

Military maneuvers and sanctions: NATO, EU escalate threats against Russia

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On Monday, NATO military exercises commenced in the Black Sea, against a backdrop of protests from Russia. The three-day marine exercise code-named “Sea Breeze” is another Western provocation, following the NATO summit at the end of last week, and raises the risk of a direct military confrontation between the West and Russia.

On Friday the frigate HMCS Toronto (Canada), SPS *Almirante Juan de Borbón* (Spain) and Romania’s *ROS Regele Ferdinand* sailed into the Bulgarian port of Burgas. The three ships are under the command of the Standing NATO Maritime Group 2 (SNMG 2), the NATO maritime task force in the Mediterranean, which is part of the NATO Response Force. The American destroyer *USS Ross* is also taking part in the maneuvers, and sailed into the Black Sea on Sunday together with the French frigate *Commandant Birot*.

Ukraine is also participating in the exercise together with the NATO powers, the US, Canada, Romania, Spain and Turkey. According to the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense, Ukraine has sent five warships, two border patrol boats, and navy aircraft and helicopters.

Russia called the NATO maneuvers “completely inappropriate” and is responding to Western threats with its own military preparations. It reportedly moved the missile cruiser “*Moskva*” into the Mediterranean. The Russian Navy is also conducting its own maneuvers in the Black Sea. Russia has around 20 warships plus Sukhoi Su-24 fighter-bombers and attack helicopters in the region, according to the Russian Defense Ministry.

Also, according to a *Washington Free Beacon* report cited in *Russia Today*, during last week’s NATO summit in Wales, two Russian Tu-95 “Bear” strategic bombers flew to predetermined launch sites in the North Atlantic in exercises for nuclear strikes on the

United States. Each bomber can carry six AS-15 nuclear-armed cruise missiles with a range of 1,800 miles. US and Canadian officials declined to comment, stating that the incident would have occurred outside the North American Air Defense Identification Zone.

While even Western media outlets such as Spiegel Online have described NATO’s Black Sea maneuvers as a “provocation by the United States and Ukraine towards Moscow,” Ukrainian and NATO officials have sought to play down the significance of the exercises.

The aim of the exercise was to ensure “maritime security in a crisis area,” the Defense Ministry in Kiev declared. A NATO spokesman claimed that the maneuver was planned prior to the current crisis in the Ukraine and was part of the measures the NATO Council adopted “to strengthen our collective defense and demonstrate the power of NATO solidarity.”

In fact, NATO measures to “strengthen common defense” are part and parcel of the imperialist powers’ offensive against Russia, which is being pursued unabated, despite the current ceasefire in eastern Ukraine and the 12-point plan agreed in Minsk.

In February, the EU and the United States, in close collaboration with the fascist forces of the Svoboda party and Right Sector, organized a coup against the pro-Russian Yanukovich government and installed a pro-Western puppet regime in Ukraine. Now, they are systematically exploiting the resulting crisis to advance NATO to the borders of Russia.

During a visit to Georgia on Sunday, US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel boasted that the Ukraine crisis had created an anti-Russian alliance consisting of the United States, the EU, and countries like Georgia and Ukraine. After a meeting with his Georgian counterpart, Irakli Alasania, Hagel said: “Russian actions here and in Ukraine are a challenge we take

very seriously. But Putin's actions has also meant that the United States and our friends in Europe, including Georgia, have moved closer together."

Parallel to the start of the NATO maneuver, the EU decided on tougher sanctions against Russia. According to EU diplomats, tough negotiations were carried out on Monday afternoon, which "achieved agreement in principle to an extension of sanctions against Russia." The sanctions are officially due to go into effect on Tuesday, when they are published in the *EU Official Journal*.

The new sanctions target the same areas as previous measures. Access to credit for Russian state banks, defense contractors and companies in oil production is to be restricted. The export of military goods will be made more difficult and the ban on export of technologies for oil production will be extended. In addition, the EU is imposing more bans on the travel and accounts of Russian politicians and businessmen, and Ukrainian separatist leaders.

A letter from EU Council President Herman Van Rompuy and Commission President José Manuel Barroso to the European leaders stated: "EU sanctions are aimed at bringing about a change of course in Russia's actions in the Ukraine." In fact, they are a fundamental element of the aggressive course against Russia, which, in addition to military escalation, is increasingly assuming the form of open economic war.

Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev accused the West of increasing the risk of international conflict with its sanctions. "The economic sanctions against us have political consequences that are worse than any export restrictions," he said, warning that the global security architecture has been weakened. "Whoever first introduced the sanctions should be clear about the fact that he bears responsibility for the consequences," he told the Russian newspaper *Vedomosti*.

In the event of new sanctions, Russia is threatening a wide range of countermeasures, including a possible ban on flights by Western airlines over Russian territory. "If Western Airlines have to avoid our airspace it could lead to bankruptcy of many airlines that are already struggling to survive," Medvedev said, warning of a further escalation of sanctions. "It's the wrong road. The sanctions against us have not led to peace in Ukraine."

While Russia is desperately seeking an agreement to

secure the status quo, the imperialist powers and their puppet in Kiev appear determined to step up the escalation despite all the warnings from Russia.

On Monday, the Ukrainian President and oligarch Petro Poroshenko visited the embattled port city of Mariupol on the Black Sea despite the official ceasefire. There he announced that the Ukrainian military will ensure the defense of the city with rocket launchers and threatened: "The enemy will suffer a crushing defeat." On Twitter, he wrote: "This is our Ukrainian country and we will not give it to anyone."



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