

Ukraine, UK to carry out “Cossack Mace” military exercises

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The armed forces of Ukraine and the United Kingdom (UK) are set to begin a series of military exercises this week known as “Operation Cossack Mace.” The exact dates for the drills to take place have not been announced but the Russian *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* reported on Tuesday that they were already ongoing.

The joint military drills were named in honor of Ukrainian Cossack General Bohdan Khmelnytsky, who led a 1648 Cossack uprising against the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that resulted in the massacre of thousands of Jews.

While the stated purpose of the exercises is to “improve the compatibility between British and Ukrainian military formations, strengthen mutual relations, joint planning and perform battalion and tactical operations,” they are clearly aimed at preparing for a land conflict with Russia.

In addition to Ukraine and the UK, military personnel from the United States, Denmark, Sweden and Canada will also participate in the planned exercises.

Taking place just two weeks after a dangerous naval incident in the Black Sea in which Russian patrol ships fired warning shots on the British destroyer warship HMS Defender, after it had provocatively crossed into waters claimed by Russia off the Crimean peninsula, the exercises are certain to further inflame relations between Russia and Ukraine.

While Ukraine and NATO often declare that their military exercises are “defensive” in nature, “Cossack Mace” differs in that it openly states that its forces are practicing for an offensive. According to the statement by the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU): “defensive actions will be worked out, followed by an offensive to restore the borders and territorial integrity of the country that has been attacked by a hostile neighboring state,” clearly alluding to Russia.

In February this year, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky endorsed a strategy aimed at recovering Crimea,

a peninsula in the Black Sea that was annexed by Russia in March 2014, following an imperialist-backed far-right coup in the Ukrainian capital Kiev. The move triggered a major military crisis in the Black Sea region in April. Zelensky has recently provocatively threatened to impose a full blockade on territories in East Ukraine that are controlled by Russian-backed separatists.

In addition to this week's exercises, later in July, Ukraine, the United States, Poland and Lithuania will take part in another military land drill known as “Three Swords 2021,” that will reportedly include over 1,200 servicemen and more than 200 combat vehicles.

This week, Zelensky also announced that the country would be receiving Mark VI high-speed combat boats from the United States in the upcoming year.

In its ongoing provocations against Russia, the Zelensky government is driven in no small measure by a deepening domestic crisis.

Zelensky, who was initially elected above all as a repudiation of the militaristic policies of former President Petro Poroshenko, has not only continued but also escalated the unpopular policies of his predecessor. Europe's poorest country remains mired in an ongoing civil war in Eastern Ukraine that has killed 14,000, displaced 1.4 million and left 3.5 million in need of humanitarian assistance.

The social and political crisis has been exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic and its economic fall-out. A recent opinion poll by the Kiev International Institute of Sociology found that 52.7 percent of Ukrainians now disapprove of Zelensky's administration.

The ongoing military exercises and equipment procurements signal that Ukraine is continuing the integration of its military forces with Western imperialism. However, the Ukrainian ruling class has yet to receive any assurance that it will ever be officially included into NATO. The continued failure of Ukraine to

receive an official invitation has left the Ukrainian ruling class apoplectic.

Earlier in June, both US President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken shot down Zelensky's statement on Twitter that Ukraine had been assured a spot in NATO at the alliance's annual summit in Belgium. Zelensky wrote, "Commend @NATO partners' understanding of all the risks and challenges we face. NATO leaders confirmed that [Ukraine] will become a member of the Alliance & the #MAP is an integral part of the membership process. {Ukraine} deserves due appreciation of its role in ensuring Euro-Atlantic security."

Just minutes later Zelensky's comments were contradicted by Biden who stated, "It depends on whether they meet the criteria. The fact is, they still have to clean up corruption. The fact is, they have to meet other criteria to get into the action plan. And so it's, you know, school's out on that question. It remains to be seen."

Regarding Ukraine's status, Secretary of State Blinken stated that "nothing changed – this goes back to 2008," referring to a 2008 NATO conference which first proposed that the former Soviet republic could potentially join one day. In order to do so, Ukraine would have to receive an official Membership Action Plan, which despite Zelensky's begging, has yet to occur.

While NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg had previously expressed optimism regarding Ukraine's chances to enter NATO, his stance changed following Biden's comments and declared that Ukraine needed "to do more" and that Ukraine's entry "was not the focus of this summit."

Prior to the 2014 US-backed coup, Ukraine had maintained a non-aligned status in regards to NATO. In 2014, it embarked on a course of integration with NATO. In February 2019, the Ukrainian government passed a constitutional amendment, stating its commitment to join both NATO and the EU and in June of last year became a member of NATO's Enhanced Opportunities Partnership program.

US-Ukrainian relationships were further strained in May when the Biden administration announced that it would, for the time being, not impose additional sanctions on the Russian-German gas pipeline Nord Stream 2. Zelensky complained that he learned of the decision through the press and not through any direct contact with the Biden administration. Speaking to Axios, Zelensky said that he was 'very unpleasantly surprised' by Washington's decision.

The pipeline's completion could potentially cost the Ukrainian government billions in yearly transit fees that are collected on Russian gas headed to European consumers.

Ukraine's growing relations with China are another major point of contention. In March, after years of pressure from the US, the Ukrainian government seized the assets of the country's major aerospace company, Motor Sich, in order to lock out Chinese investors from acquiring the company. The United States had denounced the move by Chinese aviation firm Skyrizon to acquire a controlling stake in the Ukrainian company, stating that these "predatory investments and technology acquisitions in Ukraine represent an unacceptable risk of diversion to military end use."

Despite the obvious interference of the US, Zelensky denied any pressure from his major NATO military backers.

Following several public rebuttals of Ukraine's NATO aspirations in recent months, the Ukrainian government has notably sought to make amends with China by signing an infrastructure agreement that will see Chinese companies working on road, bridge and rail transit projects within Ukraine. Speaking to the *Global Times* on Sunday, Song Kui, president of the Contemporary China-Russia Regional Economy Research Institute, said, "If Kiev can recognize the situation and get rid of the country's dependence on the West, the prospects for China-Ukraine cooperation are good."

The deal was only completed after Ukraine agreed to remove its signature from a joint international statement calling for independent observers to be allowed to investigate alleged human rights abuses against Uyghurs in China's Xinjiang region. The allegations have been regularly promoted by the United States as a foreign policy weapon against Beijing. While the agreement was signed in late June, the Kiev government only publicized it this week.



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