

Iran, Russia and China launch joint naval exercises in Indian Ocean

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On February 16, as NATO prepared its summit to prosecute “strategic rivalry” with Russia and China, Iranian and Russian warships launched ongoing naval drills in strategic waters of the Indian Ocean, south of Iran and the oil-rich Persian Gulf. They are to soon be joined by Chinese warships which were reportedly delayed by the Chinese New Year festival.

The drills highlight the global war tensions that are at explosive levels as the Biden administration takes office. These are the second such exercises, continuing a format inaugurated by joint Iranian-Russian-Chinese “Maritime Security Belt” naval drills held in December 2019. Shortly afterwards, Washington ordered the brazen assassination of top Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, who was murdered in a US drone strike at the Baghdad airport on January 3, 2020.

This year’s Iranian-Russian-Chinese exercises take place as Iran’s economy reels under the impact of US sanctions and the COVID-19 pandemic. As he maintains devastating financial sanctions that Trump imposed on Iran after unilaterally scrapping the 2015 Iranian nuclear treaty, Biden ordered last month a provocative flyover of the Persian Gulf by a lone B-52 Stratofortress bomber escorted by Saudi F-15 fighter jets.

The Iranian-Russian-Chinese drill underscores that with its threats against Iran, Washington is prosecuting a far broader, global conflict that threatens to erupt into war.

This drill comes shortly after the larger Malabar 2020 naval exercise in November with US, Indian, Japanese and Australian ships including aircraft carriers USS Nimitz and INS Vikramaditya. This joint naval mobilization of the so-called “Asian Quad” of US allies was, as Voice of America reported citing Indian naval spokespersons, an “effort to contain China.” Shortly after these exercises, top Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh died on November 27, near Tehran, in what US intelligence officials described as an Israeli assassination.

Iran’s Navy Chief Rear Admiral Hossein Khanzadi announced that the current drill aims to “ensure collective

security in the region and in the northern Indian Ocean.” Khanzadi implied that the drill aims to expel US influence from the region: “It means that global arrogance which until today dominated the region must realize that it needs to leave it.”

While Khanzadi also initially reported that Indian warships would join the joint exercise, Indian navy officials subsequently denied that India is participating in the exercises.

The Russian Baltic fleet press service reported that the corvette Stoyky and the tanker Kola would participate in the exercise. It said that “Russian and Iranian sailors will carry out joint maneuvers, the freeing of a merchant ship hijacked by pirates, as well as extinguishing a simulated fire on a ship in distress.” It added that the ships would practice artillery firing at surface targets, searchlight signaling, and defense against piracy or sabotage operations.

On February 8, as Russian Ambassador to Iran Levan Dzhagaryan announced the exercises, General Kenneth F. McKenzie, the commander of the US Central Command that leads US military operations in the Middle East, denounced them at the Middle East Institute in Washington.

He said, “The CENTCOM [area of operations] is and always has been a crossroads of global interests and, historically, a prime arena for foreign powers to compete for influence for resources and for access. In 2020, Russia and China exploited an ongoing regional crisis; financial infrastructure needs; perception of declining US engagement; and opportunities created by COVID-19 to advance their objectives across the Middle East and central and southern Asian nations to gain or strengthen footholds in the region.”

While branding Iran as a supporter of “terrorist organizations” and for supposedly driving “instability seen in Syria and Yemen,” McKenzie also attacked Moscow and Beijing.

He said Russia would “continue to challenge US presence as opportunities present themselves.” He cited Moscow’s attempts to serve “as an alternative to the West by trying to

mediate regional conflicts” and to increase its influence by “participating in regional and multilateral organizations and military exercises.” He added that “China uses its ‘Belt and Road’ initiative and the China-Pakistan economic corridor to expand Chinese influence and presence” in the Middle East.

US imperialism faces an insoluble crisis amid its catastrophic response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the debacle of its Middle East policy. In the three decades since the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 removed the main military counterweight to US imperialism, Washington waged aggressive wars from Iraq to Afghanistan, Libya and Syria. Costing millions of lives and trillions of dollars, these wars did not reverse but hastened US decline. US forces withdrew or left behind skeleton forces in countries they had invaded, discredited at home and abroad.

While Washington retains regional military superiority with vast naval and air forces in heavily-guarded strategic bases across the Middle East, this cannot resolve a crisis rooted in profound shifts in global economy and class relations that have matured over decades.

Russia and Iran both intervened in Syria to oppose the Al Qaeda-linked militias NATO supported in the proxy war for regime change it launched against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in 2011. With US, European, Russian, Iranian and Turkish forces all intervening in Syria, the country lost over a half-million dead; 10 million Syrians were made refugees.

The NATO defeat in the war, with its proxies now consigned to a small portion of Syria’s territory, has gone hand in hand with a reorientation in the region as China emerges as the main trading partner for many countries in the region, and the debacle of the US response to COVID-19.

Last July, the *New York Times* broke news that China and Iran has signed a 25-year treaty of commercial and military cooperation. In an alarmed article, it wrote: “At a time when the United States is reeling from recession and the coronavirus, and increasingly isolated internationally, Beijing senses American weakness. The draft agreement with Iran shows that unlike most countries, China feels it is in a position to defy the United States, powerful enough to withstand American penalties, as it has in the trade war waged by President Trump.”

The *Times* called the alliance “a sweeping economic and security partnership” based on \$400 billion of Chinese investment in Iranian industry and infrastructure. It added, “The partnership, detailed in an 18-page proposed agreement obtained by The New York Times, would vastly expand Chinese presence in banking, telecommunications, ports, railways and dozens of other projects. In exchange,

China would receive a regular—and, according to an Iranian official and an oil trader, heavily discounted—supply of Iranian oil over the next 25 years.”

The *Times* pointed to growing Chinese influence in regional infrastructure and the potential for a corresponding growth of China’s influence in naval affairs and in the region’s critical oil trade. Chinese ports built under the BRI program in the Indian Ocean region, like Hambantota in Sri Lanka and Gwadar in Pakistan, it wrote, constitute “a necklace of refueling and resupply stations from the South China Sea to the Suez Canal. Ostensibly commercial in nature, the ports potentially have military value, too, allowing China’s rapidly growing navy to expand its reach.”

While Beijing is attempting to balance its relations with Iran with its close commercial relations with Iran’s regional rivals, like Saudi Arabia, this treaty was nonetheless confirmed. Moreover, as Chinese firms recently completed railroads linking China to Tehran via ex-Soviet Central Asia, US diplomatic sources speculated that China might finance the post-war reconstruction of Syria, estimated at between \$200 billion and \$1 trillion.

These events are, in the final analysis, a warning to the working class. There can be little doubt that Washington will respond to the growing weakness and crisis of its position with renewed wars and reactionary intrigues, even though it faces nuclear-armed opponents in both Russia and China.

As for the Iranian, Russian and Chinese capitalist regimes, they have no progressive solution to imperialist aggression or the crisis of the imperialist-dominated world order. Oscillating between desperate attempts to cut deals with Washington and to threaten it with their militaries, they leave the world teetering on the brink of global nuclear war.

It is urgent to build an international, socialist movement in the working class. Such a movement can not only fight for a scientifically-driven world policy to halt the COVID-19 pandemic, but end the danger of war by overthrowing the capitalist system which gives rise to the drive to war.



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