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# Ukraine announces joint military exercises with NATO amid rising tensions with Russia

The Operational Command East with the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) provocatively announced Saturday that it will hold joint military exercises known as "Exercise Cossack Mace" with NATO forces later this year. The statement comes as violence continues to escalate between Ukrainian forces and Russian-backed separatists in the eastern Donbass region of the country.



SSO fighters of the Armed Forces of Ukraine during training [Credit: Wikipedia/ArmyInform]

While joint Ukrainian-NATO drills are often announced with clarifying statements that they are purely "defensive" operations, the AFU's statement differed in that it made clear that it would simulate an offensive attack against not only separatist-controlled Donbass but Russian forces as well.

"In particular, defensive actions will be worked out, followed by an offensive in order to restore the state border and territorial integrity of a state that has been subjected to aggression by one of the hostile neighboring countries," the statement said, clearly referring to Russia.

Saturday's statement was followed up on Sunday with the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine ominously posting a video to its Facebook page, celebrating the 72nd anniversary of NATO, along with the hashtag #WeAreNATO.

For over six years, Ukraine has been mired in an ongoing civil war in eastern Ukraine between government forces and separatists that has claimed the lives of approximately 14,000, displaced 1.4 million and left 3.5 million in need of humanitarian assistance. For much of the six years, the fighting has remained at a relatively low level of persistent shelling and shootings back and forth, while avoiding a full-out war. The Ukrainian government's recent statements and actions show that is now planning for such a scenario, and is expecting NATO backing.

NATO was founded as a military alliance in 1949 by the United States and eleven other European countries to carry out war against the numerically superior military of the Soviet Union. Despite the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, the alliance has continued to exist as an instrument of Western imperialism aimed against countering now-capitalist Russia.

While the Stalinist bureaucracy was preparing to dissolve the Soviet Union and fully restore capitalism, working hand in glove with U.S. imperialism, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev was given assurances that NATO would not expand its borders in a post-Soviet world. Yet it has done precisely that, adding Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic just eight years later in 1999. NATO has continued to expand eastward and most recently added Montenegro and North Macedonia, both formerly part of Yugoslavia.

Prior to the 2014 U.S.-backed coup that installed the right-wing anti-Russian government of Petro Poroshenko, 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 this year became a member of NATO's Enhanced Opportunities Partnership program.

While current Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky was previously ambiguous on his stance towards NATO during his election campaign in 2019—proclaiming his support for EU membership while saying little about the Western military alliance—he now regularly begs for his country's full inclusion in NATO. In 2020, Ukraine was granted enhanced status with NATO, granting it "access to interoperability programs and exercises, and more sharing of information."

Speaking to HBO earlier this year, when asked what he would say to the newly-elected United States President Joe Biden if given the chance to speak with him, Zelensky quickly replied, "I have a very simple question: Mr. President, why are we still not in NATO?"

On Sunday, Zelensky likewise congratulated NATO on its anniversary, tweeting "Congratulations to NATO partners on the anniversary of the North Atlantic Treaty! Look forward to extending our practical cooperation to strengthen Euro-Atlantic security. Count on support of Allies in granting MAP to #Ukraine. The Army of Ukraine is strong & continues needed reforms."

Already in 2021, a ceasefire negotiated between Russia, Ukraine and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has fallen apart with increasing attacks and killings on both sides.

At the same time, the Zelensky administration has step-by-step ramped up anti-Russian hysteria by sanctioning pro-Russian opposition leaders, shutting down pro-Russian media outlets and adopting a controversial language law aimed at limiting Russian language use in the country. Most recently, the Ukrainian government announced a strategy aimed a full mobilization of the country for war and the retaking of Crimea.

For its part, the oligarchic capitalist government in Moscow, which has emerged out of the Stalinist destruction of the USSR, has continually sought to make a deal with Western imperialism. Last week, Putin held talks with the heads of state of France and Germany, conspicuously without the involvement of either Kiev or Washington.

However, without a deal with NATO members France and Germany, the Putin government has now also resorted to saber-rattling and is preparing itself for a potential war. This weekend videos appeared of tanks moving towards the country's borders with Ukraine, increasing the chance of an accidental outbreak of hostilities between Ukrainian forces across the border.

Berlin and Paris released a joint statement on Saturday night, stating, "We are closely monitoring the situation and in particular Russian troop movements, and call on all sides to show restraint and to work towards the immediate de-escalation of tensions." Also on Saturday, Boris Ruge, the vice chair of the Munich Security Conference, threateningly declared that "there will be a price to pay" if Russia escalates, alluding that there would be "consequences" for the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which is set to deliver gas from Russia to Germany.

The United States meanwhile has continued to back its military protégé in Kiev, with U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin reassuring his Ukrainian counterpart, Defense Minister Andrii Taran, that Washington will not give up on Ukraine in case of war, in a phone call held on April 1 at the initiative of the American side. In a meeting on April 2, President Biden pledged Zelensky "unwavering support" against Russia.

The Western bourgeois press has paid little attention to the growing danger of war in East Ukraine. In the few reports that have emerged, Russia is universally blamed for "aggression", putting reality on its head.

At the same time, the crisis is increasingly described as a "test" for the Biden administration, which has signaled since its inauguration that it would pursue an extremely aggressive course against both China and Russia. Speaking to *Foreign Policy*, Jim Townsend, a former U.S. deputy assistant secretary for Europe and NATO, dismissed the escalating tensions as simple gamesmanship between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Biden.

"They're probing, they're trying to see what [the U.S.] is going to do, what NATO would do, what the Ukrainians would do. Is this a jumpy administration, or is this an administration that's going to act with resolve? They're doing all these things to assess where the new administration is."

Anne Applebaum, a right-wing media pundit who is married to a former Polish foreign minister, described the situation in Ukraine along with a possible "Chinese invasion of Taiwan" as one of "two crises the Biden administration needs to be prepared for."

To the war-mongering and nationalist hysteria by the ruling class, the working-class must counter pose a program of socialist internationalism. In order to prevent the outbreak of a war that has the potential to turn into a world war and end in the deaths of millions and the ruination of the lives of millions more, workers in the Ukraine, Russia and internationally, must fight on an independent basis, for the construction of a socialist anti-war movement.

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