations, which are engaged in direct military conflict with Russia-backed separatists, has been at the center of the impeachment hearings against Trump.

The announcement on the eve of the talks in Paris constituted a thinly veiled warning to France and Germany not to make any significant changes to the line on Russia and

Ukraine. Kay Bailey Hutchison, the US ambassador to NATO, told the *Washington Examiner* ahead of the summit, “NATO is firmly committed to Ukraine. I believe the French are as well. We’ll all be there to make sure and work to strengthen Ukraine and not let anyone soften the approach to letting Ukraine be Ukraine.”

The summit had been aggressively pushed for by the French President Emmanuel Macron, who has met with Zelensky several times, both before and after the latter’s election as president. Under conditions of growing transatlantic tensions, Macron has been calling for NATO and the EU to “reconsider our position towards Russia.” In a recent interview with the *Economist*, Macron called NATO “brain-dead.” His criticisms of NATO and the US were sharply rebutted by US president Trump at the NATO summit just days before the Ukraine summit on Monday. (See also: **NATO summit dominated by growing inter-state conflicts**)

Berlin too has rejected Macron’s dismissal of NATO. Despite growing tensions with the US, including over the Russian-German pipeline Nord Stream 2, Germany has insisted on the need to maintain and strengthen NATO. Recent weeks have also seen a worsening of relations between Berlin and Moscow, with Germany expelling two Russian diplomats, accusing them of complicity in the murder of two Chechen separatist leaders. Ahead of the Ukraine summit, the German defense minister Heiko Maaß stressed that Russia had to give in to the demands posed by Ukraine, and that the Kremlin was to blame for the crisis in the country. At the summit, Merkel and Putin reportedly met one-on-one to discuss the recent diplomatic crisis.

The escalation of warfare within the US ruling class and the intensification of the conflicts between the imperialist powers occur amid the unraveling of the strategy that US imperialism has pursued in the region since the dissolution of the USSR in 1991: aiming to secure its world hegemony through control of the Eurasian landmass, the US has aggressively worked to encircle Russia, above all by extending NATO to its borders and through the enlargement of the EU. The East European EU member states, above all Poland and the Baltics, have been transformed into critical props of US militarism in the region.

Ukraine has historically been central to that strategy. The US has pumped massive resources into the operation of turning Ukraine into a reliable prop of NATO and the US against Russia. In 2004, sections of the Ukrainian oligarchy and upper middle class with funding and support of the CIA toppled a pro-Russian government in the so called

“Orange Revolution.” Then, in 2013-2014, the US and the EU supported the so-called Maidan movement which culminated in a fascist-led coup and the establishment of the Poroshenko regime.

Between 1991 and 2014, the US, according to former US Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, pumped some \$5 billion into Ukraine’s “civil society.” Since 2014, the US has spent another \$5 billion on Ukraine, according to congressional testimony in the impeachment hearings. The US military has also taken an active part in training and arming the Ukrainian army and paramilitary fascist organizations like the Azov battalion. (See also: **Who decided the US should fight a “hot war” with Russia?**)

This strategy, however, has failed to achieve its main goals. Ukraine remains mired in a civil war and the Putin regime has remained in place and continues to be a thorn in the eye of US foreign policy. Analysts widely agree that it is impossible to resolve the military stalemate in East Ukraine without turning what is now a proxy war into a direct war with Russia.

Polls among the East Ukrainian population have repeatedly indicated overwhelming hostility to an accession of the country to the EU and NATO, making it all but inconceivable that these territories be integrated without massive political and military conflicts in the country. Zelensky himself was voted into office in April largely on the basis of promises to end the widely hated war and discontinue the provocative anti-Russia policies of his predecessor Poroshenko.

Similarly, US efforts to prop up the right-wing liberal opposition in Russia and figures like Alexei Navalny and undermine the Putin regime through economic warfare in the form of sanctions have yielded only limited results.

The deadlock of US foreign policy in the region was spelled out in a recent piece in *Foreign Affairs*, the publication of the US Council of Foreign Relations, which advises US imperialism on its strategy. The journal noted, “Over the past quarter century, nearly all major efforts at establishing a durable post-Cold War order on the Eurasian continent have foundered on the shoals of Ukraine. For it is in Ukraine that the disconnect between triumphalist end-of-history delusions and the ongoing realities of great-power competition can be seen in its starkest form.”

The only solution offered by the advisors of US imperialism was to double down on a strategy that has proven both disastrous and dangerous, and escalate the war preparations against Russia and US involvement in the region. The piece concluded: “Washington’s

best option at this point is to strengthen its bilateral political and security ties with Ukraine while working closely with its European allies to ensure Ukraine's ability to protect its sovereignty... Above all else, Washington must protect the impeachment process from Russian interference and get past the illusion that it can promote a stable political order either at home or abroad without successfully navigating the shoals of Ukraine.”

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