

Escalation in Ukraine threatens East-West conflagration

By Rachel Douglas

13 Apr.—In a phone call today US President Joe Biden raised to Russian President Vladimir Putin the desirability of a bilateral summit between them in the near future. A major topic was the military escalation around the Donbass area of eastern Ukraine, which has become more acute by the day, with a serious danger of involvement of the two biggest nuclear-weapons powers on the planet.

No one should think for an instant that today's conversation has cooled off the situation enough for the world's safety, nor that either the Ukrainian armed forces' recent build-up around the self-declared Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics (DPR and LPR) in the Donbass or Russia's troop movements in its own regions right across the border are just bluffing. Two other statements today, one by an American and one by a Russian, dramatise the danger.

Former Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard, a military veteran and steadfast opponent of the endless overseas wars of the past 20 years, said on Fox News that the question for the American people is, "Are we willing to go to war with Russia over Ukraine?" She continued, "Such a war would come at a cost beyond anything that we can really imagine." Unleashing the thousands of nuclear warheads the USA and Russia have aimed at each other, Gabbard warned, would be "the end of the world as we know it", with immense suffering inflicted on civilian populations by nuclear-weapons firestorms.

In Moscow, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov responded to threats made over the weekend by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken that "there will be costs, there will be consequences" if Washington deems that Russia "acts recklessly" towards Ukraine. Ryabkov, who has years of experience in arms control negotiations, said, "The USA is our adversary, and is doing everything possible to undermine Russia's position in the international arena. We do not see any other elements in their approach to us."

Referring to a dense schedule of planned NATO manoeuvres and US Navy missions into the Black Sea, Ryabkov said, "There is nothing for American battleships to do off our coasts. These are strictly provocations.... They are testing us, playing on our nerves. They will not succeed. It won't work. The USA, which evidently feels that it is ruler of the world, the heir in that respect of Great Britain from another epoch, should nonetheless realise that the risk of an incident is very high.... We warn the USA that they would be better off staying away from Crimea, from our Black Sea coast."

What happened in Ukraine

The civil war in eastern Ukraine began in 2014, after the ouster of elected President Victor Yanukovich in the so-called "Euromaidan" coup of Nov. 2013-Feb. 2014. The takeover had the backing of the United States and the European Union, with hands-on orchestration by officials like then-Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland of the Obama Administration. She was caught on an intercepted phone call hand-picking the next prime minister of Ukraine.

The spearhead of the Euromaidan was not the citizens who demonstrated for a free-trade association with the EU (envisioning "jobs for everybody, wages like in France, pensions like in Germany", as Progressive Socialist Party of Ukraine leader Natalia Vitrenko put it at the time). It was a smaller force of paramilitary units from western Ukraine, promoting a fascist ideology inherited from one-time ally of the Nazis Stepan Bandera (1909-59) and his Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), which had slaughtered tens of

thousands of Jews and Poles during World War II. Their doctrines of ethnicity-based nationalism include a belief that war with Russia is inevitable.¹

Within days of the Euromaidan coup, Banderites in the new regime stripped Russian and other languages of their status as official languages alongside Ukrainian, in areas of the country where a majority of people spoke them. That action, together with the terrorist record of the Banderite Right Sector group, triggered the secession of Crimea from Ukraine—with Russian backing—and its overwhelming vote by referendum in March 2014 to join the Russian Federation. Uprisings against Kiev's authority began in the Donbass at the same time. NATO governments and the international media call both events "Russian aggression".

The death toll in seven years of the Donbass War, which was at its most intense in 2014-15, is estimated by the United Nations at 13,000 including more than 3,000 civilians. A ceasefire and measures for a political settlement of the conflict were agreed in February 2015 between Kiev and representatives of the DPR/LPR, at talks held in Minsk, Belarus with the diplomatic participation of Russia, France, Germany and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The ceasefire has been violated off and on, while the political settlement has not advanced; Ukraine's Parliament refused to implement the provisions of the "Minsk II" accords for granting a higher degree of autonomy to the Donbass regions.

