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Dozens of “near miss” incidents have brought NATO and Russia to the brink of war

By Alex Lantier

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According to a report published yesterday by the London-based European Leadership Network think tank (ELN), there have been at least 40 “near misses” in which the Russian military and NATO forces, sent to Eastern Europe following last February’s far-right, NATO-backed putsch in Kiev, came close to military conflict.

The ELN writes that NATO-Russian relations since March 2014, have been in “a situation in which mistrust, fear, and shortened leadership decision times characterize a volatile stand-off between a nuclear-armed state and a nuclear-armed alliance.” The report continues: “To perpetuate that reality in the circumstances described in this report is risky at best. At worst, it could prove catastrophic.”

The ELN is comprised of top-level security officials from a number of European imperialist countries. Its board includes Munich Security Conference Chairman Wolfgang Ischinger, former NATO Secretary General Javier Solana, former Defense Secretaries Des Browne and Malcolm Rifkind (UK), Volker Ruehe (Germany), and Alain Richard (France), and former UN Special Commissioner on Iraq Rolf Ekeus. In its report, it carefully selects the incidents it describes to falsely cast Russia as the aggressor.

Nonetheless, the reported incidents clearly illustrate the immense dangers posed to the survival of humanity by NATO's reckless escalation in Eastern Europe in the aftermath of the US-led NATO regime-change operation in Ukraine.

Armies worldwide are on a hair trigger, with NATO jets patrolling the skies of the Baltic republics and other Eastern European states as little as a quarter hour's flight time from Russian cities. Minor miscommunications between Russian forces and the NATO troops, fighter jets and warships flooding into Eastern Europe—or deployed in North America and the Pacific, where other “near misses” occurred—could rapidly escalate into a global nuclear conflagration.

One so-called “high-risk” incident occurred on September 5, two days after US President Barack Obama visited Estonia to assure it of Washington’s “eternal support” against Russia. “On 5 September 2014, an Estonian security service operative, Eston Kohver, was abducted by Russian agents from an Estonian border post. He was later taken to Moscow and accused of espionage,” the ELN writes. “Had the incident resulted in loss of life, there could have been a dangerous and uncontrolled escalation.”

As with most of the incidents the ELN reports, this event shows that the main war danger comes from NATO’s aggressive policies. Estonia is a tiny, non-nuclear Baltic country of 1.3 million people near the Russian city of St. Petersburg. It would use diplomatic channels to resolve the matter and not risk military escalation against Russia, if it were not receiving encouragement and strong assurances of support against Russia, including direct military support, from NATO and the United States.

Another “high-risk” incident was Sweden's bellicose but fruitless hunt for a Russian submarine it believed to be in its territorial waters between October 17 and October 27. “Supreme Commander General Sverker Goranson underlined that Sweden was ready to use ‘armed force’ to bring the vessel to the surface if necessary,” the ELN writes. “Had the submarine been found and force used by Swedish authorities, this may have resulted in casualties and a further Russian military response.”

The last “high-risk” incident was the near-collision on March 3 of an SAS passenger plane and a Russian reconnaissance aircraft that was not transmitting its position to civilian air authorities. According to the ELN, a collision leading to passenger deaths would have led NATO to classify “further un-logged or blind air activity over Europe as a possible threat to life requiring forceful pre-emptive interdiction.”

That is, NATO would adopt the incendiary policy of tracking and destroying all unidentified flying objects in European air space—rapidly risking war with Russia.

The conflicts and the danger of nuclear war raised in this report underscore the catastrophic implications of the crisis of world capitalism. A quarter century after the fall of the Berlin Wall, followed by the Stalinist bureaucracy's dissolution of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism, a new world war is being prepared as the imperialist powers manipulate ethnic divisions within the former USSR to encircle and divide Russia.

The central danger to the working class is the aggressive policy of the NATO powers, led by the United States and Germany. They backed a putsch in Kiev spearheaded by forces of the Ukrainian fascist Right Sector militia. They then seized upon the resulting civil war that broke out between the far-right Kiev regime and ethnic Russian areas in eastern Ukraine to denounce Russia and dispatch military forces to Poland, the Baltic republics, the Black Sea region and Ukraine itself.

This offensive was justified in the NATO countries with lying claims that the US-led military alliance was intervening to support freedom. The risk of nuclear war resulting from the offensive against Russia was concealed from working people in America and Europe.

Recognizing the central role of NATO aggression in the Ukraine crisis does not imply support for reckless policies the Kremlin might employ as it tries to work out a new modus vivendi with Western imperialism. Representing a layer of super-rich oligarchs that emerged from the looting of public property in the Soviet Union, the regime of Russian President Vladimir Putin can make no appeal to opposition to war in the global working class.

Its Russian nationalist appeals are reactionary. They aid the imperialists in their efforts to stir up divisions between Russian and Ukrainian workers and within the international working class more generally.

Significantly, the ELN avoids mentioning nuclear weapons in the incidents it describes. However, both NATO and Russia are preparing their nuclear forces.

Washington has never issued a so-called “no-first-use” pledge, i.e., a guarantee that it will not be the first power to use nuclear weapons in a conflict. Top Russian officers are pushing for the Kremlin to explicitly define scenarios in which they would launch nuclear strikes against NATO countries.

In May, Russian and US strategic nuclear forces carried out dueling exercises. According to Kremlin outlet *Russia Today*, the Russian drills “demonstrated how the missile corps, artillery, aviation, and anti-aircraft defenses can be used—for instance, to destroy troops on the ground or to counter massive missile, aviation, or nuclear strikes by an enemy. Plus, it was shown how to inflict a launch-through-attack strike with nuclear missiles”—that is, a retaliatory Russian nuclear strike carried out as a NATO nuclear attack on Russia took place.

In September, as Russia carried out a further round of nuclear exercises, Russian General Yury Yakubov told Interfax: “In my view, our primary enemy is the US and the North Atlantic bloc ... it is necessary to hash out the conditions under which Russia could carry out a preemptive strike with the Russian Strategic Rocket Forces.”

The ELN does report the following incident: “In early September 2014, Russian strategic bombers in the Labrador Sea near Canada practiced cruise missile strikes on the United States. The Russian aircraft stayed outside of Canada's ADIZ, but this was still a provocative move in light of the NATO summit ongoing at the time. Cruise missiles launched from the Labrador Sea would have Ottawa, New York, Washington, Chicago, and the Norfolk Naval Base in range.”

The cruise missiles the Russian bombers could fire at these cities could be armed with nuclear warheads.

Prior to the ELN report, this event was reported only in a *Washington Free Beacon* article by journalist Bill Gertz. Otherwise, this event—which illustrates all too clearly the risks posed by US policy in Ukraine—was totally blacked out by the US media.