

# NATO exercise Defender 2020: Germany serves as military base for build-up against Russia

By Martin Nowak  
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“Defender 2020,” the largest NATO exercise in Europe for 25 years, has gotten under way in recent weeks. For the first time in its history, the alliance is practicing the deployment of an entire division, which includes 20,000 soldiers and all of their equipment, from the United States to eastern Europe. The deployment is scheduled to be completed in March, with the return trip due to commence in June.

The German army website introduced the exercise in a video. A rapid series of pictures accompanied by heroic music serves as the backdrop for a number of facts about the operation: 37,000 soldiers and 20,000 pieces of freight cargo have to be transported and secured along a 4,000-kilometre route across Europe. They require “refuelling, provisioning, accommodation, and IT access.”

As the “host nation,” Germany is responsible for logistical support. Around 4,000 German army soldiers are deployed for this purpose. The logistical command centre for the exercise is NATO’s “Joint Support and Enabling Command,” established in Ulm in 2018, which is led by the German Armed Forces Basis, the organisational arm of the German army (Bundeswehr). Lieutenant General Martin Schelleis, inspector general of the Armed Forces Basis, commented that they are looking forward to the exercise because it will allow them to put their skills to the test.

The German army’s 2018 policy doctrine underlined Germany’s importance for NATO’s military build-up against Russia. “Due to its geographic location, Germany is a strategic hub at the heart of Europe,” the document states. “The capacity of the NATO alliance and the EU to act” is based on “Germany fulfilling its tasks as a host nation, as a transit country for the dispatching of forces to the borders of alliance territory and interior operational area.”

As early as 2015, the German army concluded in a strategic assessment that Germany is a bottleneck for such manoeuvres. In a piece entitled “Herculean logistical task,” the *Tagesschau* listed the areas requiring work: Are there

sufficient train engines, freight carriages, and rest stations? Which routes can be used for transporters carrying loads of several hundred tons? Will the necessary authorisations be issued in time?

At the beginning of last year, the army reached a “freight framework agreement” to move military equipment with Deutsche Bahn, Germany’s rail operator, worth some €100 million.

Why are thousands of soldiers being deployed to NATO’s eastern border within the framework of “Defender 2020”? Officially, the exercise is not directed against Russia. However, this pretence is disproven by the facts and statements from a number of leading NATO personnel.

“Russia has shown that it is willing to redraw borders in Europe with military force through the annexation of Crimea. And that has sounded the alarm bells for many NATO members, in particular our eastern neighbours,” stated Lieutenant General Schelleis at a press conference in Berlin held to introduce the exercise.

On 21 January, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg named Russia as one of three challenges, together with China and terrorism, that NATO members have to deal with. Asked about mounting conflicts between the US and Europe, he pointed out that fewer US troops have been deployed in Europe for some years, and praised the efforts of US allies to rearm. Europe and Canada have invested an additional €130 billion in defence over the past four years, he said.

A glance at NATO’s military exercises over recent years shows why the logistical infrastructure for military transportation through Europe has reached the breaking point.

Since 2011, the annual “Sabre Strike” NATO exercise has been held in Poland and the Baltic states. In addition, the major “Anaconda” exercise takes place in Poland every two years and involves tens of thousands of soldiers from all NATO member states. Poland’s Army for Territorial

Defence (VOT), which was founded in 2016 and is made up overwhelmingly of far-right paramilitary forces, also participates. In 2018, attacks on the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad and the Belarusian capital Minsk were explicitly simulated.

Ukraine, which is engaged in open conflict with Russia and is not a NATO member, also regularly participates in NATO exercises. The “Lithuanian-Polish-Ukrainian brigade,” which was established in 2015, has taken part on several occasions in “Anaconda.” Meanwhile, NATO has carried out its own military manoeuvres in Ukraine within the framework of “Rapid Trident” since 2006.

Since the Ukraine crisis of 2014, which was initiated with a fascist-led coup sponsored by the US and Germany, the extent and regularity of NATO exercises in eastern Europe have increased dramatically. Under the operational slogan “Atlantic Resolve,” the Obama administration initiated a major expansion of the American military presence. The spending for this “European deterrence initiative” rose eightfold over the past four years to \$6.5 billion.

Within the framework of the “NATO Enhanced Forward Presence,” four combat-ready battalions of 1,000 soldiers each have been stationed in Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania since 2017. The “NATO battlegroup” in Lithuania is led by Germany, while the other three are led by American, British, and Canadian forces. The “NATO Enhanced Forward Presence” is supported by the “Tailored Forward Presence,” a multinational battalion under Romanian leadership. The replacement of the units in the battalion takes place according to a rotation principle carried out under the “Dragon Ride” operation.

In addition, the establishment of the “Very High Readiness Joint Task Force” began in 2015. This multinational brigade of 5,000 soldiers, which is also commanded by Germany, is supposed to operate in a permanent high state of alert and can be deployed to a frontline position within 48 hours.

The previously largest NATO exercise since the dissolution of the Soviet Union took place in Norway in 2018 and was entitled “Trident Juncture.” Fifty thousand soldiers from 31 countries, including 10,000 from Germany, took part. They practiced operations at sea, on land, and in the air. “Defender 2020” continues along similar lines. Along with the NATO members, Finland and Georgia are also participating.

Georgia, like Ukraine, is a former Soviet republic that is being armed to the teeth by NATO to serve as a frontline state against Russia. In 2008, the small country in the Caucasus was involved in an open war with Russia, and has had an unresolved border dispute with its neighbour ever since. Nonetheless, NATO has continued to expand its

military cooperation with Georgia, regardless of which faction of the right-wing kleptocracy holds power in Tbilisi.

Seventy-five years since the end of the Second World War, Germany stands at the centre of a huge NATO military build-up against Russia. The transportation of troops, tanks, and vehicles to Estonia, which is less than 200 kilometres from St. Petersburg, as well as to Bulgaria and Georgia, is taking place through German airports and ports, and along German railways and roads.

The military commanders and politicians know full well that the images of tank columns and troop transporters rolling through countries that were at the heart of two world wars is producing uncertainty, fear, disgust, anger and rage. This is why the troop movements are being carried out largely in small convoys and at night. At the same time, far-right demagogues and falsifiers of history are being encouraged politically as part of the preparations for war.

Despite the crimes carried out by German troops in two world wars, Germany’s ruling elite is determined to expand its “leadership role” and its military capacity.

The German army’s current policy doctrine declares that the army “must have the forces and means at its disposal to deploy after a brief mobilisation to the borders or beyond alliance territory. Collective defence within alliance territory can range from small-scale operations to an extremely demanding deployment within the framework of a very large operation both within and on the outskirts of alliance territory.” The German armed forces must “be effectual in a hybrid conflict as it develops and escalates across the full spectrum of its effects, in all its dimensions, in a joint, multinational armed force, and in all types of operations.”

High losses are expected as a result. “At the beginning of a very large, high-intensity operation, a huge deployment of readily available forces and equipment is necessary. Provisions to regenerate the personnel (i.e., replace dead and injured soldiers) and material will be undertaken,” stated the doctrine.

This is what the German army must now—to use the words of General Schelleis—“prove with joy.”

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