

As U.S.-Russia Tensions Escalate over Ukraine, U.S. May Stumble into War, Warns Katrina vanden Heuvel

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President Biden said Wednesday that Russian President Vladimir Putin will pay a “serious and dear price” if he orders his reported 100,000 troops stationed along the Russian-Ukraine border to invade Ukraine, a scenario Biden says is increasingly likely. This comes as U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with Ukraine’s president on Wednesday, similarly warning Russia could attack Ukraine on “very short notice.” We speak with The Nation’s Katrina vanden Heuvel, who says the hawkish U.S. approach to the Russia-Ukraine conflict is a waste of national resources, and says the U.S. should pursue diplomacy instead of throwing around threats of expanding NATO into Eastern Europe. “More attention should be paid to how we can exit these conflicts, how we can find a way for an independent Ukraine,” says vanden Heuvel, who calls the Ukraine conflict a civil war turned into a proxy war. “If there is creative diplomacy, I think you could see a resolution of this crisis.”

Transcript

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AMY GOODMAN: President Biden said Wednesday he expects Russia will invade Ukraine, but predicted Russian President Vladimir Putin does not want a full-blown war. Russia has reportedly stationed about 100,000 troops on its Ukraine border and sent troops into Belarus, which also shares a border with Ukraine. Biden said Washington’s response to a Russian invasion will depend on its severity.

PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN: Russia will be held accountable if it invades. And it depends on what it does. It’s one thing if it’s a minor incursion, and then we end up having to fight about what to do and not do, etc. But if they actually do what they’re capable of doing with the force amassed on the border, it is going to be a disaster for Russia.

AMY GOODMAN: Biden’s remarks about a “minor incursion” alarmed officials in Ukraine. Shortly after the news conference ended, Biden’s press secretary, Jen Psaki, released a statement clarifying Biden’s comments about a “minor incursion” by saying, quote, “If any Russian military forces move across the Ukrainian border, that’s a renewed invasion, and it will be met with a swift, severe, and united response from the United States and our Allies.”

During the news conference, President Biden also predicted Russian President Vladimir Putin will move troops into Ukraine. This is Biden responding to a question from David Sanger of *The New York Times* about Putin.

PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN: I think he still does not want any full-blown war, number one. Number two, do I think he'll test the West, test the United States and NATO as significantly as he can? Yes, I think he will. But I think he'll pay a serious and dear price for it that he doesn't think now will cost him what it's going to cost him. And I think he will regret having done it. ...

I'm not so sure he has — is certain what he's going to do. My guess is he will move in. He has to do something. And, by the way, I've indicated to him — the two things he said to me that he wants guarantees on: One is Ukraine will never be part of NATO, and, two, that NATO — or, there will not be strategic weapons stationed in Ukraine. Well, we can work out something on the second piece, [inaudible] what he does along the Russian line, as well, or the Russian border, in the European area of Russia. ...

DAVID SANGER: Mr. President, it sounds like you're offering some way out here, some off-ramp. And it sounds like what it is, is at least an informal assurance that NATO is not going to take in Ukraine anytime in the next few decades. And it sounds like you're saying we would never put nuclear weapons there. He also wants us to move all of our nuclear weapons out of Europe and not have troops rotating through the old Soviet Bloc. Do you think there's space there, as well?

PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN: No. No, there's not space for that. We won't permanently station, but the idea we're not going to — we're going to actually increase troop presence in Poland, in Romania, etc., if in fact he moves, because we have a sacred obligation in Article 5 to defend those countries. They are part of NATO. We don't have that obligation relative to Ukraine, although we have great concern about what happens in Ukraine.

AMY GOODMAN: That's President Biden speaking at his two-hour news conference Wednesday.

Secretary of State Tony Blinken is planning to meet with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov Friday. Blinken is meeting with some of his NATO counterparts in Berlin today and was in Kyiv Wednesday.

To talk about U.S.-Russian relations, we're joined by Katrina vanden Heuvel, editorial director and publisher of *The Nation* magazine. She has been reporting from Russia and on Russia for the last 30 years. She's also a columnist for *The Washington Post*. Her latest piece is headlined "Stop the stumble toward war with Russia."

In your piece, you write, "In the technical argot of diplomacy, what's going on in the Ukraine crisis is nuts." Katrina, can you first respond to what President Biden said, what the White House took back after, and actually what is going on?

