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NATO launches war games in advance of Russian exercise

By Bill Van Auken

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The US and its NATO allies have launched a series of war games in advance of a major military exercise by Russia and Belarus scheduled to begin later this week.

The dueling war games are unfolding under conditions in which relations between Washington and Moscow are more tense than at any time since the height of the Cold War. They follow the imposition of unilateral US sanctions against Russia, a round of tit-for-tat expulsions of Russian and American diplomats initiated by Washington and an unrelenting propaganda campaign alleging Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election.

On Monday, military forces from the US and a number of other NATO countries joined the Ukrainian army for military exercises dubbed “Rapid Trident,” involving 2,500 troops. The war games, which are taking place in the western Ukrainian city of Yavoriv, are to continue until September 23.

Washington has steadily increased its support to the right-wing nationalist regime brought to power by a US-backed and fascist-spearheaded coup in February 2014. Last month, US Defense Secretary James “Mad Dog” Mattis traveled to Kiev, where he signaled his support for providing the country with lethal weapons.

The US and NATO have invoked Moscow's annexation of Crimea, which came in response to a referendum expressing overwhelming support for the militarily strategic territory's return to Russia, and the revolt by pro-Russian separatists in the Donbas region as manifestations of Russian aggression, justifying the US-led military buildup in the region.

This has included NATO's deployment last May of four "multinational battlegroups," consisting of over 1,000 combat troops each, in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, led by the UK, Canada, Germany and the US respectively. This has been accompanied by the organization of a 40,000-troop rapid reaction force and a steady military buildup in the Black Sea region.

The US recently sent seven more advanced fighter planes to Lithuania to beef up its military presence during the Russian military exercise, along with an additional 600 American airborne troops. For the first time since 2014, the Pentagon has taken command of NATO's air operations in the Baltics.

Meanwhile, NATO initiated another military exercise, "Steadfast Pyramid" in Latvia on Sunday, involving 40 senior commanders from NATO member states along with Finland and Sweden. NATO issued an opaque description of the exercise, which continues until September 15, declaring that it was focused on "further developing the abilities of commanders and senior staff to plan and conduct operations through the application of operational art in decision making." A second stage of the war games, known as "Steadfast Pinnacle," is to last from September 17 through September 22.

In addition to these US-NATO actions, American and French troops are participating, along with units from Finland, Denmark, Norway, Lithuania and Estonia, in the largest Swedish military exercises to be held in 20 years. The maneuver, which began on Monday and runs through September 20, represents another show of force directed against Moscow. In an unmistakable sign of the sharp tensions roiling the region, Sweden has substantially increased its military budget, re-instituted conscription and is debating joining NATO, an action that would break the country's century-long tradition of neutrality.

The US-NATO military buildup in both Ukraine and the Baltic republics—as well as the war games in Sweden—are clearly aimed, in the first instance, at countering the "Zapad 2017" joint exercises being staged by Russia and Belarus, which is set to begin on Thursday and continue through September 20.

Moscow has said that only 12,700 troops will participate in the military exercise, but Western officials, echoing allegations by the right-wing nationalist regimes in Ukraine and the Baltics, have issued hysterical and unfounded statements predicting that some 100,000 will be involved, casting the maneuvers as a potential preparation for invasion.

Typical was the reaction of Britain's Defense Minister Michael Fallon, who told the BBC: "This is the biggest exercise I think for four years, over 100,000 Russian and Belorussian troops now on NATO's border. This is designed to provoke us, it's designed to test our defenses, and that's why we have to be strong."

Such claims turn reality on its head. For the past quarter century, since the Moscow Stalinist bureaucracy's dissolution of the Soviet Union, the US and NATO have steadily advanced on Russia's borders, seeking to militarily encircle the country, while orchestrating regime change operations aimed at installing pro-Western governments in various former Soviet republics. Its ultimate aim is the dismemberment of the Russian Federation and its transformation into a semi-colony.

While there is nothing progressive about Moscow's flexing of its military muscles, the fact is that Russia's major troop mobilizations are taking place on its own territory, while under the banner of NATO, the Pentagon has deployed warplanes and paratroopers on Russia's borders.

The dueling war games in Eastern Europe constitute a serious warning. After 16 years of uninterrupted—and unsuccessful—wars in the Middle East and Afghanistan, US imperialism is increasingly shifting its focus toward preparation for military confrontation with its major geo-strategic rivals, in particular Russia and China, threatening humanity with a nuclear third world war.

The potential fuses to ignite such a powder keg stretch from Syria to North Korea, the South China Sea and Ukraine and the Baltics.

The simultaneous war games themselves hold the potential of inadvertently triggering a military confrontation.

“With two major exercises at the same time, there is always a risk for incidents,” a former Swedish army officer and Russian military expert, Joergen Elfving, told Sweden's SR International radio. “The Baltic Sea area will be filled with military activity more than usual for a very long time.”