



## Eurasian powers act against headlong war agenda

By Rachel Douglas

7 Dec.—Presidents Joe Biden of the USA and Vladimir Putin of Russia held a two-hour summit by video hook-up today, on which reports are only just beginning to emerge as the AAS goes to press. It is not yet known, whether the latest Russian-American diplomatic engagement will stop the runaway freight train heading towards World War. The current dangerous, headlong rush was set in motion not by particular events in or around Ukraine, which is in headlines right now as a supposed target for Russian invasion, but by the pernicious doctrine adopted by the Anglo-American establishment and its hangers-on around the world, which says that there is a “rules-based order” that other powers must be prevented from violating.

The “rules-based order” prescribes neoliberal economics—the free trade and deregulation that have given a free hand to massive financial speculation while wrecking countries’ real economies; deindustrialisation under a “Great Reset”, in the name of decarbonisation for climate-change abatement; and forbidding any country’s rise to the level of power the Anglo-American bloc has enjoyed. Official American strategic policy in recent years had defined both China and Russia as “revisionist” powers, for not going along with these rules.

The Anglo-Americans’ year-end diplomatic activity has been geared to the claim that a Russian invasion of Ukraine is imminent and must be deterred with force and/or punished with unprecedented economic sanctions. This alleged Russian threat topped the agenda of the NATO foreign ministers’ meeting in Riga, Latvia, 30 Nov.-1 Dec. Ukraine and Georgia, countries bordering Russia, whose accession to NATO Moscow has identified as unacceptable, took part. On 4 December, US Administration sources put out through the *Washington Post* the claim that Russia has amassed 175,000 troops near Ukraine’s borders, in preparation for “a military offensive against Ukraine as soon as early 2022”. The *Financial Times* of London reported 6 December that “unprecedented sharing of US intelligence on Moscow’s military preparations” has brought several European countries around to agree that such a threat exists.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken, speaking in Riga 1 Dec., his deputy Victoria Nuland (famous for her role in overthrowing the elected president of Ukraine and installing a radical nationalist regime in 2014) two days later, and Biden in talking with Putin today, all threatened Russia with “a range of high-impact economic measures that we’ve refrained from using in the past”, as Blinken put it, if any Russian intervention occurs. According to Michèle Flournoy, a Washington think tanker close to the Administration, these would include banning trans-Atlantic banks from owning or trading Russian government debt, in an attempt to collapse its value and the ruble’s, and cutting Russia off from the SWIFT international payments system.

On the eve of the NATO meeting, the USA and NATO stepped up military operations in Russia’s immediate vicinity. The guided-missile destroyer USS *Arleigh Burke* sailed into the Black Sea on 25 November, continuing a deployment sustained over recent months (“US and Ukrainian military actions raise Black Sea tension”, AAS, 10 Nov.). NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg visited a combat-ready battle group in Latvia, on Russia’s border, on the eve of the

foreign ministers’ meeting. A few days earlier in Berlin, Stoltenberg had campaigned for American B61 nuclear bombs, stored in Germany, to be moved to a NATO member country closer to Russia.

Alongside these military activities, Biden will host a so-called Summit of Democracies on 9-10 December. Its dubious invitation criteria allow participation by countries like Ukraine, where opposition parties and media have been ruthlessly suppressed, and Pakistan, with a sadly long record of regime-change through assassination, yet China and Russia are barred. “This vision reduces the multi-coloured palette of the modern world to a minimalist black and white graphic of ... ‘us’ and ‘them’”, observed Dr Andrei Kortunov of the Russian International Affairs Council on 4 December.

A height of absurdity, bringing together the military and “democracy”-peddling elements of current US policy, came 23 November when “high-level bilateral consultations [on] opportunities for enhanced cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region” were held between the USA and... Lithuania. That tiny (pop. 2.8 million) Baltic NATO member is situated about 6,000 km from the nearest Indian Ocean port, but Lithuania has pitched in to do its part against Beijing, by allowing Taiwan to open a *de facto* embassy in Vilnius, despite Taiwan’s formal status as a province of China.

