

Dangerous Crossroads, Threatening Russia: “Permanent Deployment” of US Troops on Russian Border Since Cold War

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Global Research, January 16, 2017

[World Socialist Web Site](#) 16 January 2017

Region: [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [Militarization and WMD, US NATO
War Agenda](#)

Some 4,000 US troops, together with tanks, artillery and armored vehicles, arrived in Poland over the weekend, further escalating tensions with Russia ahead of the January 20th inauguration of US President-elect Donald Trump. It is the largest US troop deployment in Europe since the Cold War.

The troops will be disbursed over seven Eastern European countries, including the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, all of which border Russia. After nine months, the troops will be replaced with another unit, making the deployment effectively permanent. NATO plans to deploy a further four battalions to the Russian border later this year, including one each to Poland and the three Baltic states.

The deployment follows a week in which US politics was dominated by denunciations of Russia and President Vladimir Putin. In Senate confirmation hearings for Trump administration cabinet nominees, Senators called Putin a “war criminal,” an “autocrat,” and a murderer, while newspapers and TV broadcasts have been filled with charges of Russian plots to subvert the US elections.

The US deployment in Poland is part of the quadrupling of the US defense budget for Eastern Europe in 2017, announced by Defense Secretary Ashton Carter in February. Annual US military spending in the region will rise from \$800 million last year to \$3.4 billion this year.

In addition to deploying ground forces, the US plans to construct a missile defense system in Poland and to further stockpile munitions and armaments along the Russian border.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov called the buildup “a threat to our security...especially as it concerns a third party building up its military presence near our borders.” He added, “Any country may and will take a buildup of foreign military presence along its borders negatively. This is exactly how we take it.”

The deployment was originally scheduled to take place at the end of this month, after the inauguration, but it was expedited by an Obama administration anxious to undermine any retreat from the aggressive anti-Russia line demanded by dominant sections of the US military and intelligence agencies.

The deployment was welcomed by the virulently right-wing and anti-Russian Polish

government, which received a formal warning last year by the European Union for violations of “the rule of law, democracy and human rights.” Since coming to power in October 2015, the Law and Justice (PiS) Party has sought to pack the country’s courts with right-wing ideologues and has cracked down on oppositional media.

Polish officials hailed the US troops on Saturday with a ceremony in the western Polish town of Zagan. The officials made a series of hysterical remarks, seeking to present Russia as an aggressive menace to the sovereignty of Poland and other Eastern European countries.

“We have waited for you for a very long time,” Polish Defense Minister Antoni Macierewicz told the assembled troops. “We waited for decades...feeling that we were the only one who protected civilization from aggression that came from the east.”

He said the presence of the US military would ensure “freedom, independence and peace in Europe and the whole world.” Prime Minister Beata Szydlo added, “This is an important day for Poland, for Europe, for our common defense.”

Speaking at the ceremony on Saturday, Paul Jones, the US ambassador to Poland, said the latest deployment signaled an “ironclad commitment” to the US’s NATO allies. “This is America’s most capable fighting force: a combat-ready, highly trained US armored brigade, with our most advanced equipment and weaponry.”

One of those battalions, supplied by the United States, will be stationed in Eastern Poland in the so-called Suwalki Gap between Belarus and the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad. These troops are designed to act as a “tripwire” force, raising the chance of a full-scale military conflict with the US in the event of a border conflict.

The nominal reason for the stepped-up deployment is the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, portrayed by the US and NATO as an act of unilateral aggression by Russia.

In reality, Russia’s move on Crimea was primarily of a defensive character, a response to the US-backed and fascist-led, right-wing coup in Ukraine that threatened to cut off Russia’s access to its naval base in Sevastopol. The annexation followed a majority vote in Crimea to secede from Ukraine and join Russia.

The US and its NATO allies used the annexation as a pretext for a series of retaliatory measures, including economic sanctions directed against the Russian government and individuals.

The deployment of US troops has been largely downplayed in the US media, earning a single mention, as an aside, on ABC’s “This Week Sunday” talk show. It was almost entirely ignored on “Meet the Press” and “Face the Nation.” To the extent that US news outlets, like CNN and the *New York Times*, reported the deployment, it was to present the move as a defense of small states on Russia’s border.

Completely absent from all this reporting was any sense of historical context. The Second World War, which led to the deaths of 26 million Soviet citizens, began with the invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany, which saw it as a staging point for the ultimate invasion of the USSR, aimed at making Germany a world power capable of competing with the United States.

Now, as the United States is seeking to cement its stranglehold over Eurasia in order to

prepare for a showdown with its main international rival, China, it risks a clash with Russia, the world's second-ranked nuclear power.

While for now Trump has signaled a more accommodative stance toward Russia, this is only in order to focus US military aggression against China. In an interview published this weekend by the *Wall Street Journal*, Trump simultaneously said he was open to lifting economic sanctions against Russia, while announcing a willingness to reconsider the US's longstanding policy of not recognizing Taiwan, a policy move that Chinese officials have said would lead to a rupture of diplomatic relations.

In the increasingly bitter faction fight within the US political establishment over foreign policy, both sides favor military escalation against nuclear-armed powers, threatening a war, whether against Russia or China, that would have the most catastrophic consequences.

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