NATO begins massive Defender 2021 military exercises aimed at Russia

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The United States, at the head of the NATO military alliance, is continuing its military and diplomatic drive to encircle and subjugate Russia. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact in 1991, NATO has absorbed much of Eastern Europe and, with the Euromaidan coup of 2014 in Ukraine, expanded its sphere of influence up to Russia's border. This is the context in which the huge NATO military exercise beginning this week, Defender 2021 Europe, unfolds.

Since March, NATO has amassed over 28,000 soldiers from 26 allied nations to practice for war.

As a "host nation," Germany plays a central role. "Due to Germany's geostrategic location in the heart of Europe, the Federal Republic is a regular transit country and hub for military transports and movements of our allied partners," a spokesman for the Armed Forces Base Command (KdoSKB) stated.

Strategic military depots (Army Prepositions Stocks) in Germany, Italy and the Netherlands sent stockpiles of heavy weaponry by barge, rail and convoy to positions across the European theatre. The goal, according to General Christopher Cavoli of the US Army Europe and Africa command, is to "hone our abilities alongside our allies' partners in the strategically important Balkans and Black Sea region," that is, on Russia's doorstep. These drills will continue into June.

The Defender 2020 exercise practiced the mobilization of the US-NATO war machine along the northern approaches of Russia through Germany, Poland and the Baltic. Defender 2021 approaches Russia from the south and the Black Sea. It tests "interoperability" between NATO armed forces and confirms the capacity of transport infrastructure to move armies and heavy weapons.

According to a US military fact-sheet on Defender-Europe 2021, the exercise "demonstrates our ability to serve as a strategic security partner in the western Balkans and Black Sea regions while sustaining our abilities in northern Europe, the Caucasus, Ukraine and Africa." Listed among the "countries participating in exercise activities" are non-NATO member states Ukraine and Georgia.

This is extremely provocative. The largest war game in Europe since the end of the Cold War includes two countries that have recently attacked Russia in border disputes in which they had NATO support: Georgia in a brief 2008 war, and Ukraine after the 2014 coup.

In coming days, NATO will live-fire multiple rocket-launch systems in the Tapa Training Center in Estonia, barely 200 km from Russia's Baltic Sea port and second largest city, St. Petersburg; conduct naval operations at Alexandroupoli in Greece, athwart Russia's access route to the Mediterranean; and execute night-time and airborne operations in Romania and Bulgaria, across the Black Sea from Russia's naval base at Sevastopol on the Crimean peninsula.

US-NATO manoeuvres were in full swing well before Defender 2021 began. In March, nuclear-capable B-1B strategic bombers, flying from Ørland Air Base in Norway, were accompanied by German and Italian fighter jets on missions through the Baltic states, along the Russian border. At the same time, French and Spanish fighter jets flying from Romania's coastal air base at Constanta simulated attacks on warships in the Black Sea.

"The Baltic and Black Sea regions are of strategic importance to the Alliance," NATO spokesperson Oana Lungescu said. Painting Russia as the aggressor in the US-NATO war drive, Lungescu claimed the war games aim "to deter aggression, prevent conflict and preserve peace."

A more frank presentation of NATO plans is provided by a strategy paper by retired General Ben Hodges of May 2020. In the report, titled "One Flank, One Threat, One Presence," the former commander of the US Army

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Europe lays out plans to “gain the initiative” in the Baltic and Black Seas. It explains how NATO could gain strategic dominance in the Black Sea by imposing “sea denial” upon Russia, aiming for “sea control.”

This comes after Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky’s government unveiled plans to “recover” the Crimea, including the strategically vital Black Sea naval base at Sevastopol, from Russia.

This port not only provides Russia access to the Mediterranean but is the main headquarters of Russia’s Black Sea Fleet. Unsurprisingly, Russia protected this port during the German- and US-backed coup in Ukraine in 2014, and agreed to annex Crimea after its population voted to rejoin Russia. Any attempt to forcibly “recover” the Crimea would necessarily involve attacking the Russian armed forces—that is, war with Russia.

In March, Washington formally requested Turkey grant two US warships passage through the Bosporus to the Black Sea. This elicited unsubtle threats from Russia, whose Deputy Foreign Minister Ryabkov declared: “We warn the United States that it will be better for them to stay far away from Crimea and our Black Sea coast. It will be for their own good.”

Washington subsequently recalled the deployment. On April 16, Russia’s RIA Novosti news agency reported that coordinated Russian naval and air force exercises will close the Black Sea waters around Crimea until October. Nonetheless, Great Britain, a NATO member state, has announced plans to send warships to the area.

While Defender Europe is training for combat on Russia’s western front, Washington is holding parallel war games on Russia’s eastern borders. The Defender Pacific exercises, aimed at both Russia and China, involve the US Air Force, Navy and Marines as well as the Japanese Air Self-Defence Force and the Royal Australian Air Force. In January, the US Army announced the formation of an “Arctic Multi-domain Task Force,” advancing the United State’s encirclement of Russia to its north.

This year saw the inauguration of the “Quad,” a semi-military alliance of Japan, Australia, India and the US, aimed specifically at China but at Russia, as well.

One hardly dares imagine Washington’s apoplectic response if a “strategic competitor” were to hold war games within striking distance of US shores, yet the largest mobilization of NATO since the end of the Cold War has gone largely unremarked in Western media. Instead, its pages are packed with lurid, misleading and mostly unsubstantiated anti-Russian propaganda. Every military or diplomatic move by the United States and its NATO allies against Russia is invariably attended by a media campaign framing Russia as the aggressor.

Military tensions are rising in line with an accelerating breakdown of diplomatic relations. Russia recalled its ambassador to the US, usually the last step before the outbreak of war, after President Biden publicly called Russian President Putin a “killer.”

The Biden administration is following the pattern of confrontation with Russia and China pursued by the Trump and Obama administrations before it, and supported, whatever their often bitter tactical differences, by politicians of both of America’s big-business parties. Similar strategic concerns lie behind the growing tensions between the US and China, as Washington responds to China’s rapid economic growth. Belligerent US policy in that theatre, openly stated with Obama’s 2011 “pivot to Asia,” continues today in the growing conflict with China over Taiwan.

While no support can be given to the capitalist oligarchy in Moscow that emerged from the Stalinist regime’s restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union in 1991, calling Russia the aggressor in this geostrategic rivalry inverts reality.

The NATO imperialist powers are the driving force behind the rising tide of war, as Washington’s attempt to defend its faltering world hegemony sets the stage for a conflict unparalleled in history. A world war based on modern military technology would threaten the survival of humanity. It can only be stopped through the independent mobilization of the working class in an international anti-war movement based on a socialist programme.

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