### Eurasian strategic cooperation boosted

NATO’s thundering against Russia and China has prompted an upgrade of the partnership between those two Eurasian powers, including in the military area. Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and his Chinese counterpart Wei Fenghe met by video teleconference on 23 November, to finalise an extension of existing China-Russia military cooperation agreements. This will involve “strategic coordination and ... cooperation in strategic exercises and joint patrols”, reported China Military Online. Shoigu pointed to the importance of Sibul Interaction-2021, the first-ever Russian-Chinese joint military exercise on Chinese territory, held in August.

On 19 November, the Chinese and Russian militaries flew their third joint strategic aerial patrol, sending bombers out over the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea. Shoigu situated the need for such exercises, amid the build-up of flights by US strategic bombers near Russian borders. “This month”, he said according to the Associated Press, “during the US Global Thunder strategic force exercise, 10 strategic bombers practiced the scenario of using nuclear weapons against Russia practically simultaneously from the western and eastern directions.... In such an environment, the Russian-Chinese coordination becomes a stabilising factor in global affairs”.

On 26 November the Chinese and Russian ambassadors in the USA issued an unusual joint statement, published in the Washington magazine *The National Interest*. Under the headline “Respecting People’s Democratic Rights”, Anatoli Antonov and Qin Gang objected to the upcoming “Summit for Democracy”, which they warned will “stoke up ideological confrontation”.

At a regularly scheduled Sino-Russian prime ministers’ meeting, held 30 November, Russian PM Mikhail Mishustin said that Russia and China should “join forces” in the face of the “unilateral sanctions, political and economic pressure” both face, and promote economic “interconnectivity in the

Eurasian space". China's *Global Times* featured their agreement to step up cooperation on digital operating systems, as part of a broad agenda of cooperation on "telecommunications, network security energy, agriculture and technology". Russia and China have been working on alternative payments systems to SWIFT for some time.

Despite India's being heavily encouraged to take up hostile postures towards China, including through membership in the Quad (Australia, India, Japan, USA), there has been an uptick of diplomacy among Eurasia's big three—India, together with China and Russia. On 26 November the foreign ministers of the three countries video-conferenced; they had first conferred 20 years ago as "the Eurasian strategic triangle". Concurring on their ability to play a positive role to promote world peace and stability, they addressed substantive strategic policy issues: a coordinated global fight against COVID-19; international aid for Afghanistan to avert mass starvation in that country; a joint fight against the drug trade and related terrorism; and the need for a new system of international relations based on win-win cooperation. Given the serious tensions between India and China over recent years, the talks were a significant advance.

Then, on 6 December, Putin made only his second trip abroad since the pandemic started, travelling to New Delhi for a summit with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. They discussed Afghanistan, agreeing on providing "immediate humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people", the Kremlin reported. Over the years, international media pundits have "announced" that Russia's building of bridges with China means distancing from India, but Putin was keen to dispel that myth. India is currently taking delivery of Russian S-400 air defence systems, continuing a long history of bilateral defence-industry deals between the two. Russia is also eager for Indian investment in Russia's Far East, in infrastructure, extractive industries, shipbuilding and agriculture.

### The Ukraine escalation

The Kiev government of President Volodymyr Zelensky has a track record of wild claims that turn out to be false (one of the latest being that he was threatened by a "Russian-backed coup" on 1 December), yet reports from Ukrainian military and intelligence people are a major component underlying the "Russian invasion" scare. One Russian official after another has denied that invasion is Moscow's operational scenario for Ukraine.

There are serious signs, however, that a mega-provocation in Ukraine is possible and that Russia would respond. Russian officials are now talking about this in terms not used before now. Some Russian analysts have assessed that the USA views the Black Sea region as a future battlefield, if fighting were to be triggered in eastern Ukraine.

