

NATO begins anti-Russian air drill in Arctic

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More than 4,000 troops from six NATO countries and three non-member states began a major air exercise over far northern Europe Monday in one of the largest military mobilizations of the year. Arctic Challenge is to last two weeks and involves more than 100 warplanes from the United States, Britain, Germany, France, Norway, and the Netherlands, all NATO members, plus Sweden, Finland and Switzerland.

The US Air Force will contribute 12 F-16 jet fighters as well as AWACS radar aircraft. The European countries are contributing their own F-16s as well as Eurofighter Typhoons and Tornado GR4 fighters. Norway's Chief Brigadier General Jan Ove Rygg, in overall command of the exercise, said it would test "orchestration and conduct of complex air operations, in close relation to NATO partners."

The exercise is clearly directed against Russia, which borders on Norway, the host country for the drills, as well as on Finland. Both Finland and Sweden have raised the alarm over alleged Russian submarine penetration of their coastal waters in recent months, and tensions have worsened throughout the region because of ongoing anti-Russian provocations over Ukraine and the Baltic states.

On May 20, only five days before the beginning of the drill, Swedish fighter jets intercepted two Russian Tu-22M "Backfire" bombers over the Baltic Sea. While Swedish officials said the bombers were heading toward the Swedish island of Land, south of Stockholm, they conceded that the planes had remained throughout in international airspace.

The military exercise, which lasts until June 5, will include operations over northern Norway, Sweden and Finland as well as the Arctic Ocean, all areas a short flying time from northern Russia and critical military bases such as Murmansk, headquarters of the Russian Northern Fleet.

The exercises could easily trigger a confrontation

with Russian air force planes. According to a report by journalist Ahmed Rashid in the *New York Review of Books*, a similar drill in Estonia in April brought Russian and American planes within 20 feet of each other over the Baltic Sea. The near-collision had a "high probability of causing casualties or a direct military confrontation between Russia and Western states," Rashid wrote.

Arctic Challenge 2015 is the second such mobilization to include the two non-NATO Scandinavian countries and give NATO warplanes experience in operating in northern Swedish and Finnish airspace above the Arctic Circle.

It follows a series of operations testing the coordination of NATO forces against Russia on land, sea and air. There were NATO submarine detection drills off the Norwegian coast earlier this month, and two major ground exercises—Operation Hedgehog, in which 13,000 ground troops simulated a response to a Russian invasion of Estonia, and Operation Lightning Strike, involving 3,000 troops in Lithuania. Next month, the annual BaltOps exercise will bring a large number of NATO warships into the Baltic Sea.

The *Washington Post* wrote on May 16: "Training efforts have swept the region, and in the past week alone separate exercises took place in Poland, Lithuania, Georgia, Estonia and the Baltic Sea. Military planners said they were a practical attempt to drill new lessons about how Russia wages war... US military trainers are also in Ukraine trying to strengthen that nation's fighting forces even as a war burns in the eastern part of the country."

Next to eastern Ukraine, the Baltic states remain perhaps the most dangerous flashpoint between NATO and Russia, since the right-wing governments of the three countries have escalated tensions with Russia, claiming that they are the imminent targets of Russian military aggression although nothing of the kind is

actually in evidence. Moscow has repeatedly denied it has any designs on their territory.

On May 14, the three Baltic countries formally requested that NATO institute a permanent deployment of some 3,000 troops on their soil to reinforce the guarantee made by President Obama last year that he would invoke Article Five of the Atlantic Charter and go to war with Russia in the event of a military attack on Estonia, Latvia or Lithuania. Some NATO member countries are opposed to such a deployment, since it would violate a 1997 NATO-Russia agreement limiting the size of NATO forces stationed in the Baltics.

On May 22, the European Commission met in Riga, the Latvian capital, for discussions with the leaders of six former Soviet republics—Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus. It was the first such meeting of the European Union’s “Eastern Partnership” since November 2013, when the EU offered a deal for economic association to Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych. It was Yanukovych’s decision to reject the association agreement that prompted the campaign, backed by the US and the EU, which led to the overthrow of his government by the ultra-right elements who now hold sway in Kiev.

On the eve of the Arctic Challenge exercise, NATO defense chiefs from all 28 member countries met in Washington to discuss “challenges from Russia and from non-state actors,” according to a Pentagon press release. Danish General Knud Bartels, who chaired the May 22 gathering, said the NATO powers “are implementing the biggest reinforcement of our collective defense since the end of the Cold War.”

In addition to tensions with Russia over Ukraine, Bartels pointed to NATO playing a larger role in southern Europe, where refugee flows across the Mediterranean are being treated as a military issue.

NATO Supreme Commander Philip Breedlove said, “To the south, we face a different set of challenges that involve multiple state and non-state actors. Our members are facing the consequences of instability in North Africa, Sahel and sub-Saharan as well as other regions, which is driving migration and proving fertile ground for extremism, violence and terrorism.”

In the fall, the Pentagon said, NATO will conduct one of its largest-ever exercises involving the southern European countries. Trident Juncture 15 will mobilize 35,000 troops from 33 countries, as well as personnel

from international and non-governmental organizations.



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