

US defense secretary launches simulated nuclear attack against Russia in Pentagon war game

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As more than 20,000 US troops and 20,000 military vehicles began to arrive in Europe for the massive “Defender 2020” exercise targeting Russia, US Defense Secretary Mark Esper took part in a war game at US Strategic Command headquarters in Omaha, Nebraska involving the simulated use of nuclear weapons against Russian troops.

“The scenario included a European contingency where you’re conducting a war with Russia and Russia decides to use a low-yield, limited nuclear weapon against a site on NATO territory,” the Defense Department said in a background briefing Friday.

When pressed by reporters, the Pentagon made clear that as part of the exercise, the US launched a nuclear weapon against Russian troops in what the Pentagon called a “limited” response.

“I mean, in the course of the exercise, we simulated responding with a nuclear weapon,” the Pentagon briefer said.

None of the reporters at the background briefing asked the obvious question: Whether the use of nuclear weapons by both the United States and Russia led to a full-scale nuclear exchange. But as journalist Fred Kaplan recently commented, “No one in officialdom has ever played a war game in which a ‘limited’ attack believably stays limited. Things spiral out of control pretty quickly.”

Russian authorities viewed the exercise as a threat. Konstantin Kosachev, the head of the foreign affairs committee of the Russian legislature’s upper house, linked the war game to the United States’ recent withdrawal from the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty.

“If you conduct exercises on a nuclear response to an

attack by an enemy, you are thereby convincing people that such an attack is likely, and you need not to negotiate or sign arms control agreements, but arm yourself,” Kosachev told RIA Novosti on February 22.

Last year, the United States withdrew from the INF treaty, which prohibited the deployment of land-based missiles, including nuclear missiles, with ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometers.

The US is massively expanding and modernizing its nuclear arsenal. In December, Washington tested a ballistic missile that would have violated the treaty.

These moves are part of US preparations for what Defense Secretary Mark Esper, speaking at this month’s Munich Security Conference, called “high-intensity conflicts against competitors such as Russia and China.”

In Friday’s background briefing, the US officials went into detail on the US government’s sweeping \$1 trillion plan to enlarge the US nuclear arsenal, making clear that “most of the nuclear modernization that you see before you started under the previous administration, started under the Obama administration. And we’re just continuing it.”

Over the past two months, the US Navy deployed several new “low-yield” warheads on Trident submarine-launched ballistic missiles. The move was widely condemned by arms control experts. Despite having just a fraction of the explosive force of normal nuclear warheads, these weapons are by all accounts indistinguishable from “strategic” nuclear weapons, the use of which would in most conceivable scenarios trigger a full-scale thermonuclear exchange and the end of human civilization.

As Kaplan recently warned, “For many years, arms

control advocates have argued that low-yield nuclear weapons are destabilizing because they lower the threshold between conventional and nuclear war. They seem to be—they are designed to be—more usable as weapons of war, and therefore some president, in a crisis, might feel more tempted to use them.”

On Friday, the same day that the Pentagon disclosed the nuclear exercise, the first contingent of US tanks, troops and equipment arrived in the German port of Bremerhaven for “Defender 2020.” The exercise will involve 37,000 troops, including 20,000 soldiers transported across the Atlantic, in the largest US military deployment in Europe in 25 years.

“The security order that Europe believed it had with Russia no longer works,” Claudia Major, an expert in security and defense policy at a leading German think tank, told Deutsche Welle. “Russia is no longer a strategic partner. Europeans have to deal with the question again: ‘How do we defend ourselves in Europe?’”

The Trump administration’s threats against Russia come as the Democrats, joined by a faction of anti-Trump Republicans, intensify their anti-Russia campaign, centered on allegations that the Trump administration is insufficiently confrontational toward Moscow.

In a column titled “Why the Russians still prefer Trump,” *Washington Post* columnist Max Boot defended his claim that Trump has been “soft” on Russia. He wrote: “It’s true, as Republicans say, that Trump sent anti-tank missiles to Ukraine—but only under conditions that make them useless against Russia.”

He continued, “In July 2017, Trump ended a covert program of training and supplying moderate Syrian rebels—‘a move long sought by Russia,’ as the *Post* noted.” Boot added, “Trump has facilitated Russian designs not only in Syria but also in Libya.”

The Democratic impeachment drive was framed entirely on this pro-war basis, with Congressman Adam Schiff, speaking from the Senate floor on the second day of the impeachment trial of President Trump, declaring that “the United States aids Ukraine and her people so that we can fight Russia over there and we don’t have to fight Russia here.”

Last month, the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, which for more than seven decades has maintained a

Doomsday Clock, warned that human civilization is closer to midnight, i.e., total destruction, than at any other period in history, including the Cuban Missile Crisis at the height of the Cold War.

“Civilization-ending nuclear war—whether started by design, blunder, or simple miscommunication—is a genuine possibility,” the group said in its annual report. “Any belief that the threat of nuclear war has been vanquished is a mirage.”



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