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NATO tanks in Ukraine: Prelude to a US-Russia shooting war

On Wednesday, President Joe Biden announced that the United States would send 31 Abrams heavy tanks to Ukraine, after German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said Germany would send 14 Leopard 2 tanks as part of the shipment of over 100 main battle tanks from NATO countries.

The decision to send main battle tanks into the conflict is intended to set in motion a chain of events that will justify an ever greater involvement of NATO troops and aircraft, up to and including a shooting war with Russia.

The significance of Biden's announcement lies less in the battlefield impact of the tanks than in the consequences of deploying them. The turbine-driven Abrams tanks will require a massive logistical network inside Ukraine, involving large numbers of specialist American contractors. Attacks on these supply networks and American personnel servicing the tanks will then be used to press for implementation of a "no-fly zone" and the deployment of US and NATO troops to Ukraine.

Immediately following Biden's announcement, retired four-star General Barry McCaffrey, appearing on MSNBC, made an offhand comment that revealed the essential content of the announcement.

Countering the argument made earlier by military officials that the Abrams was too complex to send to Ukraine, McCaffrey declared, "Of course the Ukrainians, with civilian contractor support, can maintain these Abrams."

Who are these "civilian contractors" if they are not "Ukrainians?" McCaffrey was never asked.



At least 10 civilian contractors watch closely as a crane lowers a 30-ton turret back onto an Abrams M1A2 in Camp Arifjan, Kuwait. [Photo: US Department of Defense]

America's vast fleet of M1 Abrams tanks is serviced by civilian contractors at Army bases throughout the world, and these civilian contractors are generally Americans with specialized knowledge and skills, including direct employees of General Dynamics and other major arms manufacturers. The Abrams, the Army's most complex vehicle, requires about eight man-hours of maintenance for every hour it serves in operation.

In explaining why the US military was reluctant to send the Abrams tank last year, the *Washington Post* noted, "A senior US defense official... said that... It is hard for the United States to maintain the Abrams tanks and their sophisticated turbine engine... For the Ukrainians, the official said, it would be impossible."

Of course, it would be impossible, unless, as McCaffrey indicates, a large number of American civilian contractors already trained on the Abrams were sent alongside the tanks.

Thousands of civilian maintenance personnel from NATO countries will be deployed to Ukraine, along with the creation of massive supply chains for the specialized high-tech, precision parts required to keep the machines in operation, stretching hundreds of miles from the eastern front through Poland and to US bases in Germany.

These supply lines and American personnel will likely become targets of Russian attacks on the weapons systems flowing into Ukraine. The demand, first raised early in the war, to "close the skies" and initiate a no-fly zone will quickly be raised by the entire US media, in order to "save the lives" of Americans deployed in Ukraine.

Like clockwork, Wednesday's announcement was accompanied by demands in the press for sending F-16 and other fourth-generation NATO fighter aircraft.

“Tanks won’t be enough: Ukraine needs F-16 jets to win,” wrote former UK commander Greg Bagwell in the *Telegraph*. “There is a military axiom that only armies can take and hold ground. It is also true that armies don’t take or hold ground for long without air support.” The former RAF commander implied if the US sends tanks, it will have to send F-16s as well.

“The next big hurdle will now be the fighter jets,” Yuriy Sak, an adviser for Defence Minister Oleksiy Reznikov, told Reuters. “They didn’t want to give us heavy artillery, then they did. They didn’t want to give us Himars systems, then they did. They didn’t want to give us tanks, now they’re giving us tanks. Apart from nuclear weapons, there is nothing left that we will not get.”

Plans for supplying NATO jets are already underway. The *Financial Times* reported that Lockheed Martin has already increased production of F-16 fighters to compensate for countries planning to transfer them to Ukraine. The company is “going to be ramping up production on F-16s in Greenville [South Carolina] to get to the place where we will be able to backfill pretty capably,” said Frank St. John, chief operating officer of Lockheed Martin.

The deployment of openly offensive weapons to Ukraine has blown apart the White House’s fiction that “This is a war between Russia and Ukraine,” and that “NATO is not involved.”

Speaking before the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg on Tuesday, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock acknowledged the basic truth when she declared, “We are fighting a war against Russia and not against each other.”

The fact that the NATO war against Russia is undeclared—by both Germany and America—is entirely par for the course. The United States has not declared a single war it fought since World War II. The Korean, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan wars were all waged without a congressional war declaration.

Since the start of the war in Ukraine, every public statement coming out of the White House has been aimed at keeping the American people in the dark about the government’s plans to massively escalate the war.

In March, Biden promised the public that the US would not send “offensive equipment” and “tanks” to Ukraine, because this would trigger “World War III.” If we take Biden’s statements of last March literally, then the decision to send tanks to Ukraine is, in fact, a decision to begin “World War III.”

The NATO powers have decided to cast the die of war, seeking through the military defeat, conquest, break-up and exploitation of Russia to solve the myriad crises confronting the capitalist oligarchies.

While sections of the US political establishment may believe that the Kremlin will not respond to the deployment of tanks, the conflict has a logic of its own. The Putin government, representing sections of the Russian oligarchy, hoped that its invasion of Ukraine would result in some form of accommodation with the imperialist powers. It confronts internal crisis and demands by factions of the Russian ruling class for a major escalation.

The risk of the development of the war into a nuclear exchange, and what Biden himself referred to as “Armageddon,” is raised to a new level at every point in the escalation.

As the US and NATO powers implement their war policies, they do everything they can to keep the broad mass of the population unaware of the consequences. Biden’s perfunctory 10-minute-long remarks on Wednesday announcing a major new stage in the war were delivered in the middle of the day, without even the pretense of questions from the media.

The Biden administration is well aware that, beyond the Republican and Democratic politicians, the ruling elite and privileged sections of the upper-middle class, there is no broad support for war.

The immense danger of the situation, however, is that popular opposition to war is not politically organized. It is urgently necessary to unify the growing struggles of the working class that are erupting throughout the world with the struggle against war, and to arm these struggles with the socialist program of abolishing the capitalist system that is the root cause of war.

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