

Western powers intensify military pressure on Russia

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Despite a shaky ceasefire deal struck two weeks ago between Ukraine and pro-Russian separatists, NATO and the European Union are intensifying their military and economic offensive against Russia.

On September 5, a ceasefire agreement was brokered by the Ukrainian regime with pro-Russian separatists following a series of military setbacks for the Ukrainian army at the hands of the rebels.

Last Friday, representatives of the Ukrainian government, Russia, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) who met in Belarus agreed to concrete steps to enforce the ceasefire—in particular, a 30 kilometre buffer zone between Ukrainian forces and pro-Russian militias.

The response from NATO was immediate and dismissive. At a meeting Sunday of military chiefs in the Baltic state of Lithuania, NATO's leading commander in Europe, US Air Force General Philip Breedlove, told a news conference that the two-week-old truce was a “cease-fire in name only.”

Breedlove blamed Russian support for the rebels in the east for breaches of the ceasefire, while acknowledging he had no concrete information about the form of such Russian support.

The main topic of the NATO conference in Lithuania was the implementation of the alliance's so-called Readiness Action Plan, which involves stationing NATO ground and air forces in a number of states bordering Russia. Speaking at the conference, the right-wing and virulently anti-Russian president of Lithuania, Dalia Grybauskaite, called on NATO defense chiefs to make fast decisions.

Along with outgoing NATO General Secretary Anders Foch Rasmussen, General Breedlove has been one of the most bellicose advocates of a plan to encircle Russia with NATO troops. Deployment of NATO

troops to the Baltic States of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, as well as to Poland and Romania, is due to commence in October.

At the same time as the Vilnius conference was taking place, 1,300 troops from 15 nations were conducting military manoeuvres on Ukrainian soil as part of the Rapid Trident operation. The military exercises, which involve close coordination between US and Ukrainian military forces, are due to continue until September 26.

Against this background of military intimidation, the EU and the US have implemented a new round of economic sanctions. On Friday, EU and American sanctions aimed at major Russian banks, defence companies and oil and gas firms came into effect.

The restrictions on Russia's energy sector have been drawn up to avoid directly affecting the country's current production levels of oil and gas. Russia is the largest oil exporter outside of OPEC and the biggest supplier of natural gas to Europe. Any disruption of supplies could drive up the price of oil, which would benefit Russia and impact negatively on oil-importing countries.

Nevertheless, the latest round of Western sanctions will have major consequences for the Russian economy, which is already suffering from previous rounds of sanctions as well as the relatively low price of oil.

Announcing the sanctions, David Cohen, US Treasury under-secretary for terrorism and financial intelligence, declared: “Today's actions demonstrate our determination to increase the costs on Russia as long as it continues to violate Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty.”

Cohen's declaration came just a few days after the billionaire president of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko,

received a standing ovation when he spoke at a joint session of the US Congress and was given a pledge of support from the US president. After meeting with Obama, Poroshenko told reporters: “I asked the president to increase the cooperation in the security and defense sector, and I received a positive answer.”

The military and economic offensive by the West has been accompanied by renewed fighting in the regions occupied by pro-Russian rebels.

On Saturday, a series of explosions demolished an arms factory under the control of pro-Russian separatists in Donetsk. Rebel forces claim the factory was hit by a shell fired by the Ukrainian army, which occupies the city’s airport ten kilometres from the former Soviet weapons plant.

Acknowledging the active role of the Ukrainian military in the region, Army spokesman Andriy Lysenko declared at the weekend that his forces had killed 40 separatist fighters with what he termed “defensive” fire in the course of fighting around Donetsk’s airport.

The latest statements by NATO leaders and their plans to establish a cordon of Western troops along Russia’s eastern border make clear that the primary aim of the ceasefire is to buy time for the Ukrainian army to reorganise its forces.

It is an utterly reckless policy that risks drawing the entire region and the world into war. On the basis of NATO’s Article Five, a conflict with Moscow provoked by any one of NATO’s new and highly unstable frontline Baltic and Eastern European members would be sufficient to mobilise the entire alliance into what could rapidly develop into a nuclear confrontation with Russia.



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