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Alex Lantier

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Stoltenberg calls for Ukraine to join NATO amid escalation of conflict with Russia

US and NATO officials met at Ramstein Air Base in Germany yesterday to coordinate new arms deliveries to Ukraine ahead of a planned Ukrainian spring offensive, a day after NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg went to Kiev and said Ukraine should join NATO.

These provocative actions all point to the growing risk of an escalation in which the leading NATO imperialist powers would intervene in the war to directly attack Russia. Indeed, were Ukraine admitted into the NATO alliance today, it could invoke Article 5 of the alliance treaty to demand that all NATO member states declare war on Russia. The immediate actions decided by NATO, to set up supply lines to deliver battle tanks and other heavy arms to Ukraine, also raise the risk of a clash between Russian and NATO forces.



NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg answers reporter's questions during a press statement prior to the meeting of the 'Ukraine Defense Contact Group' at Ramstein Air Base in Ramstein, Germany, Friday, April 21, 2023. (AP Photo/Matthias Schrader)

“Ukraine’s future is in NATO. All allies agree on that,” Stoltenberg said on Thursday in Kiev. He added that Ukraine’s NATO membership would be “high on the agenda” of NATO’s July summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, and that NATO has already spent €150 billion on arming Ukraine. “Allies are now delivering more jets, tanks and armored vehicles,” he said. “NATO stands with you today, tomorrow and for as long as it takes.”

Russian government spokesman Dmitri Peskov replied that Ukraine’s joining NATO would “pose a serious and significant danger to our country, to the security of our country.”

Arriving in Ramstein for the Ukraine Defense Contact Group meeting yesterday, Stoltenberg pledged to “ensure that Ukraine prevails” in the war. He confirmed that Ukraine functions militarily as part of NATO in all but name, saying: “I also expect NATO allies to agree a multi-year program to help Ukraine transition from Soviet-era equipment, standards, doctrines to NATO standards and doctrines, and to ensure full interoperability between Ukrainian forces and NATO forces.”

Significantly, Stoltenberg suggested NATO is not confident that Ukraine’s spring offensive will end the war, and is planning a broader conflict. He said, “Hopefully, the Ukrainians are able to make a lot of progress and you can have a just and an enduring peace soon. But no one can say that with certainty. So we need to be prepared for the long haul.”

He made clear that already massive arms deliveries will be escalated: “Maybe it sounds a bit more boring, but ... this is now a battle of attrition, and a battle of attrition becomes a war of logistics.”

Stoltenberg said NATO must “ensure that Ukraine has the military strength, the capabilities, the deterrence to prevent new attacks, because you have to remember that the war didn't start in February last year. The war started in 2014, when Russia illegally annexed Crimea, and when Russia for the first time moved into eastern Donbas. And then we had the full-scale invasion in February [2022].”

After the meeting, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley gave a press conference. Austin denounced “Russia’s reckless and lawless invasion” of Ukraine in February 2022 and said: “In just a few short months, the Contact Group has delivered more than 230 tanks, more than 1,550 armored

vehicles and other equipment and munitions to support more than nine new armored brigades.”

Austin and Milley were repeatedly questioned by NATO reporters on the state of the Ukrainian armed forces and whether the planned spring offensive could start. Milley said that, beyond tanks and artillery ammunition, for Ukraine “the most critical thing right now, is that air defense system, to make sure that it is robust, it's rigorous, it's deep ... That's the most important, critical military task right now. That was the theme of this entire day, was air defense, air defense, air defense, to make sure that Ukraine can defend its airspace.”

He also said that US Abrams tanks, on which Ukrainian troops will begin training in two weeks, “they’ll be very effective. But I would also caution, there’s no silver bullet in war.” One of the principal technical difficulties facing NATO tank deliveries to Ukraine is the massive logistics chain of parts and supplies necessary to keep Abrams or Leopard tanks in combat. Yesterday, German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius announced that Germany, Poland and Ukraine have signed an agreement to build a hub in Poland to repair Leopard tanks sent to the war in Ukraine. The cost of building the hub is estimated at around €200 million.

NATO officials and media are presenting their utterly reckless policy of NATO military escalation against Russia based on relentless propaganda lies. Russian President Vladimir Putin’s invasion of Ukraine last year is based on a reactionary Russian-nationalist strategy that enormously escalated the fighting in the region. But this invasion was not a sudden, unprovoked act of aggression; nor was the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014.

The war in Ukraine is the product of decades of imperialist war and intrigues made possible by the Stalinist bureaucracy’s dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. This not only paved the way for decades of NATO wars near the former USSR’s southern and western borders, in Yugoslavia, the Middle East and Central Asia. It also let US and NATO officials spend billions of euros on building up far-right, anti-Russian Ukrainian-nationalist groups who ultimately carried out a NATO-backed putsch in Kiev in 2014.

The vote to rejoin Russia in Crimea, which is overwhelmingly Russian-speaking, came after the newly-installed NATO-backed regime in Kiev sent far-right militias to attack Russian-speaking areas in southern and eastern Ukraine. The areas of Donetsk and Luhansk in the largely Russian-speaking Donbas seceded amid fighting between local militias and far-right Ukrainian militias like the neo-Nazi Azov Battalion. Fighting continued in the region until the Russian invasion last year.

Now, NATO officials are investing enormous resources in the planned spring offensive to retake parts of southern and eastern Ukraine held by Russian troops. This aims above all to fill the gaps in Ukrainian forces left by catastrophic losses they suffered fighting Russian troops around Bakhmut, after which Ukrainian losses are estimated to run into the hundreds of thousands.

While the spring offensive itself poses an enormous risk of escalation into direct Russia-NATO clash if it is successful, many indications suggest that it could lead to a debacle for Ukraine. The only way to avoid a complete Ukrainian collapse would then be for NATO powers to directly intervene in the conflict against Russia.

After the publication two weeks ago of leaked US military documents suggesting that Ukraine is in a far weaker position than the US press has admitted, many reports indicate that the Ukrainian forces may be heading for a bloody defeat.

El Pais—a daily close to Spain's ruling social-democrats, who have aggressively participated in the NATO war, arming the neo-Nazi Azov Battalion—admitted that Russian forces outgun Ukrainian forces 10 to 1 in heavy artillery. While Ukraine is straining to receive hundreds of NATO tanks, Russia is thought to still have several thousand operational tanks and nearly 10,000 tanks in reserve despite losses suffered in the war.

Moreover, it added that Ukrainian forces, many newly-recruited and given brief training on complex weapon systems, are walking into the largest defensive works built in Europe since World War II.

It wrote, "Nothing like it has been seen in Europe since 1945: ... 800 kilometers of trenches, anti-tank ditches, dragon's teeth (reinforced concrete obstacles to hinder armored vehicles), concrete machine-gun nests and bunkers today form a defensive line protecting the territory occupied by Russia in Ukraine. Since last summer, the invading forces have been constructing a massive defensive barrier to hold off the expected Ukrainian counteroffensive."

The response of the NATO powers to fears of a looming Ukrainian debacle is to threaten escalation. Polish officials have repeatedly stated that they would be prepared to enter the conflict, with Polish Ambassador to France Jan Emeryk Rościszewski telling the French LCI station: "If Ukraine does not defend its independence, we will have no other choice, we will be forced to enter the conflict."

These events point to the imminent danger of the eruption of a Third World War across Europe, and the urgent necessity of mobilizing the working class and youth in a movement against imperialist war.

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