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Alex Lantier, Johannes Stern
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EU imposes sanctions on Russia as NATO escalates troop deployments

Yesterday, as Russian forces bombed targets in Ukraine and attacked Ukrainian troops and far-right militias in the east of the country, the European Union (EU) agreed to impose “very massive, very strong” sanctions on Russia, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian reported last night. This came as Washington deployed 7,000 more US troops to Germany, and the NATO alliance built up its forces all along the western borders of Russia and Ukraine.



European Union leaders gather during a round table meeting at an extraordinary EU summit on Ukraine at the European Council building in Brussels, Thursday, Feb 24, 2022. (Olivier Hoslet, Pool Photo via AP)

The NATO imperialist powers are clearly responding to the Russian attacks in Ukraine not by seeking to avert a broader war but to intensify economic and military pressure on Russia, risking escalation to a global war directly between the major nuclear powers.

EU sanctions will target Russian energy and transport firms, financial firms, and trade in so-called “dual use” goods, that is, civilian goods that have direct military applications. The EU is also ending the granting of visas to Russian citizens and preparing new sanctions targeting the financial assets of Russian firms and individuals. Russian assets and property in the EU are to be seized, and the access of Russian banks and the Russian state to financing in Europe suspended.

Several EU countries, including Germany, Italy and Cyprus, opposed calls to suspend Russian access to the SWIFT inter-bank payment system, which would end Russia’s ability to make payments in US dollars, freezing it out of most international financial markets. Asked about this threat, however, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz made clear it was still an option, declaring: “We need to keep sanctions ready for later times.”

Suspending Russian access to SWIFT, described in the financial press as the “nuclear option,” threatens an all-out EU energy and trade blockade of Russia, which provides the EU with 36 percent of its natural gas. This would be a devastating blow to the world economy, triggering an explosive rise in energy prices in Europe and beyond. It would, moreover, vastly intensify price inflation that is already devastating workers’ living standards and threaten a collapse of world trade.

This underscores that the Russian invasion of Ukraine is not simply the product, as broad layers of European media present it, of the scheming of Russian President Vladimir Putin. It is the bankrupt and reactionary nationalist response of the Kremlin to an intractable political and economic crisis of the entire world capitalist system. It is, however, the NATO imperialist powers that hold the militarily and financially stronger position on a world scale and that play the most aggressive role.

The NATO alliance is activating unspecified emergency plans to accelerate the deployment of tens of thousands of troops to the borders of Ukraine and Russia. Yesterday, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said: “Today, the North Atlantic Council decided to activate our defense plans at the request of our top military

commander, General Tod Wolters. ... [This] will enable us to deploy capabilities and forces, including the NATO Response Force, to where they are needed.”

The NATO Response Force is a 40,000-strong rapid response force made up of troops from several NATO countries, deployed as part of the alliance’s Crisis Reaction Measures plan. A 5,000-strong Franco-German brigade that is part of this force is already on high alert. Yesterday, Washington also announced the deployment of 7,000 more US troops to Germany in a state of high alert, 300 soldiers to Latvia and F-35 fighter jets to Estonia and Lithuania.

It is apparent, moreover, that a far-reaching militarization of the NATO countries themselves is underway, as NATO asks European governments to take unspecified emergency measures.

Yesterday, the German Defense Ministry said: “Due to current events, NATO has called on its member states to take further Crisis Response Measures, a catalog of measures to be taken in event of crisis. ... Based on NATO triggering rapid response measures, the [German] Federal Ministry of Defense has now triggered so-called national alert measures.” It added that the “population may notice more military movements in public areas over the next few days. There may also be transport restrictions, as land, sea and air transport must be kept available for military purposes.”

Emergency measures are indubitably being taken by Polish, Slovak, Hungarian and Romanian authorities in order to deploy troops to greet thousands of desperate Ukrainian refugees, who are fleeing the Russian invasion into EU countries on Ukraine’s western border.

It is also apparent, however, that the major NATO powers are preparing a military escalation targeting Russia that threatens an outbreak of global nuclear conflict, as well as an escalation of emergency measures at home. Already, it has deployed so-called “battlegroups” in Poland and the Baltic states, which are now also to deploy to Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia and Hungary. Le Drian himself baldly warned Russia yesterday: “NATO is also a nuclear alliance.”

In this conflict, the NATO imperialist powers are indubitably the main aggressor. They have worked systematically to encircle Russia since the Stalinist bureaucracy dissolved the Soviet Union 30 years ago. After Moscow emerged as an obstacle to NATO proxy wars in Syria and the Middle East, Washington and Berlin organized a coup in Kiev, led by fascist forces such as the Svoboda Party and the Right Sector, to install an anti-Russian regime in Kiev. Since then, NATO has tightened the noose around Russia.

The *World Socialist Web Site* rejects and opposes the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which will not stop the NATO offensive against Russia but rather intensify the danger of a Third World War. Its opposition to the reactionary Russian nationalism of the Putin regime does not, however, entail any lessening of its irreconcilable opposition to the lies and hypocrisy the imperialist powers use to justify their campaign against Russia.

The European powers are rushing to put their long cherished rearmament plans into action, while moving to eliminate all public health measures against the COVID-19 pandemic, which still claims over 20,000 lives across Europe every week. Above all, the German ruling class, which waged a barbaric war of extermination against the Soviet Union in World War II, is going on the offensive even as over 200,000 people fall ill with COVID-19 every day in Germany.

In an extraordinary statement Thursday, the German Army's highest ranking officer, Lieutenant General Alfons Mais, called for massively rearming against Russia. "I would not have believed in my 41st year of service in peace that I would have to experience another war. And the Bundeswehr, the army I have the privilege of leading, is more or less bare," the general wrote on the LinkedIn network. "The options we can offer the politicians to support the alliance are extremely limited."

"This does not feel good! I'm pissed off!" Mais fumed, adding that "now is the time" to "structurally and materially ... reorganize" the army.

The media is in propaganda mode, insisting that a new era of war calls for the embrace of force. "The European order, which gave the continent three decades of relative security and stability after the end of the Cold War, is breaking up. A new, dangerous era is beginning," *Der Spiegel* writes, asserting that in such times, one must "say goodbye to

some cherished life lies.” This includes “the assumption that all conflicts can be solved through persuasion.”

That is unmistakable: Don’t talk, but fight! *Der Spiegel* continues by demanding, “Europeans have to come to terms with the idea that the military is also a factor in 21st century politics. Many thought the fate of nations was determined solely by economic data, technology, artificial intelligence.” Briefly seeming to applaud the Russian invasion, it enthuses that Putin is showing “that politics can also be made with much more archaic means: tanks, fighter jets, artillery.”

To prevent the ruling class from plunging the planet into the abyss, the growing popular opposition against war, social inequality and the mass infection policy in the pandemic must be imbued with a clear political perspective. As the International Committee of the Fourth International explained in its statement, “Socialism and the fight against war” the critical issue is the building of an antiwar movement in the international working class, independent of all capitalist regimes and parties, fighting against capitalism and for socialism.

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