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As COVID-19 surges in Europe, NATO steps up threats against Russia and China

As COVID-19 cases and variants spread across Europe, NATO foreign ministers met in two days of talks in Brussels that ended yesterday. The summit again exposed the NATO governments' utter contempt for human life.

NATO, the alliance between the United States, Canada and Europe that includes most of the world's wealthy countries, has seen over 1.3 million of its citizens die of COVID-19. Its collective military spending in 2020, of \$1.03 trillion, dwarfs the projected cost of vaccinating the world's population, projected at roughly \$100 billion. Yet the summit announced no new measures on the pandemic, launching instead a NATO 2030 initiative to prepare for nuclear war with Russia and China.



U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken delivers an address after a meeting of NATO foreign ministers at NATO headquarters in Brussels on Wednesday, March 24, 2021. (AP Photo/Virginia Mayo, Pool)

The first major NATO summit since Joe Biden's inauguration as US president, it was billed as an attempt to reaffirm US commitment to NATO after the public breakdown of relations between the European powers and Biden's predecessor, Donald Trump. Trump not only mocked NATO as "obsolete" but threatened European powers with hundreds of billions of dollars in trade war tariffs and speculated about using nuclear weapons in Europe.

The summit opened on Tuesday with a joint press conference between US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg.

Blinken began by stressing both the current "pivotal moment" for the NATO alliance and "the United States' steadfast commitment to that alliance. ... I've come to Brussels because the United States wants to rebuild our partnerships, first and foremost, with our NATO allies. We want to revitalize the alliance to make sure it's as strong and effective against the threats of today as it has been in the past."

The conference showed that NATO is trying to band together on a program of "herd immunity" against their populations at home and military threats abroad. They are plunging trillions into their militaries—made available by maintaining nonessential production and thus ensuring continued mass infections among workers—in order to further threaten Russia and China.

Stoltenberg set out the summit agenda. "I strongly welcome the Biden administration's message on rebuilding alliances and strengthening NATO. This is what our NATO 2030 initiative is all about. Because we face great global challenges: Russia's destabilizing activities, the threat of terrorism, cyber attacks and nuclear proliferation, disruptive technologies, and the rise of China, and the security impact of global warming and climate change."

He gave a second press conference that day, reporting, "I have proposed a substantial increase in common funding to support deterrence and defense, in our Alliance."

The claim that the NATO alliance supports deterrence—that is, policies to discourage the use of nuclear weapons—is a fraud. Its members, led by the United States, have scrapped multiple arms control treaties, including the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty in 2001 and the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces treaty in 2018, in order to escalate pressure on Russia and China. Stoltenberg dishonestly blamed the resulting nuclear arms race not on NATO, which canceled the arms control treaties, but on its targets.

He said that “the challenge is that we see that both Russia, but also China, they are implementing substantial modernization of their nuclear arsenals, the nuclear weapon systems.” He attacked, in particular, Russia’s decision to build mobile nuclear missile launchers to make it more difficult for NATO to destroy them in a first strike. “They reduce warning time [after launch], they are dual-capable, they are hard to track also because they are mobile.”

While calling for the adoption of a New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty), Stoltenberg also made extraordinary nuclear threats against Russia and China. Russia’s policy of building mobile missile launchers, he said, has “also reduced the threshold for any use of nuclear weapons in a potential conflict.” That is to say, since it is harder for NATO to find and destroy Russian and Chinese forces, it may turn more rapidly to using nuclear weapons to try to destroy any weapons located in large areas of Russia or China.

To drive the point home, Stoltenberg shamelessly hailed London, which recently announced plans for a 40 percent increase in its nuclear weapons stockpile, as a model. “The United Kingdom is also of course a strong supporter of strengthening international arms control, and a strong supporter of NATO being a key platform for addressing how we can make progress on arms control.”

Stoltenberg also reported that NATO discussed its current deployments of troops to occupy Afghanistan and Iraq.

Yesterday, in the final press conference, Stoltenberg denounced “new and destabilizing nuclear weapons,” which he attributed only to Russia and China. He said, “NATO has implemented the biggest reinforcement of our collective defence in a generation. We have stepped up our hybrid and cyber defences. ... Allies agree we should continue to review

and adapt our deterrence and defence, including when it comes to the growing Russian missile threat.”

Asked about international solidarity on distributing COVID-19 vaccines, Stoltenberg made clear this did not concern him. “Our armed forces are helping the civilian efforts in fighting the pandemic. But when it comes to the export and import of vaccines, that’s not an issue that has been discussed within the NATO framework.”

The summit exposes the barbaric conduct of the NATO powers. Facing the debacle of the endless wars they waged in Iraq and across the Middle East since the 1991 Gulf War, as well as the erosion of their economic weight compared to Asia, they reacted brutally to the pandemic. Treating it as a purely financial-military issue, NATO used “herd immunity” policies to ensure that profits would continue to flow to its banks and military hardware to its armies.

Against the risk of “China-centric globalization,” as the French daily *Le Monde* wrote approvingly in one article last year, Trump’s “herd immunity” policy was “the ‘business first’ option, sacrificing part of [America’s] population to not leave Chinese power with an open field.”

Now that millions have been thus “sacrificed” to imperialist financial and strategic interests, the NATO powers are stepping up efforts to bully their great power rivals. After Biden called Putin a “killer” last week, the European Union (EU) adopted sanctions targeting China based on bogus allegations of Chinese genocide against the Uighur ethnic minority in the region of Xinjiang.

For all the comments of Blinken and Stoltenberg rejoicing about NATO’s supposed unity now that Trump has left office, explosive divisions in the NATO alliance were also on full display in the vaccine debacle in Europe. Yesterday, after Italy blocked exports of AstraZeneca vaccines to Australia, police inspected an AstraZeneca plant in Italy at the EU Commission’s request. It has repeatedly charged AstraZeneca with improperly sending vaccines to Britain instead of the EU.

A ferocious nationalist conflict is emerging inside NATO over access to vaccines, even as trillions of dollars that could be spent on vaccines, health care and social distancing are being wasted on wars and nuclear weapons that could destroy all of humanity.

This week World Health Organization Director General Dr. Tedros Ghebreyesus condemned those, like the NATO states, that block vaccine exports “at the cost of the lives of health workers, older people and other at-risk groups in other countries.” It not only leads to mass deaths but encourages the emergence of vaccine-resistant variants that then spread internationally, he noted.

He explained, “The world’s poorest countries wonder whether rich countries really mean what they say when they talk about solidarity. The inequitable distribution of vaccines is not just a moral outrage. It’s also economically and epidemiologically self-defeating. Some countries are racing to vaccinate their entire populations while other countries have nothing. This may buy short-term security, but it is a false sense of security.”

The criminality of NATO policy is the product of the bankruptcy of an entire social order. Pointing in its perspective yesterday to the NATO powers’ ongoing nuclear buildup, the WSWWS wrote, “This barbarism, accompanied by the promotion of nationalism and chauvinism, is the product of the same capitalist social order that has condemned millions to die from a pandemic that could have been prevented in the first place and contained once it erupted.”

The central question it raises is the building of a socialist movement against war and for a scientific treatment of the pandemic in the international working class.

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