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Are you ready for nuclear war?

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Are you ready for war—including possibly nuclear war—between the United States, Europe, and Russia? That is the question that everyone should be asking him- or herself in light of the developments since the destruction of Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17.

The crisis provoked by American and European charges of Russian responsibility for the shooting down of flight MH17 has brought the world the closest it has been to global war since the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. But the situation today may be even more dangerous. A half century ago, the Kennedy administration—haunted by fears that miscalculations on either side could precipitate a nuclear exchange—sought to keep the lines of communications open and avoid the demonization of Soviet leaders.

Today, on the other hand, the CIA is directing an incendiary propaganda campaign against Russia and its president, Vladimir Putin, a campaign that seems intent on provoking a direct military confrontation with the country with the second largest nuclear arsenal in the world. There is no question that the CIA is mobilizing all the resources and assets it commands—within governments, the media, and among academics—in a carefully orchestrated campaign aimed at polluting public opinion with anti-Russian hysteria.

As of now, there is nothing approaching a definitive explanation of the chain of events that led to the destruction of MH17. Despite all the massive surveillance technology at its disposal, upon which it lavishes tens of billions of dollars annually, the US intelligence agencies have not produced a shred of hard evidence to back up the accusations of Russian responsibility.

But while the physical circumstances surrounding MH17's destruction remain unknown, the political purposes to which this tragedy is being put to use have become all too clear.

Since the beginning of the week, the three most influential mass circulation newsmagazines of the United States, Britain, and Germany—*Time*, *The Economist*, and *Der Spiegel*—have published cover stories that combine wild accusations against Vladimir Putin with demands for a showdown with Russia.

The most striking and obvious characteristic of these cover stories is that they are virtually identical. The CIA has scripted them all. The stories employ the same insults and the same fabrications. They denounce Putin's "web of lies." The Russian president is portrayed as a "depraved" mass murderer.

What is the Russian president to make of the use of this sort of language in the most influential newsmagazines? He is on the receiving end of the same campaign of vilification that was previously directed against Serbia's Slobodan Milosevic, Iraq's Saddam Hussein, Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, and Syria's Bashar al-Assad. Putin certainly knows the outcome of these propaganda campaigns. Serbia was bombed into political submission and Milosevic was carted off to The Hague, where he died, mysteriously, in prison. Iraq was invaded and Hussein executed. Libya was also invaded, and Gaddafi—much to the amusement of Hillary Clinton—was savagely tortured and lynched. As for Assad, the United States has directed a bloody insurgency that has resulted in the deaths of more than 100,000 Syrians.

Given this record, Putin could hardly be accused of paranoia were he to conclude that the United States and its European allies want him dead. Therefore, one must ask, what impact might this well-grounded suspicion have on his own course of action as the confrontation escalates?

In all three cover stories, the governments of Western Europe *and* the United States are taken to task for failing to move against Putin and Russia. The three magazines adopt a tone of angry impatience with what they perceive to be insufficient aggressiveness. They all argue that the time for talk is over. *Der Spiegel* declares "The wreckage of MH17 is also the wreckage of diplomacy."

How should this statement be interpreted? If diplomacy has failed, it can only mean that war is imminent.

In its article “In Russia, Crime without Punishment,” *Time* attacks Obama for asking Putin to assist in the investigation of the crash rather than immediately threatening Russia with war. It writes, “This was the crisis in a nutshell: the least Putin could do was the most Obama could ask for. The American President announced no deadlines, drew no red lines and made no threats.”

The invocation of “deadlines,” “redlines,” and “threats” is the language of war. How else should these words be read?

Time attacks Italy and France and even the Obama administration and the American people for not backing aggression against Russia: “Putin doesn’t have a lot to worry about when he looks at the forces aligned against him. Obama, as the leader of a war-weary nation, has ruled out all military options, including the provision of weapons to Ukraine.” Clearly, *Time* wants to place military options on the table.

In its lead editorial, entitled “A web of lies,” *The Economist* follows the same script, accusing the West of vacillation. “The Germans and Italians claim to want to keep diplomatic avenues open, partly because sanctions would undermine their commercial interests. Britain calls for sanctions, but it is reluctant to harm the City of London’s profitable Russian business. America is talking tough but has done nothing new.”

The coordinated media campaign is already producing the desired effect. On Tuesday the Obama administration and the European Union announced that they had agreed on a new set of tougher sanctions. These measures are being interpreted as a transitional measure toward what *Financial Times* columnist Wolfgang Munchau describes as “The Atom Bomb of Financial War.” Munchau’s piece has been published not only in the *Financial Times* but also in *Der Spiegel*.

By a combination of military threats and economic strangulation, the US and the EU are moving to politically destabilize Russia. As their continuous references to the Russian oligarchs make clear, they are hoping that the financial sanctions will encourage a conspiracy to overthrow and even murder Putin. The regime envisaged by Washington would convert Russia into a neo-colonial protectorate, entirely subordinated politically, economically and militarily to US imperialism.

Of course, were Putin to shift course and accommodate himself to US demands, the media campaign would make the necessary adjustments. However, events can proceed in a direction unforeseen in any CIA scenario.

The recklessness of a policy of destabilizing Russia, a power that controls the world’s second-largest arsenal of nuclear weapons, is staggering. As military forces are set on alert throughout Eastern Europe and the Black Sea region, and Ukrainian and Russian forces exchange artillery fire along their borders, the possibility for a miscalculation is mounting by the day.

Whatever the short-term outcome, the long-term implication of the agenda being pursued by the United States and the European imperialist powers leads inexorably in the direction of war with cataclysmic consequences. The greatest danger facing the working class is that decisions are being taken behind the scenes, with masses of people largely unaware of the risks facing the world's population.

A hundred years ago this week, World War I was launched by small cabals of ministers, monarchs, and business interests throughout Europe, whose decision to risk everything on victory in war led to deaths numbering in the tens of millions. Today, similar forces are setting into motion a drive to a conflagration that could lead to the destruction of the planet.

There is no means to stop the momentum toward war except through the politically-conscious intervention of the working class. Anyone who believes that a nuclear war is impossible because modern governments, unlike those that were in power in 1914, would not risk catastrophe, is deluding himself. If anything, the regimes that exist today are even more reckless. Beset by mounting economic and social problems for which they have no progressive solution, they are ever-more inclined to see war as a risk worth taking.

This is why the International Committee of the Fourth International insists upon the urgency of building an international anti-war, anti-imperialist, and anti-capitalist movement of the working class.