President Volodymyr Zelensky, a TV actor and comedian with no political experience except in a fictional mini-series, won election in a landslide in 2019 on a platform of ending the war, reconciling the country, and reviving its tattered economy.² It became clear very fast, however, that Zelensky had no program and commanded no political forces to do these things. He ignored an offer by Vitrenko, a Doctor of Economics and previous Presidential candidate, to coordinate ready-to-go economic policies: to break Ukraine's enslavement to International Monetary Fund austerity demands, stop the drain of resources into the offshore bank accounts of the owners of privatised industries, and generate credit within Ukraine through banking reform.

Zelensky also ran into the stiff refusal of the radical nationalists to soften the post-Euromaidan "Ukrainianisation" policies or carry out the Minsk accords. He may have feared assassination, were he to defy the Banderites.

The COVID-19 pandemic deepened the already bad economic crisis in Ukraine. Zelensky and his government turned down an offer by Victor Medvedchuk, a businessman who has organised prisoner swaps in the Donbass War and whose party Opposition Platform—For Life was the second highest vote-getter in 2019 parliamentary elections (with 13 per cent), to contract with the Russian Direct Investment Fund for production of Russia's Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccine under licence in Ukraine. The Ukrainian Parliament passed a law in January, banning Russian vaccines altogether. The United States is not exporting its vaccines. Ukraine, with a population between 30 and 40 million (there has been no census since 2001), has vaccinated fewer than 400,000 people with even one dose of the Covidshield version of AstraZeneca's vaccine, purchased from India. Tens of thousands of skilled medical workers have emigrated from Ukraine. The hospitals are filled to overflowing with COVID patients.

1. "British Imperial Project in Ukraine: Violent Coup, Fascist Axioms, Neo-Nazis", *EIR*, 16 May 2014.

2. "Ukraine election: stepping away from disaster", *AAS*, 1 May 2019.

Escalation in 2021

On 8 January 2021 Ukraine-watcher Prof. Nicolai Petro of the University of Rhode Island reported in *The National Interest* that “Zelensky and his advisors have hinted at the existence of an undisclosed Plan B” to restore their sagging political support, and that it seemed “to involve some sort of blitzkrieg by the Ukrainian army against the Donbass”.

Two weeks later, Joe Biden took office in the USA. His first step vis a vis Russia seemed promising, as he authorised urgent action to extend for five years the New START strategic arms reduction treaty, which the Trump Administration had been prepared to let lapse in February. But Biden also named Nuland as under secretary of state (yet to be approved by the Senate), and he brought back his own habit of belligerence towards Russia over Ukraine. A vigorous supporter of the Euromaidan coup as vice president, Biden in 2014 had “pressed President Barack Obama to take decisive action, and fast, to make Moscow ‘pay in blood and money’” for its military support of Crimea’s secession, the *New York Times* reported in 2019. Biden has co-authored articles with Mike Carpenter, a Ukraine hawk who directs the Biden School for Diplomacy and Global Engagement at the University of Pennsylvania, like “How to Stand up to the Kremlin: Defending Democracy against its Enemies”, in the Council on Foreign Relations journal *Foreign Affairs* in 2018.

Zelensky launched a campaign to curry favour with the incoming Administration and to seek a boost in military aid from Washington. On 31 January, he told a TV interviewer he wanted to ask Biden why Ukraine is not yet in NATO; if it were, Zelensky opined, there would be no troubles in eastern Ukraine.

In February Zelensky closed down three TV stations owned by allies of Medvedchuk, which had been promoting the Russian COVID-19 vaccine.

The next signal for a flare-up of hostilities came from Biden on 26 February, the seventh anniversary of Russia’s deploying troops from its existing bases in Crimea in support of the movement of Crimeans seeking independence from Kiev. In a written statement, Biden said, “On this sombre anniversary, we reaffirm a simple truth: Crimea is Ukraine.”

