

Amid NATO threats, Russia launches largest war games since World War II

Alex Lantier

1 September 2018

This September, hundreds of thousands of Russian, NATO and Chinese troops are being mobilized in dueling war games across Eurasia. These exercises, the largest in Russia and Europe since the end of World War II, come amid an escalation of military conflicts and tensions directly posing the danger of a clash between nuclear-armed powers.

Today, as the Russian Navy mounts its largest deployment in the Mediterranean Sea in decades, Moscow is launching eight days of naval-aerial exercises in that region. The exercise involves 25 ships and 30 aircraft, including Tu-160 strategic bombers, whose capabilities include continental nuclear strikes. The Russian Defense Ministry advised that areas covered by the drill will be blocked off and “declared dangerous for navigation and flights.”

On September 11, Russia and China will launch the Vostok-18 (“East-18”) drills in eastern Russia’s trans-Baikal region. Vostok-18 is to surpass in size even the 1981 Zapad-81 drill, the largest war game carried out by the Soviet Union after World War II. It is to involve a staggering 300,000 troops, 1,000 aircraft, and 36,000 vehicles on the Russian side, together with 3,200 troops, 30 aircraft and 900 vehicles from China. Mongolian troops will also participate.

On September 3, 2,270 NATO troops will participate in Exercise Rapid Trident 2018 in Ukraine, on Russia’s borders. This is only a prelude, however, to what will likely be the largest NATO war game in Europe since the end of the Cold War: Trident Juncture 2018, from October 25 to November 7 in Norway, again on Russia’s borders. This will involve 40,000 NATO troops, together with 130 aircraft and 70 warships. They are to be spearheaded by an unprecedented German contribution of 8,000 troops, 100 tanks and 2,000 combat vehicles.

The vast scope of these exercises is a warning to working people everywhere. In the capitals of the major

powers, behind the backs of the people, cabals of state and military officials are planning wars that would devastate the planet and kill billions. These exercises come as tensions in various flashpoints created by decades of US-led NATO wars reach new heights, and the danger of direct conflict between NATO, Russia and China is openly discussed.

These flashpoints include:

- The breakdown of US talks with North Korea, which borders on eastern Russia and which Trump threatened last year with “fire and fury like the world has never seen,” that is, with nuclear war. Now Washington is warning it may resume military drills in South Korea, which last year involved 23,000 US and 300,000 South Korean troops in practicing “pre-emptive” attacks targeting North Korea.

- Russian warnings that UK intelligence is preparing a chemical attack in Syria’s Idlib region, the last holdout of NATO-backed Islamist rebels, as a provocation for Washington, London and Paris to justify another unprovoked bombing of Syria, like this April. “We have sent a strong warning to our Western partners not to play with fire,” said Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, as US guided missile destroyer USS Ross arrives in the Mediterranean, facing off against the Russian flotilla.

- The killing in a terror bombing yesterday of Alexander Zakharchenko, the leader of the Russian-backed separatist Donetsk People’s Republic in east Ukraine. The Russian foreign ministry said it views this as an assassination carried out by the NATO-backed Ukrainian regime in Kiev.

Main responsibility for the war danger lies with the imperialist powers, above all the United States and the major Western European powers. For over a quarter century since the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, they have escalated aggressive military interventions across Eurasia, from Yugoslavia to Iraq and

Syria, through to Afghanistan and beyond. These wars cost millions of lives and shattered entire countries, as Washington sought to maintain its failing global hegemony.

Washington's threats against Russia and China came into the open in January when it published a new National Security Strategy, dropping the pretense that it was waging a "war of terror" and naming Russia and China as targets. Presenting the document, US Defense Secretary James Mattis branded Russia and China as "revisionist powers" threatening a US-led world order and said "great power competition, not terrorism, is now the primary focus of US national security."

Moscow and Beijing are declaring that their exercises are a response to the US National Security Strategy and stepped-up US military activity worldwide. Russian state media cited foreign policy commentator Mark Sleboda, who said the exercises are a signal to Washington and "a response to their national security strategy, as well as a response to US and NATO posturing in the South China Sea, in the Taiwan Strait, as well as ... the permanent stationing of troops that we are seeing on Russia's western border."

Sleboda bluntly stated that Moscow and Beijing are planning joint missile defense exercises to prepare for potential global nuclear war, as they "foresee that any strategic nuclear conflict that embroils one would, naturally, involve both."

The Chinese Defense Ministry has stated that the exercises aimed "to strengthen strategic military partnership between the two countries, deepen friendship and cooperation between the two militaries and further boost the two countries' joint capability to deal with security threats."

The scale of the Russian-Chinese exercises appears to be a warning addressed to military strategists and ruling elites in the imperialist countries, that Moscow and Beijing earnestly believe they could be on the brink of all-out nuclear war.

François Heisbourg, the well-known strategist at London's International Institute for Strategic Studies think-tank and the *Fondation de recherche stratégique* in Paris, Tweeted: "This new exercise goes beyond what may be useful for prestige purposes. It involves 30 percent of Russian active duty military & must be costly at a time when Russia's defence budget is under strain. This only makes sense if large-scale war is viewed as a high probability contingency."

Jonathan Holslag of the Free University of Brussels told

the *South China Morning Post* the exercises are a "signal of deterrence," adding: "It shows that, while there is still a lot of distrust between Moscow and Beijing, Moscow sees no other choice but to work with China, especially as relations with the US remain unstable and Chinese financial support is needed to mitigate the effects of Western sanctions."

The policy of Moscow and Beijing, rooted in the bankrupt nationalism of the post-Soviet capitalist oligarchies in both countries, offers no way forward in opposing the imperialist war drive. These regimes are incapable of appealing to anti-war sentiment in the international working class. Rather, they oscillate between risking an all-out war with the imperialist powers that could cost billions of lives and begging the United States and its allies, which Moscow dubs its "Western partners," for a deal.

There are indications that, as Trump threatens Europe with trade war, Moscow has some hope of splitting NATO and winning over the European imperialist powers against Washington. Indeed, Berlin has indicated it may be open to Moscow's proposals for talks on Syria including Turkey and France, Germany's main partner in plans to militarize the European Union, and excluding Washington. This plan is bankrupt, however: it entails backing EU countries' plans to plunge hundreds of billions of euros to build up their military machines which, as the NATO exercises show, are aimed at Russia.

As at the beginning of the 20th century, rival capitalist governments are teetering on the brink of world war, this time involving nuclear weapons. This drive to war cannot be stopped outside of a conscious intervention by the working class. The main danger is that masses of people are not aware of the immediacy of the risk. This is why the WSWs stresses the urgency of building an international anti-war movement in the working class, based on an anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist perspective.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact