

US prepares anti-Russian war games amid COVID-19 pandemic

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Washington and its NATO allies are continuing to escalate military tensions with Moscow, as the coronavirus pandemic unleashes political crises in both the United States and Russia. In May, the US Navy made a show of force in the Arctic beyond anything witnessed in decades, sending vessels into strategic waters bordering Russia. The US also just announced it is proceeding with DEFENDER-Europe 20, military exercises involving NATO allies, which had been scheduled for March but were postponed over concerns about the spread of COVID-19 among troops.

In a little over two weeks, 6,000 US and Polish troops will simulate ground and airborne attacks about 35 miles from the Russian territory of Kaliningrad. Involving tens of thousands of pieces of equipment, the US government says that DEFENDER-Europe 20 is aimed at testing capacity to respond to “regional crises” and “border security.” The operation is heavily reliant on participation by Germany, which in this first phase is serving as a transit hub for troops and materiel into Poland.

Further exercises are planned for the Black Sea and the Balkans, where in March the mini-state of Northern Macedonia gained admittance to NATO. Georgia, which borders the Black Sea on its west, will play a central role in the ongoing war games. American forces are working to boost the country’s ability to respond to “aggressive” energy blockades, covert intelligence operations, and “cyber-misinformation,” the latter being one of the central charges leveled against Russia in the COVID-19 pandemic.

On Tuesday, the head of Russia’s navy, Mikhail Yevmenov, announced upcoming plans to stage exercises off the country’s Baltic coast involving six warships with short and mid-range weapons’ capacities.

According to the Kremlin, DEFENDER-Europe 20 will ultimately involve 37,000 troops and be the largest US military exercise staged on European soil in 25 years. Moscow has strenuously objected to the war games along its border and what it describes as NATO’s growing efforts to draw formally neutral European Union countries such as Sweden and Finland into an overtly anti-Russian military campaign. On May 19, the Kremlin also warned against the redeployment of NATO nuclear weapons to Poland from Germany.

DEFENDER-Europe 20, whose first stage will take place from June 5 to 19, follows on the heels of a sharp uptick in American naval activity in the Norwegian and Barents Seas. In early May, US destroyers and nuclear submarines, along with a British frigate, conducted exercises in the waters off Norway, which shares a border with Russia in the far north. Shortly thereafter, three American ships entered the Barents Sea, where Russia’s northern fleet is stationed in the coastal city of Murmansk.

Washington insists that its actions are a response to Moscow’s operations in the area, where Russian special forces recently conducted the first-ever Arctic parachute drop from a height of nearly 33,000 feet. In March, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree on government policy in the Arctic aimed at increasing its security operations. Russia and China’s economic cooperation in the region has also increased in recent years, as the Chinese have stepped forward to finance the transport of energy resources through the Arctic.

Whatever tactical capacities and experience the Russian military has in the Arctic, however, are far exceeded by the combined military might of the US, its NATO allies and the Nordic states, which since 2018

have become ever-more involved in American-led exercises geared at securing domination of the far-northern waters against Russia as well as China. Among ordinary people, however, these policies are deeply unpopular. A recent poll found that in only three NATO countries—Great Britain, the Netherlands and Lithuania—did a majority of the population want NATO to respond to a Russian attack.

Meanwhile, Washington continues to press ahead with shredding military agreements with Moscow. The US is expected to withdraw soon from the Open Skies Treaty, a 2002 accord involving 35 states, including Russia, that allows countries to conduct unarmed fly-overs of member states with the purpose of monitoring each other's military facilities. Last year, the US scrapped the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty with Russia and immediately began testing the previously-banned weapons.

The last nuclear arms deal between the US and Russia left standing, the 2010 New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty), is set to expire next year, and Trump administration officials have given no grounds to believe that the US will agree to its renewal.

The US escalation of tensions with Russia comes as the two countries have become the world leaders in terms of COVID-19 infections. American cases now top 1.5 million and Russian cases have crossed the 300,000 mark. While the US accounts for nearly one-third of all coronavirus deaths around the globe, Russia continues to report a remarkably low, and highly questionable, death rate.

The American media has sought to use COVID-19 to stoke up further anti-Russian sentiment. There are widespread claims that Russia is behind false information about the origins of the coronavirus, which it is allegedly pumping out in an effort to interfere in the upcoming US elections. Moscow has also been accused of seeking to foment international schisms and deepen the domestic political crises in other foreign states.

As coronavirus sweeps through nursing homes across Europe and the US, and states on both sides of the Atlantic fight over desperately-needed medical supplies, NATO head Jens Stoltenberg denounced Russia for taking advantage of the obvious by trying “to portray NATO allies as if we are unable to, for instance, protect our elderly or that we are not able to

work together.”

The oddly-low COVID-19 death rate in Russia has also been the subject of a barrage of commentary about the Kremlin's nefarious methods for suppressing information, with little acknowledgment that the United States, and every other country, is involved in similar efforts to hide the spread of the disease and cover up the political rot fueling the deadly virus.

While the Democratic Party attempts to outdo the Republicans in anti-Russian hysteria, the war drive is supported by both parties, which see it as essential to efforts to project American power around the world. On May 8, in a crude display of anti-Russian sentiment, US President Donald Trump took to Twitter to laud the United States and Great Britain for their “victory over the Nazis!” Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov denounced the statement on the 75th anniversary of Hitler's defeat in Europe for failing to acknowledge the decisive role played in the event by the Soviet Union, which bore the brunt of the fighting in Europe and sustained millions more casualties than any other country.



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