KATRINA VANDEN HEUVEL: Well, I mean, Amy, first of all, what you just listened to, David Sanger of *The New York Times*, who's been on the beat to promote a conflict or war with Russia for — with Russia-Ukraine for several years. What's going on is that the most immediate task is to defuse the immediate crisis. And you can hear in Biden's — the interstitial pieces of Biden, if you decipher what he said, that there is room, if there was creative diplomacy, if there was as much time spent pondering what Putin is going to do or worrying about the — you know, not even worrying, but ginning up war.

What's clear is that three presidents — Obama, Trump and even Biden — have said that Ukraine is not a national security, vital security interest of the United States. No president at this moment is going to send men and women to Ukraine to fight. It has become a proxy war, however. It's been geopoliticized, when in fact it's a civil war. And there is this relationship between Russia and Ukraine, and it also goes back to the bigger issue, Amy, of NATO expansion. In 1997, there was a vigorous debate in this country about NATO expansion, and key people who knew Russia well warned it would lead to a new Cold War.

So, here we are. And I think it — you know, we're living at a time, Amy, of pandemic, of racial division, of staggering economic inequality, of climate crisis. And to go to war, or even to contemplate these two new Cold Wars, Russia and China, seems to me nuts. And more attention should be paid to how we can exit these conflicts, how we can find a way for an independent Ukraine, free and whole, between East and West, as opposed to all this talk about more military massing on the border, or even — and I'll end here — *The New York Times* the other day planting anonymous intelligence sources warning of a false flag operation which would create a pretext for Russian invasion. There is that danger. Why I use the word “stumble” is that it, you know, looks a little like World War I, where some accident could happen. You've got two nuclear-armed countries. And I think instead of focusing on troops and this, let's find a diplomatic — tough diplomatic solution, and let's begin the arms control work that needs to be done. The INF could be brought back; it was abolished by John Bolton and Trump, 2019. Today's the Doomsday Clock announcement. Will it be closer to midnight, which is perilous? Lots of work to be done, instead of all this talk about war, war, war, troops, troops, troops.

NERMEEN SHAIKH: Well, Katrina, we'll go back in a second to, as you said, a possible diplomatic resolution to the conflict, you know, Blinken's meetings in the last couple of days, and tomorrow meeting with Lavrov. But you mentioned — and this is a critical issue — the question of NATO expansion since 1997. I mean, it's staggering. There have been a very large number of countries that have joined since 1997, Eastern European countries: Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Albania, Croatia, Montenegro and, most recently, North Macedonia. So, two questions: First of all, could you explain why Russia is especially concerned about Ukraine joining NATO? And also, what the significance, the importance of, what the function is of NATO, now that the — I mean, it's been decades now that the Warsaw Pact was dissolved?

KATRINA VANDEN HEUVEL: That is the central question, Nermeen. I mean, when the Warsaw Pact was dissolved, naturally one would think NATO would be dissolved, and we would find a new security architecture that wasn't a militarized one. By the way, in 1997, people like Paul Nitze — I mean, Paul Nitze, Richard Pipes, McNamara, these people opposed the expansion. But put that aside. The expansion of NATO was the expansion of a military institution, which is dominated by the United States. This is no coffee klatsch. This is a group which brings weapons to the fore. You have to buy certain weapons, you know, get in sync with the whole operation. There are other institutions that could have created, as Mikhail Gorbachev had spoken of a "common European home" from Vladivostok to Lisbon, which wouldn't have been militarized.

You know, Russia, the Soviet Union lost 27 million people in World War II. There is a real continuing fear, even in younger generations, about being encircled. And, you know, we had our Monroe Doctrine. We had our spheres of influence. What if Mexico — what if Soviet troops had — Russian troops suddenly decided to alight in Mexico? Borders matter, especially in the Russian historical consciousness. But that is playing a role right now. Ukraine, unlike the other countries you mentioned, has had a very special relationship with Russia, and Russia with Ukraine. Ukraine is a divided country. It is a country that has a right to be fully independent. But it is very much in — a lot of Russians are intermarried with Ukraine. Ukraine is not like Montenegro. And so, I think one has to understand that there is an expression in foreign affairs called strategic empathy. I mean, you try — and if there was standing in the other's shoes, not condoning, but understanding, I think we would be in a better place.

