

Global tensions surge as NATO, Russia hold rival military exercises

By Alex Lantier
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Militaries throughout Eurasia and North America are on high alert as NATO and Russian forces hold rival military exercises.

Moscow responded to the beginning of large-scale, two-week-long air exercises by the NATO powers in the Arctic on Monday by launching its own air defense maneuvers. Roughly 250 Russian aircraft and 12,000 servicemen were mobilized in the Urals and western Siberia as 100 NATO aircraft and 4,000 servicemen from Germany, Britain, France, the Netherlands, Finland, Sweden, Switzerland and the United States operated in the Arctic.

NATO's Arctic exercises, code-named Arctic Challenge, will continue until June 4. The day after, the annual exercises held by NATO in the Baltic Sea region will begin, bringing 4,500 troops from 17 NATO member-states to Russia's northwestern border.

The Russian Defense Ministry called its operations a "massive surprise inspection" of Russian air defense capabilities. According to Russian media, the maneuvers are meant to train Russian forces to respond to large-scale air attacks from abroad. Beginning last Monday and running until Thursday, their purpose is to prepare the Russian armed forces for a larger military drill, Center 2015, to be held in September.

Yesterday, 10 Russian warships supported by naval aircraft carried out exercises in the Barents Sea, a part of the Arctic Ocean largely consisting of Russian territorial waters.

Meeting with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on Tuesday in Washington, President Obama denounced Russia for holding its military drills, calling the Kremlin's posture "increasingly aggressive."

Stoltenberg, for his part, criticized Russia for not being "more transparent" in holding its military

exercises. "We urge the Russians not to... do these kinds of snap exercises," he told CBS News. "Every nation has a right to exercise its forces, also Russia," he continued, "but they should do it in a more transparent and predictable way in order to avoid any misunderstandings."

The denunciations from Obama and Stoltenberg are hypocritical and absurd. It is NATO, not Russia, that is driving the explosive military standoff around Russia's borders. Having provoked a military crisis by toppling a pro-Russian Ukrainian regime in Kiev in a far-right putsch last year, then launching a proxy war against pro-Russian forces in eastern Ukraine, NATO is now methodically surrounding Russia with hostile military exercises.

According to Russia's envoy to the NATO alliance, Aleksandr Grushko, the number of NATO exercises close to the Russian border has doubled over the past year, to over 3,000. NATO is also doubling to 30,000 men the size of its European rapid reaction force, which is designed to quickly prepare for combat with Russia in Eastern Europe.

Britain is sending its biggest warship, the HMS Ocean, to the Baltic Sea this week to deploy a unit of Royal Marines in Poland and join naval drills off Russia's coast at Kaliningrad.

US and Canadian airmen and military aircraft are jointly carrying out NORAD's annual "Amalgam Dart" exercises in the Arctic. These are billed as operations to train NORAD forces to detect and respond to potentially hostile flights into North America from across the Arctic Ocean and the North Pole—that is, from Russia.

In recent weeks, US forces have also held joint military exercises with Romania and Bulgaria in the Balkans, and with Georgia in the Caucasus. Last

month, US troops began training fighters from far-right militias inside Ukraine itself for combat against pro-Russian forces in eastern Ukraine.

With international tensions at the breaking point, NATO's decision to hold multiple military exercises on Russia's periphery is utterly reckless. In March, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that early in the Ukraine crisis he had placed the Russian military, including its nuclear forces, on alert.

A report last November by the European Leadership Network (ELN) think tank in London found that since the February 2014 putsch in Kiev, 40 "near miss" incidents had almost led to military clashes between Russian and NATO forces. That danger has since been heightened, with armies across Europe on a hair trigger, and thousands of NATO aircraft and military units surrounding Russia. A few collisions or miscalculations could lead to a clash with potentially catastrophic consequences.

Russia and China recently concluded their first joint naval exercises in the Mediterranean Sea, operating out of the Crimean port of Sevastopol, a region of Ukraine that chose to rejoin Russia after the Kiev putsch in a move that was denounced by the NATO powers. Russian and Chinese warships carried out multiple operations, including live-fire exercises, in the eastern Mediterranean. For the Chinese navy, this exercise was by far the most far removed from its home base in China it has ever held.

The holding of military exercises preparing for large-scale conflict demonstrates that the major capitalist powers, above all Washington and its imperialist allies in Europe and the Asia-Pacific, are gearing up for a Third World War. This is the outcome of decades of US-led wars in the Middle East and Central Asia that followed the dissolution of the USSR, and more recently the Ukraine crisis and Washington's anti-Chinese "pivot to Asia."

As wars surge across the Middle East in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, and the standoff escalates between the United States and China in the South China Sea, NATO's confrontation with Russia completes the picture of a Eurasian landmass beset by bloodshed and the imminent danger of war. Under the pressure of a crisis of global capitalism, masses of workers worldwide are being dragged into a horrendous conflict in which they have no interest, and which is developing

largely behind their backs.

The critical task facing the international working class is to mobilize itself politically in struggle against capitalism and war. It cannot give any support to the maneuvers of the Putin regime in Moscow or its Chinese counterpart, collections of corrupt business oligarchs which emerged from the restoration of capitalism and which are incapable of appealing to anti-war sentiment in the working class. They oscillate between attempts to work out a deal with imperialism and military bluster that only increases political and military tensions.

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