

Cold Response 2022: NATO concludes war rehearsal on Russia's northern flank

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The United States and its NATO allies have militarily encroached upon Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union. The arrival of the imperialist alliance on Russia's doorstep prompted Russia's incursion into Ukraine. With the ultimate goal of subjugating Russia, NATO is war-gaming every approach to Russian territory. In the largest military exercise led by NATO ally Norway in a generation, last week NATO finished a live-fire rehearsal for war on Russia's northern flank, the High Arctic exercise dubbed Cold Response 2022.

The significance of such large-scale NATO exercises is underscored by the escalating conflict in Ukraine. As Russia desperately seeks to counter the spread of NATO influence over its neighbor with its reactionary invasion of that country, putting NATO military exercises into practice becomes an immediate possibility. Cold Response took place as the world powers tangle on the brink of World War III.

Cold Response is a biannual display of martial might that has grown with the immediacy of NATO war plans. "We invite this exercise mainly within a NATO framework, and the size of it all depends on the interest from our allies and partners," Norwegian military spokesman Preben Aursand told *High North News*, before the maneuver. With the US and NATO considering direct conflict with Russia over Ukraine, the "interest" in preparing the northern theater is running especially high, and Cold Response has scaled up accordingly, more than doubling in size since 2020.

The objective of the large-scale military maneuver is to prepare to engage militarily with Russia on the sea, land and air in the Arctic environment. Approximately 30,000 troops from 27 countries—including 3,000 US Marines and 1,000 German "Bundeswehr" soldiers—along with 220 aircraft and 50 vessels converged on the north of Norway.

The first phase of Cold Response was a maritime "access and denial" operation, which amounts in practical terms to a blockade of Russian military and commercial vessels from accessing the Atlantic Ocean from the northern cold-water port of Arkhangelsk, as well as to assuring that NATO warships can reach the Barents Sea off Russia's northern coast, where US and UK ships resumed patrols in 2020 after an absence since the 1980s.

The tremendous presentation of NATO sea power in these waters so critical to Russia included aircraft carrier strike groups from the UK and Italy, lead by the HMS Prince of Wales. A third carrier strike group led by the USS Harry S. Truman was scheduled to participate, having just completed exercise Neptune Strike 2022, but extended its deployment in the Mediterranean to "reassure allies" as the war in Ukraine escalates.

Intensive air operations, including the deployment of carrier-based air power, in the second phase of Cold Response served to prepare for amphibious invasion simulations in the third phase. Thousands of NATO troops have been congregating in Norway since last fall to practice assaults on coastal population centers.

Invariably presented as a defensive exercise to "restore national integrity," these operations need only be shifted a little eastward along the northern Norwegian coast to become a real attack on the Russian north. Russia's Northern Fleet, armed with nuclear-capable hypersonic missiles, makes berth in Murmansk, less than 150km from the Norwegian border.

Significantly, officials and commentators were increasingly dispensing with the pretense of the supposedly "defensive" nature of these military exercises. "I think this exercise is a good counterpart, a good companion to the ongoing reinforcement of the

(alliance's) eastern flank that has been taking place since Russia's invasion began," said Charles Kupchan, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.

Cold Response 2022 also marked the culmination of Operation Brilliant Jump, the exercise and a certification of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, NATO's vanguard, all-theater rapid reaction force. Brilliant Jump, involving 2,500 troops, 10 warships and 750 sailors, began in Norway last February. Once certified, these elite units are deployable within five days to any NATO theater, including the High North.

While Moscow declined an invitation to formally observe the exercise, Russian warships patrolled at a distance.

As large as Cold Response is, it threatens primarily the northern approach to Russia. In imperialism's encirclement of its geopolitical rival, however, NATO conducts a host of massive military exercises along Russia's western and southern flanks. The massive Steadfast Defender 2020 exercise war-gamed the approach to Russia from northern Europe while Steadfast Defender 2021 practiced the approach from the south, preparing for combat in the Balkans and Black Sea Region. War games on the Black Sea itself were staged in Operation Sea Breeze. Trident Juncture, like Cold Response, war-gamed the far north in 2018. The list goes on.

The eastward expansion of NATO beginning after the fall of the Soviet Union has steadily crossed Eastern Europe, absorbing the post WWII "buffer states" and reaching Russia's boarder in the Baltic in 2004. In 2014, a Western-orchestrated right-wing coup in theretofore Russia-aligned Ukraine installed a pro-western government deep in Russia's side. That Russia retained control of Crimea, which hosts Russia's Black Sea Fleet at Sevastopol, was considered a military imperative as NATO spread its sphere of influence over Russia's strategically important neighbor. Russia responded to NATO's continued arming and training of anti-Russian elements within Ukraine—the Ukrainian army, led by a pro-Western government, as well as neo-Nazi paramilitary groups like the Azov Battalion—by launching its military attack at the end of February.

Western cries of "Russian aggression" in an "unprovoked invasion" serve only as political cover while NATO pushes eastward with the ultimate aim of

removing Russia as an obstacle to a global "rules-based order," that is, US political and economic domination. Whether by instigating a regime change, inciting internal divisions or by direct military confrontation, imperialism, driven by nationally-based capitalism's demand for control of global markets and resources, considers it "in its interest" to subjugate by whatever means its Russian, and for that matter Chinese, rival. Without defending the reactionary Putin regime of oligarchs and kleptocrats, it is NATO, not Russia, which is the aggressor.

Beyond the immediate confrontation with Russia, heightened interest in the Arctic, embodied by Cold Response and the even larger Trident Juncture in 2018, is driven by what capitalist governments perceive as "opportunities" as manmade climate change causes sea ice to retreat. The shortened shipping routes with the opening of the Northwest and Northeast Passages are viewed not as a manifest catastrophe but as potentially lucrative for business, requiring military control in the "national interest" of Arctic nations. Mineral and fossil fuel deposits becoming accessible in Arctic regions likewise have world powers jostling to exploit them. It is an irredeemable indictment of capitalism that its response to the irrefutable consequences of climate change does not inspire an alarmed re-prioritization of resources to save the planet but rather renewed vigor in geopolitical machinations.

Because capitalist governments are incapable of resisting their interest in world domination to the point of risking full-scale war and the irreversible destabilization of whole ecosystems, it is entirely futile to appeal to these powers for peace or sustainable stewardship of the Earth. Only an independent, international movement of the working class can muster the social strength necessary to take the reins of power from the capitalists and reorganize the world economy to stop war and meet the needs of humanity.



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