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## Gorbachev warns Ukraine could ignite World War III

By Niles Williamson

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Mikhail Gorbachev, the last president of the Soviet Union, accused the United States Thursday of initiating a new Cold War with Russia and expressed fears that the conflict could escalate into a nuclear Third World War.

Gorbachev made his comments as fighting escalated in Ukraine between forces directed by the US- and European Union-backed government in Kiev and pro-Russian separatists in the eastern Donbass region.

“Plainly speaking, the US has already dragged us into a new Cold War, trying to openly implement its idea of triumphalism,” the former Soviet leader told *Interfax*. “What’s next? Unfortunately, I cannot be sure that the Cold War will not bring about a ‘hot’ one. I’m afraid [the United States] might take the risk.”

He criticized the US and the EU for continuing to press for more economic sanctions against Russia. “All we hear from the US and the EU now is sanctions against Russia,” he continued. “Are they completely out of their minds? The US has been totally ‘lost in the jungle’ and is dragging us there as well.”

Earlier this month, Gorbachev gave an interview to the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* about the ongoing conflict between the US, EU and Russia over Ukraine. While he stated that it was “something that shouldn’t even be considered,” Gorbachev warned that a major war in Europe would “inevitably lead to a nuclear war.” He added, “If one side loses its nerves in this inflamed atmosphere, then we won’t survive the coming years.”

In the same interview, Gorbachev lamented these developments as the outcome of Washington’s construction of a “mega empire” in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Gorbachev, as the initiator in the late 1980s of the process of capitalist restoration, in the form of the policies of “perestroika” and “glasnost,” bears a huge degree of responsibility for the current crisis in Ukraine and the expansion of NATO. At the time, he argued that the relentless drive of imperialism toward war had been replaced by the pursuit of universal “human values.”

The decision of the ruling Stalinist bureaucracy to preserve its own interests by liquidating the Soviet Union and restoring capitalism allowed NATO to expand its reach to Russia’s Western border.

Gorbachev was not alone in warning of the dangers involved in the Ukraine conflict. Former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who has been involved in countless crimes of US imperialism, spoke Thursday before the US Senate Armed Services Committee, declaring himself “uneasy about beginning a process of military engagement [in Ukraine] without knowing where it will lead us and what we’ll do to sustain it.”

The 91-year-old Kissinger added: “I believe we should avoid taking incremental steps before we know how far we are willing to go. This is a territory 300 miles from Moscow, and therefore has special security implications.”

The ongoing imperialist operations in Ukraine, from last year’s US- and EU-backed fascist-spearheaded coup to the ongoing fighting in the Donbass, as well as the current sanctions regime against Russia, are aimed at asserting US hegemony over all of the former Soviet Union and ultimately breaking the Russian Federation itself into a series of semi-colonies, opening the way for the plunder of its vast natural resources.

While there had been signs in recent weeks of a desire on the part of some EU states, in particular France and Italy, to begin rebuilding diplomatic relations with Russia, a deadly rocket attack on the Ukrainian city of Mariupol last weekend brought the EU members back into line behind the sanctions regime.

An emergency meeting of EU foreign ministers on Thursday decided to extend travel bans and bank account freezes against 132 Russian citizens and 28 organizations until September of this year. The foreign ministers will meet again on February 12 to discuss escalating the current tranche of economic sanctions against Russia.

Speaking after the meeting, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier stated menacingly, “If there is an offensive towards Mariupol or other regions, one will need to respond with clear and harsher measures.”

In the wake of the EU foreign ministers meeting, Donetsk was subjected to a new round of artillery shelling. At least five civilians were reported killed when mortars struck a crowd of several hundred people waiting outside a community center for the distribution of relief aid.

Another two civilians were reported killed after a mortar shell landed near a bus stop. Artillery shelling throughout the day on Friday in western Donetsk killed at least five more civilians.

The pro-Russian separatists continued their assault on a key railway hub between Donetsk and Luhansk, taking control of the village of Vuhlehirsk, just west of a city, Debaltseve, where at least 8,000 Ukrainian forces are currently entrenched. While the city’s civilian population of 25,000 has for the most part been evacuated, at least seven civilians were reported killed by shelling on Friday.

Semen Semchenko, founder of the Ukrainian nationalist Donbas Battalion militia, which has been integrated into the National Guard of Ukraine, reported that Kiev-backed forces in Debaltseve had been fired upon by artillery shells, mortars and grad rockets.

Ceasefire talks hosted by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe that were set to resume on Friday failed to even get off the ground. Vladislav Deinego and Denis Pushilin, representatives of the pro-Russian separatists, announced they were leaving Minsk for Moscow after Kiev’s representative, former president Leonid Kuchma, failed to show.

The Ukrainian government and its backers in the US and the EU have shown little desire to reach a compromise with the rebels. Speaking in the UN Security Council last week, US Ambassador Samantha Power dismissed the latest Russian peace plan as an “occupation plan.”

On Friday, in a desperate attempt to stimulate its economy and avoid a devastating recession, the Russian central bank made a surprise announcement that it was cutting its key interest rate by two percentage points, to 15 percent. This decision came little more than a month after it raised the same interest rate by 6.5 percentage points, to 17 percent, in an attempt to stem the decline of the ruble, which has lost more than 17 percent of its value since the beginning of the year.

The sudden move by the Bank of Russia is an indication that the sanctions regime, combined with the collapse of oil prices, is contributing to a mounting political and economic crisis within Russia. According to preliminary reports from Russia’s Statistics Services, the country’s economy grew by a mere 0.6 percent in 2014. Citigroup projects that, if the average price of Brent crude oil remains deflated, Russia’s economy will contract by 3 percent in 2015.