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NATO plays Russian roulette with nuclear weapons

Three weeks into the Ukraine war, all of the sides involved are taking ever greater risks. The hitherto unthinkable, a nuclear exchange in Europe, is being openly considered and built up as a threat. Voices of caution, restraint and appeals to reason have largely fallen silent. Despite the looming catastrophe, NATO is not prepared to compromise.

In a televised speech the day before the invasion of Ukraine, the Russian president Vladimir Putin had already issued this threat: “Whoever tries to get in our way and create further threats to our country and our people must know that Russia’s response will come immediately and will lead to consequences without precedent in history. All the necessary decisions have been taken. I hope you hear my words.”

This was a clear reference to Russia’s nuclear arsenal which, according to the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, consists of more than 6,000 warheads, 900 of which are immediately operational, according to NATO.

Instead of de-escalating the situation, however, NATO has poured oil onto the fire. It has categorically rejected Putin’s request for security guarantees, which the latter—following decades of NATO eastward expansion, extensive NATO manoeuvres along the Russian border and direct NATO interference in Ukraine and Georgia—must have taken as an existential threat.

Since the beginning of the war, NATO has done everything in its power to cut off any chance of retreat for Putin—ranging from draconian economic sanctions to the threat of

dragging him before an international tribunal. NATO is not waging war itself in name only. It is flooding Ukraine with high-tech weapons, concentrating its own troops on the border and intervening ever more directly in the war.

So far, the alliance has shied away from open military action against Russia. On March 11, US President Joe Biden insisted on Twitter that “we will defend every inch of NATO territory with the full might of a united and galvanized NATO.” He rejected direct military intervention in Ukraine, however, writing: “A direct confrontation between NATO and Russia is World War III. And something we must strive to prevent.”

But even this hurdle is disappearing rapidly. Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky, several Eastern European heads of government, as well as other political figures in Europe and the US, are emphatically calling for the establishment of a no-fly zone, which would be tantamount to NATO officially entering the war.



Thomas Enders 2018 at the ILA Schönefeld (Image: Matti Blume / CC BY-SA 4.0 / Wikimedia)

Thomas Enders, CEO of Airbus until 2019 and since then president of the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), is particularly aggressive in this respect. “Establishing such a no-fly zone over western Ukraine is not just feasible; it is necessary,” he wrote in an article for Politico. “It is time for the West to expose Putin’s nuclear threats for what they really are—a bluff to deter Western governments from military intervention.”

What, however, if Putin's nuclear threats are not a bluff? What if he makes good on them because his back is against the wall? Kaliningrad is only 530 kilometres from Berlin. The nuclear-capable medium-range missiles stationed there would take just four-and-a-half minutes to reach the German capital with its almost four million inhabitants. In between lie Warsaw and many other cities.

Enders is playing Russian roulette with nuclear weapons. He risks the nuclear destruction of Europe and large parts of the globe. And to what end? It would be absurd to think the aim is to simply allow bitterly poor Ukraine to become a member of the European Union and NATO!

Enders speaks for a ruling class that has lost its moorings and, faced with the insoluble contradictions of the capitalist system, is once again striving for conquest and dictatorship; that regards the war in Ukraine as an opportunity to realise the biggest rearmament programme in Germany since Hitler.

He speaks for a ruling class which, in Germany alone, sacrifices 250 lives every day to a pandemic which—as China has shown—can be controlled; which, despite record infections, is lifting all Corona protections, driving social inequality to unprecedented extremes and can only maintain its over-indebted financial system by declaring war on the working class.

Three years ago, Enders, onetime head of Europe's largest arms company, Airbus, spoke out in favour of “an open, non-ideological, strategic debate” on a military and great power policy for Germany, which he likened to a vegetarian in a “world full of carnivores.”

Two years ago, in *Die Zeit*, he declared: “We need to talk about nuclear weapons.” The time was “ripe for a bold step towards a new European security architecture,” he wrote. This would include “our own nuclear umbrella.” If Europe were to learn “the language of power” again, “so as not to be crushed between the old and new great powers,” it would have to “become a military power again.” The “construction of a powerful European Defence Union” is “absolutely inconceivable without nuclear *backing*.”

The war in Ukraine serves to realise these militaristic goals. The Ukrainian population, which is bearing the brunt of the war, is merely a pawn on the chessboard of the

imperialist powers. They will suffer the same fate as the Iraqis, Afghans and Libyans, all of whose countries sank into chaos and misery after being “liberated” by the US and its NATO allies.

The disastrous consequences of the dissolution of the Soviet Union thirty years ago are now becoming fully apparent. Former Stalinist secret service agent Putin was among those who fully supported the plundering of the economy by oligarchs, dreamed of their wealth to come and derided the term “imperialism” as an invention of Lenin—or even worse, Leon Trotsky.

The Bolshevik leaders had insisted that wars were inevitable as long as capitalism was not overthrown by the working class. Imperialist war, Trotsky wrote in 1940, derives “its origin inexorably from the contradictions of international capitalist interests. Contrary to the official fables designed to drug the people, the chief cause of war as of all other social evils—unemployment, the high cost of living, fascism, colonial oppression—is the private ownership of the means of production together with the bourgeois state which rests on this foundation.”

Now, the imperialist powers are using Putin’s reactionary war against Ukraine to strangle Russia economically, even at the risk of wiping out humanity. They are even confiscating the yachts of Russian oligarchs, whose unrestrained enrichment they had once hailed as a “victory of freedom.” The oligarchs will of course get their yachts back if they turn against Putin. The Ukrainian oligarchs are allowed to keep their boats; after all, Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates and Elon Musk also cruise the world’s oceans on \$500 million yachts.

The threat of war can only be stopped by the means of class struggle. The working class, which has to bear the costs of war, sanctions, pandemic and financial crisis and is inevitably thrown into conflict with the bankrupt capitalist system, must unite internationally and fight for a socialist programme.

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