In a 21 February phone call US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin pledged to his Ukrainian counterpart Andriy Taran America’s “commitment to building the capacity of Ukraine’s forces to defend more effectively against Russian aggression”. On 1 March the Pentagon announced a US\$125 million military aid package for Ukraine, continuing the supply of lethal weaponry implemented under Trump.

Kiev saw these statements and actions as a green light. In mid-March Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba announced that the National Security and Defence Council had adopted a new strategy for “retaking Crimea” (which has been fully reintegrated into Russia for seven years).

Also in March, large shipments of heavy equipment by the Ukrainian military towards the Donbass were observed. Incidents along the “line of contact” between the DPR/LPR and the rest of Ukraine picked up.

Moscow took note, with Foreign Ministry spokesman Maria Zakharova saying on 12 March, “We want to warn the Kiev regime, the hotheads that serve or manipulate it, against any further escalation and attempts to launch a violent scenario in the Donbass.” By late March, Russia stepped up troop movements on its own territory near the border with Ukraine, which Kiev and international media hyped as an imminent threat to invade.

Kiev’s claim that four of its soldiers had been killed on 26 March, though OSCE observers recorded no such incident,



Groups resisting the coup-installed Kiev regime in 2014 declared the Donetsk and Lugansk People’s Republics (DPR/LPR) in parts of Ukraine’s easternmost regions, Donetsk and Lugansk (the Donbass).

gave Zelensky a pretext to obtain a phone call with Biden on 2 April, with pledges to support Ukraine’s territorial integrity.

NATO is running a huge number of exercises in the vicinity of these events. On 3 April it announced that five NATO member countries will participate with Ukraine in the Cossack Mace 2021 manoeuvres later this year. The scenario calls for “repelling a large-scale offensive by the armed forces of the conditional aggressor state”. There are additional, bilateral exercises scheduled for Ukraine in 2021 with NATO members the USA, UK, Romania, and Poland. On 5 April NATO Land Command in Turkey hailed Ukraine as “the first partner nation to take part in the NATO Response Force”.

Zelensky placed calls at the beginning of April—to Canadian PM Justin Trudeau, British PM Boris Johnson, and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg—to push his demand for a NATO Membership Action Plan for Ukraine. “We are committed to reforming our Army and defence sector, but reforms alone will not stop Russia”, he told Stoltenberg. “NATO is the only way to end the war in Donbass. Ukraine’s MAP will be a real signal for Russia.” The Lithuanian foreign minister said 7 April that his country would offer an MAP for Ukraine. Air Chief Marshal Sir Stuart Peach of the UK, head of NATO’s Military Committee, visited Kiev to tell Zelensky and Minister of Defence Gen. Ruslan Khomchak, “Ukraine is one of NATO’s closest and most important partners”.

Since August 2020 the Royal Navy has been coordinating a NATO training program for Ukrainian naval forces in the Black Sea. Sources in Washington and Ankara reported 9 April that the USA will send two warships into the Black Sea in May.

President Putin’s spokesman Dmitri Peskov has addressed the growing tensions frequently. On 2 April he called the situation on the line of contact “rather frightening”, charging that there had been “many ... provocations by the Ukrainian armed forces”. A resumption of the Ukrainian civil war “near our borders”, he added 9 April, “will pose a threat to Russia’s national security”.

A loaded warning came from Dmitri Kozak, deputy chief of staff for Putin, at an 8 April forum at an Academy of Sciences think tank. He said that if Minsk II were implemented, the Donbass conflict could be resolved within one year. “The beginning of the hostilities”, however, “is the beginning of the end of Ukraine. This is a self-inflicted wound—a shot not in the leg, but in the temple.” Kozak noted that there are Russian passport-holders residing in the DPR/LPR—several hundred thousand of them, after Moscow simplified the application procedure two years ago—and if they were threatened with a “massacre”, then “we will probably be forced to defend”.