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As NATO moves to allow Ukraine to bomb Russia with its weapons, Kremlin floats possible Ukraine cease-fire

Yesterday, as the Ukrainian regime fired a wave of US-supplied, long-range ATACMS missiles at Russian forces in Crimea, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg called for a vast escalation of the war, in which Ukraine would use NATO missiles to bomb Russia.

NATO's escalation, in response to the accelerating collapse of the Ukrainian armed forces, is rapidly exposing its own lies about the war. As Stoltenberg made his remarks to *The Economist*, Reuters was publishing a collection of interviews with top associates of Russian President Vladimir Putin, appealing to the NATO powers for a cease-fire and warning of the danger of nuclear war. It is not Moscow, but the NATO powers led by Washington that are driving the war, threatening the rapid outbreak of total war in Europe and worldwide.



Smoke rises after a Russian attack in Kharkiv, Ukraine, Friday, May 17, 2024. [AP Photo/Evgeniy Maloletka]

Echoing remarks by US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and UK Foreign Secretary David Cameron, Stoltenberg called for Ukraine to use long-range NATO missiles to bomb Russia. "The time has come for allies to consider whether they should lift some of the restrictions

they have put on the use of weapons they have donated to Ukraine,” he said. He added, “to deny Ukraine the possibility of using these weapons against legitimate military targets on Russian territory makes it very hard for them to defend themselves.”

“We will not be party to the conflict,” Stoltenberg promised. However, he promptly argued that NATO should give Ukraine a blank check to use its weapons for whatever strikes it pleases against targets in Russia, stating: “Ukraine has the right to defend themselves. And that includes striking targets on Russian territory.”

Stoltenberg hides his reckless proposal for escalation behind the lie that this will not involve NATO in a shooting war with Russia. But in ruling circles, this is well known to be false. The leak of a call between German military officers revealed that US and British troops are already in Ukraine to help Ukrainian troops target missiles launched against Russia. On this basis, Russian officials have threatened to attack NATO countries giving Ukraine weapons to bomb Russia.

Stoltenberg argued that improving NATO’s strategy meant taking all necessary measures to inflict a humiliating and devastating defeat upon Russia. The problem with current strategy, he claimed, is that NATO governments want “Ukraine to win in a way that Russia does not lose.”

A central difficulty the ruling elites face is deep popular opposition to direct NATO involvement in the war. Polls show 68 percent of Frenchmen, 80 percent of Germans and 90 percent of Poles oppose moves like sending troops to Ukraine that could lead to total war. However, there remains a substantial underestimation in the population of the danger that the NATO imperialist powers will succeed in triggering such a war in the near future.

Stoltenberg advanced a justification for attacking Russia, even if Russia had not physically attacked NATO. Claiming that NATO allegations of Russian cyber attacks could trigger an invocation of Article 5 of the NATO treaty to justify war, he said: “If there’s a magnitude [reached in Russian cyber attacks] ... then we can trigger Article 5 and respond in cyber, but also in other domains to protect the NATO allies.”

This statement is staggering. Cyber attacks are extremely difficult to trace, and a cyber attack could easily be launched from computers based in Russia by someone outside Russia; however, this would nonetheless still serve, by Stoltenberg’s reasoning, as a justification for NATO military action against Russia. In an act of utter and monumental recklessness, he is providing a rationale for military aggression against a major nuclear-armed power.

NATO officials’ calls for military action that Moscow has said will lead to total war shows that, in the ruling classes of key NATO countries, the decision for war with Russia has

already been taken. Leading politicians in NATO member states are admitting that such a war is being actively planned.

Yesterday, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban told Russian state media outlet RT: “What is happening today in Brussels and Washington... looks like warming up for a possible direct military conflict. We can safely call it the preparation of Europe’s entry into the war.” He added, according to RT, that “there are working groups within NATO that are assessing the best ways for the bloc to further boost its participation in the conflict.”

Orban claimed his government wants to find ways to avoid becoming involved in the war that NATO is feverishly planning against Russia: “Hungary’s position must be redefined, our lawyers and officials are working on ways to allow Hungary to continue to exist as a NATO member without participating in NATO activities outside the bloc’s territory. We need to create a new approach, a new definition for our position as a pro-peace force within NATO.”

These promises are worthless. If NATO attacks Russia, Hungary—like other Eastern European states whose leaders express concerns over the war, such as Slovakia and Bulgaria—will be swept up in a continent-wide and global war and devastated, whatever their governments’ legal position. Unless the war is rapidly stopped, moreover, they and most of the world will be incinerated by nuclear weapons.

There is no national path to averting the catastrophe NATO is setting into motion. The disastrous implications of the Stalinist regimes’ dissolution of the Soviet Union and their restoration of capitalism across Eastern Europe in 1989-1991 are ever more apparent. The imperialist powers were allowed to play the ex-Soviet republics off against each other, using Ukraine as a base for war with Russia, and Eastern Europe joined a NATO alliance that, under rhetoric about human rights and democracy, ruthlessly wages imperialist wars.

The bankruptcy of any nationally-based opposition to imperialism emerges clearly in the policy of Putin. He launched his reactionary invasion of Ukraine in 2022 to try to compel the NATO powers to negotiate a deal with him to stop arming Ukraine against Russia, hoping that Russia’s vast military power would bring the NATO powers to the negotiating table. But this proved to be an illusion. Even as Russia’s military crushes NATO-armed Ukrainian units on the battlefield, the NATO powers are doubling down on plans for regime change or war against Russia.

Yesterday, Reuters carried a report titled “Putin wants Ukraine ceasefire on current front lines,” based on interviews with five top Russian officials it described as “familiar with discussions in Putin’s entourage” or as having “worked with Putin.” These individuals all

stressed that the Kremlin does not plan to press its military advantage to seize large amounts of Ukrainian territory and is desperate for a ceasefire with NATO.

“Putin can fight for as long as it takes, but Putin is also ready for a ceasefire—to freeze the war,” one source told Reuters. This person, Reuters added, said Putin “had expressed frustration to a small group of advisers about what he views as Western-backed attempts to stymie negotiations and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy’s decision to rule out talks.”

Another source, stressing that Russia’s current offensive does not aim to crush the Ukrainian army and regime, promised: “Putin will slowly conquer territories until [Ukrainian President Volodymyr] Zelenskiy comes up with an offer to stop” the war.

These sources stressed that Putin is concerned about popular opposition inside Russia to being drafted for the war, and also about nuclear war. “Two of the sources cited Russian concerns about the growing danger of escalation with the West, including nuclear escalation, over the Ukraine standoff,” Reuters reported, adding: “Three sources said Putin understood any dramatic new advances would require another nationwide mobilisation, which he didn’t want.”

The comments of Stoltenberg, Blinken and Cameron show, however, that the NATO powers have no interest in reaching a deal with Putin. They are targeting Russia and Putin in a war for regime change. A catastrophic escalation of what has in effect already emerged as a Third World War in Europe can only be averted by the building of a mass, socialist movement against imperialist war in the working class, unifying workers in struggle against both the NATO governments and their allies, and Putin’s post-Soviet Russian capitalist regime.