The area in question, the Donbass, comprises parts of two Ukrainian regions, Donetsk and Lugansk, where local governments and people's militias rejected the 2014 US-backed coup in Kiev, and declared their autonomy. More than 13,000 people have been killed in civil war there, despite 2015 agreements (the Minsk Accords) negotiated by France, Germany, Russia and Kiev itself on terms to end the fighting. Sources inside the Donbass have reported escalating shelling by Kiev forces, including of civilian areas, throughout this year. Zelensky, meanwhile, urges ever more militantly to "take back" the Donbass, not to mention Crimea, the peninsula that seceded from Ukraine in 2014 and joined Russia. With increased NATO aid building up the Ukrainian Armed Forces, Zelensky cried to the Ukrainian Parliament 1 December that "we have a strong powerful army and [should] not to be afraid to tell

each other the truth if we want to return Donbas. Let's do it!"

Another concern is that with NATO countries' dense schedule of joint exercises with the Ukrainian military—nine major manoeuvres during 2022—there will be an almost constant presence of Western forces in Ukraine. The British government, UK media reported in mid-November, is readying a task force of up to 600 troops to deploy in Ukraine, allegedly to deter a Russian invasion. A scenario could quickly unfold, under which some of these NATO forces were killed in Donbass fighting, and such an incident would trigger a much bigger escalation involving Russia.

Against that backdrop, Russian officials have begun to ask aloud, "what if?" Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov said 2 December, "Military operations in Ukraine are still highly probable and this is cause for special concern". Victor Vodolatsky, a Russian MP from the majority United Russia party, told Interfax 3 December that if Kiev acted on a military scenario in the Donbass, refusing to resume talks under the Minsk framework, then Russia might be forced to act. He noted that 700,000 Donbass residents have taken out Russian citizenship, "and, naturally, we are not going to leave our citizens in the lurch".

Diplomatically, Moscow has taken several unusual steps. The press office of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service on 22 November issued a statement headlined "USA Provokes Aggravation in Eastern Ukraine", which charged that the hullabaloo over Russian troop concentrations in western Russia was based on State Department lies. It accused the USA and the EU of encouraging Kiev to believe it can do whatever it pleases, with impunity.

On 18 November, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov announced his agency's publication of diplomatic correspondence—usually kept strictly secret—with Germany and France, as proof that Kiev had no intention of honouring the Minsk agreement to negotiate autonomy for the Donbass within Ukraine.

And on 21 November Deputy Secretary of the Russian Security Council Alexander Grebenkin told the government daily *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* that Russia faces a rising "level of threats at the border, linked with possible armed conflicts and incidents".

The sharpest warnings, phrased very precisely, have come from Lavrov, Shoygu with his mention of the US Air Force practicing for nuclear war, and Putin himself. Putin has spoken several times about "red lines" for Russia, which the USA and NATO should not cross, such as emplacement of offensive weapons systems, in NATO countries or partners like Ukraine, in a position to threaten Russia's strategic forces. He has complained that the West did not take the "red lines" seriously. Indeed, Biden stated days before today's summit, "I don't accept anybody's red lines".

In several November speeches, Putin returned to the subject. "The Russian Federation is concerned", he told the Russia Calling! investment forum on 30 November, "over major military exercises near its borders, including in the Black Sea just recently, when strategic bombers were flying just 20 km away from our border, armed with precision weapons and potentially even nuclear weapons". It was threats like that, Putin said, that forced Russia to develop hypersonic weapons; as it happens, the Russian Defence Ministry announced 29 November that the Tsirkon hypersonic missile was successfully test-fired for the second time.

Citing broken promises that NATO would not be extended eastward after 1990, Putin and Lavrov emphasise that verbal assurances are not enough. Putin now seeks formal mutual security guarantees. This demand was on the agenda when he spoke with Biden today.