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“We have no way further to retreat,” says Putin, as NATO escalates military build-up on Russia’s borders

In an extraordinary speech on Tuesday before Russia’s officer corps, the entire Defense Ministry as well as cadets of military schools, President Vladimir Putin made clear that the Russian government is preparing for a potential war with NATO.



Russian President Vladimir Putin gestures while speaking during his annual news conference in Moscow, Russia, Thursday, Dec. 23, 2021. (AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko)

For much of the speech, Putin highlighted case after case in the past three decades in which the US has bombed countries, in complete disregard of international law and

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previous agreements. He pointed to Iraq, Libya and Syria and, in particular, the bombing of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Putin also accused the US of supporting ISIS and other Islamist terrorist organizations, including in separatist Islamist movements in Russia's North Caucasus.

In recent weeks, Putin has made several major public statements, invoking the danger of a "Yugoslavian scenario"—that is, the break-up of the country through a combination of ethnic conflicts, civil wars and imperialist bombardments—repeating itself, on a much larger scale, in Russia.

Putin indicated that the Kremlin fears that the US, working together with the government in Kiev, is preparing a military provocation with chemical weapons. Pointing to the situation in Ukraine, where a US- and EU-backed coup in 2014 toppled a pro-Russian government, triggering an ongoing civil war and massive build-up of NATO on Russia's borders, Putin said that NATO must understand that "We have no way further to retreat," this is "right before our doorstep."

Putin warned, "In case of continuation of the rather aggressive line of our Western colleagues, we will respond with adequate military-technical measures, [we] will react harshly to the unfriendly steps."

Yet while stating that any written contracts or agreements with the US and NATO were effectively worthless, he doubled down on the need for NATO to sign just such an agreement with "guarantees" to Russia that it would acknowledge certain "red lines." Underscoring just how desperate a situation the Kremlin oligarchy sees itself in, Putin cried that the NATO powers must give, "Something, at least something."

A few days before Putin's speech, the Kremlin issued a list of guarantees that it wants NATO to provide, including to stop further arming of Ukraine in the military stand-off with pro-Russian separatists in East Ukraine, and to cease stepping up its troop deployment to Eastern Europe. The Russian government also demands that NATO issue a written guarantee that it would never accept Ukraine as a member state.

US and EU officials have already indicated that they regard many of these demands as “unacceptable.” The US and Russia are scheduled to resume negotiations about the conflict over Ukraine early next year.

The same day that Putin gave his speech, the Biden administration met to discuss new sanctions in the case of a war between Russia and Ukraine, which would hit the Russian economy on a hitherto unprecedented scale. The sanctions now being discussed include the banning of any exports of Apple products, as well as technology that is critical to the aircraft and automobile industry of Russia, two of its largest industrial sectors.

Earlier reports by CNN and BBC indicated that the US and EU are also considering cutting off Russia from the SWIFT agreement, the main basis for international financial transfers, which are critical to the operations of Russian banks and companies in the world economy. Such a move is widely described as the “nuclear” option in economic warfare by the imperialist powers and would threaten a near-total collapse of the already fragile and crisis-ridden Russian economy.

Just a few days earlier, the US Congress passed a record war budget of \$770 billion, focused on preparing for war against China and Russia.

NATO has also continued to step up its provocations and war preparations on Russia’s borders in recent weeks. According to a report by the German *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, US general Tod Wolters proposed on December 7 that 6,000 troops from NATO’s “spearhead” unit should be mobilized so that, in case of war, they can be moved within just five days into a “crisis region”. Usually, the time foreseen for such deployments is at least seven days. The spearhead unit is currently stationed in Turkey but will be based in Germany in 2023. Other special and logistical units have also been put on high alert.

In an indication of bitter conflicts behind the scenes within the oligarchy over how to respond to the growing pressure from imperialism, the Russian business daily *Kommersant*, the Russian equivalent of the British *Financial Times* or American *Wall Street Journal*, had a lead article on Putin’s speech that was drenched with cynical comments, and compared Putin’s warnings of a provocation with chemical weapons by the US in Ukraine, with Colin Powell’s notorious lie about weapons of mass destructions in Iraq.

The piece warned that “this is already not the Cold War, everything has become a lot hotter” and concluded with the sardonic comment that it would “be nice to have an assurance that there will be a new year.”

While Putin, not without foundation, is warning of the repetition of the Yugoslavian catastrophe on a much bigger scale in the former Soviet Union, the truth is that the Russian oligarchy has no progressive response whatsoever to the ever-growing danger of war. It is revealing that the 30-year anniversary of the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union on December 26 has been largely passed over in silence by the Russian media and went entirely unmentioned by Putin.

The Putin regime and the ruling oligarchy as a whole have emerged out of the Soviet bureaucracy that betrayed the October Revolution for decades, and liquidated the USSR in 1991. When the US attacked Iraq in January 1991, ushering in a three-decades-long period of imperialist wars of plunder, they did so with the acquiescence of the Moscow bureaucracy.

Focused on the destruction of the Soviet state and the plunder of its social resources, robbery that was carried out hand-in-glove with the American bourgeoisie, the newly emerging oligarchy in Russia was caught up in the delusional belief in the possibility of peaceful cooperation with imperialism. Yet all the agreements and assurances from NATO, including that it would not move closer to Russia’s borders, were blown to pieces within years.

Now, that the imperialist powers are openly preparing for war against Russia, the only response from the Putin regime is a combination of endless begging for what Putin himself recognizes are worthless assurances, on the one hand, and the promotion of nationalism and a military build-up, on the other.

The utter bankruptcy of the oligarchy’s response to the threat of an imperialist assault is determined by its class interests. The biggest enemy that it sees itself confronted with is the Russian and international working class, not imperialism. On all critical matters of class policy, above all the social counterrevolution of recent decades, and the homicidal response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian oligarchy has, in fact, been mirroring the policies of the American and European ruling class.

The only social and political constituency for the fight against imperialist war is the working class. This fight needs to be connected with a determined struggle for the elimination of the COVID-19 pandemic and the root cause for war and mass death, the capitalist system. This struggle, above all, requires the building of a revolutionary leadership in the working class that is rooted in the critical historical experiences of the struggle of the Trotskyist movement against Stalinism.

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