

NATO begins massive anti-Russian Sea Breeze military exercises

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NATO intensified its provocations against Russia Monday, with the launch of two weeks of military exercises in the Black Sea region. Operation Sea Breeze will continue until at least July 10.

The largest ever NATO operation in the Black Sea takes place under explosive conditions, beginning just six days after Russian armed forces fired warning shots and then dropped four bombs in the path of HMS Defender, a British warship that entered Russia's territorial waters off Crimea. The US ignored a request made June 22 from Russia's embassy in Washington—just hours before the UK warship incident—for Sea Breeze to be cancelled this year, with Moscow warning of the danger of military confrontation.

This week's Sea Breeze manoeuvres, which have taken place annually since 1997, are the largest ever. Co-hosted by the US and Ukrainian navies, Sea Breeze 2021 will involve 32 countries, 5,000 troops, 32 ships, 40 aircraft and 18 special operations. It is being led by the Standing NATO Maritime Group 2 (SNMG2), an immediate reaction force which consists of four to six destroyers and frigates. A squadron of US Marines are taking part, with the main naval force involved the US Navy's Sixth Fleet headquartered in Naples, Italy.

The NATO website states that “allies and partners” will participate from “Albania, Australia, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Denmark, Egypt, Estonia, France, Georgia, Greece, Israel, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Morocco, Norway, Pakistan, Poland, Romania, Senegal, Spain, South Korea, Sweden, Tunisia, Turkey, Ukraine, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, and the United States.”

Last year Sea Breeze took place over just four days between July 20 and 24, with only ships, aircraft and personnel from the United States, Ukraine, Bulgaria,

Georgia, Norway, Romania, Spain and Turkey.

In a June 25 statement NATO said, “The exercise will focus on multiple warfare areas including amphibious warfare, land manoeuvre warfare, diving operations, maritime interdiction operations, air defence, special operations integration, anti-submarine warfare, and search and rescue operations.”

Ahead of the operation, the missile destroyer USS Ross sailed into the Black Sea on June 26. Kristina Kvien, the Chargé d'affaires at the US Embassy in Ukraine called this “a tangible demonstration of US support for Ukraine and is necessary now more than ever.” The statement noted, “Ross, forward-deployed at Naval Station Rota, Spain, is conducting naval operations in the US Sixth Fleet area of operations in support of U.S. national security interests in Europe... Ross is one of four US Navy destroyers based in Rota, Spain, and assigned to Commander, Task Force 65 in support of NATO's Integrated Air Missile Defense architecture.”

While Sea Breeze was only formally announced this month, its planning has been worked out for months. In April, the London *Times* reported “according to senior naval sources” that “one Type 45 destroyer armed with anti-aircraft missiles and an anti-submarine Type 23 frigate will peel off from the Royal Navy's carrier task group in the Mediterranean and head through the Bosphorus into the Black Sea.”

The Carrier Strike Group left the UK on May 23 and the Type 45 destroyer—HMS Defender—entered the Black Sea last week to carry out its provocation off the coast of Crimea, just a few miles from Russia's major Black Sea fleet based at Sevastopol.

NATO's statement announcing Sea Breeze denounced “Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014,” in response to which “NATO has increased its

presence in the Black Sea. NATO supports Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders, extending to its territorial waters. NATO does not and will not recognize Russia's illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea and denounces its temporary occupation.”

The exercise began despite Russia's warnings last week against further incursions into its territory. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said after the Defender incident, “Over the past seven years, the intensity of flights of strategic bomber aviation of the US Air Force in Europe has increased 14-fold.” He noted that seven joint military exercises with the alliance countries are planned in Ukraine in 2021 alone.

The war danger is being heightened daily in one of the world's major flashpoints. Russia's response to NATO operations on its borders has been a substantial show of force. Russia's Defense Ministry said that its navy closely monitored the USS Ross as it entered the Black Sea.

The previous day Russia began its own large-scale military exercises in the eastern Mediterranean, where the main ship in the UK's/NATO's Carrier Strike Group, the HMS Queen Elizabeth aircraft carrier, is located.

Russia's manoeuvres involved several warships, two submarines, long-range Tu-22M3 bombers and other warplanes. According to the Russian Defense Ministry, two MiG-31 fighter jets capable of carrying Kinzhal hypersonic missiles, operating from the Moscow-run Hemeimeem airbase in Syria, practiced strikes on targets in the Mediterranean. The missiles can travel at 10 times the speed of sound and have a range of up to 2,000 kilometres (about 1,250 miles). The *Washington Post* reported that it was the “first time the warplanes capable of carrying Kinzhal have been deployed outside Russia's borders.”

Russia's submarine arsenal is also being massively upgraded. Last month the Russian Navy launched the *Kazan*, its first Yasen-M-class nuclear-powered guided missile submarine and the first of seven under construction.

This ratcheting up of Russia's military operations follows the May 31 announcement by Defense Minister Shoigu that Vladimir Putin's government will establish a further 20 military bases in the country's west before the year's end. NATO's continuing encirclement and

operations near Russia's borders would “destroy the international security system and force us to take the relevant countermeasures,” Shoigu said.

With the world's attention focused on the dangerous events in the Black Sea, Russia's military, including destroyers and fighter jets, also carried out military exercises on June 19 within 35 miles of Hawaii. According to the *Daily Mail*, these were the “largest war games since Cold War” and involved “at least 20 Russian warships, submarines, and support vessels, flanked by 20 fighter jets...”

The Russian Defence Minister said that during the exercise, two detachments “worked out the tasks of detecting, countering and delivering missile strikes against an aircraft carrier strike group of a mock enemy.”

NATO's reckless provocations against Moscow can spill over into outright conflict at any time—a danger the military heads of the major imperialist nations is well aware of.

Speaking at the Chalke Valley History Festival in England, just two days after Russia fired upon HMS Defender, General Sir Nick Carter, the head of the UK's armed forces, pointed out that such events could rapidly escalate out of control into a shooting war. “The thing that keeps me awake in bed at night is a miscalculation that comes from unwarranted escalation,” he said.

In an extraordinary intervention given that Sea Breeze was just hours away from launch, Carter, an anti-Kremlin hawk, said, “The sort of thing we saw in the Black Sea on Monday and Tuesday is the sort of thing it could come from. It wouldn't have done on that occasion but it's the type of thing one needs to think quite hard about.”



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