Finally, Article 5 of NATO demands that NATO members go to the military assistance of countries which are invaded. I come back to the fact that, first of all, no American president, in my understanding, will send American men and women to fight. There is talk of funding an insurgency in Ukraine. How did that turn out in Afghanistan when we funded the mujahideen?

So, there are a lot of issues. But, you know, Gorbachev was promised after German reunification that NATO would not move one inch eastward. That is to be found in archives — National Security Archive, for example. And there is kind of a thought that Putin is asking for written material because he thinks that might protect him from Gorbachev's fate. I don't think so. But again I come back to, if there is creative diplomacy, I think you could see a resolution of this crisis. And to have war at this time is to add to the other wars we confront, climate, pandemics.

NERMEEN SHAIKH: And as far as the negotiations are concerned, Katrina, can you talk about what we know so far about what happened in the meetings between Zelensky and Blinken, and today his meetings with his counterparts in the EU, and what to expect from what might happen tomorrow with Blinken's meeting with Lavrov? Yesterday also, on Wednesday, French President Macron, going against what the U.S. has called for, has urged EU states to speak directly to Russia. Could you comment on that, as well?

KATRINA VANDEN HEUVEL: That, I think, is very important, and it speaks to a diplomatic resolution that may be able to be revived, either called Minsk, the Minsk agreement, or the Normandy agreement, which was originally Germany, France, Russia, Ukraine, not the United States. But I think it's a good sign that European countries may have more independence — France, Germany — in working out something with Russia.

And I think, you know, what is happening in Ukraine, I don't know, except that Zelensky's rival arrived in Ukraine, Kyiv, the other day, the "Chocolate King," who was the previous president, and was arrested and is sitting in a courthouse. Why that's happening now maybe exposes some of the real problems in Ukraine. By the way, Ukraine couldn't legally enter NATO right now, because its territorial integrity is not whole.

I think Lavrov — and I'll get in trouble for this — is one of the most steady and experienced diplomats working today. So I think if Blinken and Lavrov could get beyond some of the kind of rhetoric, you could see some real dealings that would be a resolution, perhaps moving back to Minsk and/or finding EU as a vehicle or finding the OSCE, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. So, I think this is hopeful that there are ongoing meetings, because I do think the crisis immediately, the importance of that being defused then gives some space.

NERMEEN SHAIKH: And, Katrina, before we turn to other aspects of Biden's comments yesterday and assessment of his first year in office, one last point on what's happening now in Ukraine. I mean, the U.S. and EU have discussed the possibility of wide-ranging sanctions against Russia as a first step. I mean, there are already sanctions in place. Could you say something about the kinds of sanctions that are being contemplated and the significance of the U.S. possibly cutting Russia off from the dollar-denominated international financial system? What would that mean, and how likely is it?

KATRINA VANDEN HEUVEL: Well, I think you're certainly hearing a lot of talk about punitive sanctions, you know, onerous sanctions. First of all, one needs to understand there are already layers and layers of sanctions on Russia. In fact, the Democrats put forward their sanction bill the other day, and I believe it was Cruz put forward one.

I do think the SWIFT removing Russia from the global trading system could have real implications, but, you know, that could push Russia closer to China and an alternative currency, which would not be helpful to the Europeans or to the United States.

And I think the — again, in Germany, you have the big issue of Nord Stream, the pipeline. It's an interesting moment, because that is not yet fully approved. There are still regulatory issues. You now have a new government in Germany. The foreign minister is a Green, and the Greens are opposed to the pipeline for environmental and other reasons. So that may be played out apart from sanctions imposed by the United States.

In general, sanctions have not worked. They have made countries more resistant to U.S. pressure. And I think the whole matter of sanction as a foreign policy, in some cases it's the equivalent of war. The humanitarian cost has to be thought through.

AMY GOODMAN: We're going to leave it there for now and, of course, continue to cover this issue, Katrina vanden Heuvel, editorial director and publisher of *The Nation* magazine, columnist for *The Washington Post*. We'll link to your [pieces](#) there, the [latest one](#), "Stop the stumble toward war with Russia." Katrina is going to stay with us as we look at President Biden's first year in office and the Senate's failure to pass voting rights legislation after Manchin and Sinema sided with the Republicans to block changing the filibuster. And we will be joined, as well, by Ralph Nader. Stay with us.

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