

NATO Begins Military Manoeuvres in Black Sea

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On Monday, NATO's Standing Maritime Group 2 (SNMG 2) began exercises in the Black Sea, including standard anti-submarine and anti-aircraft exercises, led by the US Navy cruiser USS Vicksburg.

According to NATO sources, other ships taking part include Canadian, Turkish and Romanian frigates, and a German tanker Spessart. A NATO web site describes the SNMG 2 as a "potent NATO maritime force [that] possesses substantial sea-control, anti-submarine and anti-air warfare capabilities."

Before the exercises began, the group commander, US Rear Admiral Brad Williamson, stated: "The training and exercises we will conduct with our Allies in the Black Sea prepares us to undertake any mission NATO might require to meet its obligations for collective defence."

The exercise is yet another provocation against Moscow that increases the risk of war between the Western powers and Russia. It is part of a systematic military build-up in Eastern Europe since the Western-backed coup in Kiev and the subsequent integration of Crimea into Russia last year.

The SNMG 2 is part of the NATO Response Force (NRF), a so-called rapid intervention force that was doubled in size to 30,000 soldiers by NATO defence ministers at the beginning of February.

Before the exercise, Russian ships and aircraft were seen in the area close to the NATO warships. However, Williamson noted that they "all abided by international regulations."

"They (the Russians) are following their plans, and we are following ours," the rear admiral stated at a press conference aboard the USS Vicksburg in the Bulgarian port of Varna.

According to the Russian defence ministry, around 2,000 Russian soldiers will be involved in air defence exercises until April 10 in southern Russia and the north Caucasus, near the Black Sea. In addition, Russian military bases in Armenia and pro-Russian sections of Georgia will also be included.

The military exercises take place in the context of the shaky Minsk ceasefire agreement in eastern Ukraine and ongoing provocations by the pro-western regime in Kiev and its supporters in Washington and European Union (EU) headquarters in Brussels.

Last Thursday, the Ukrainian parliament adopted a proposal from President Petro Poroshenko which orders an increase of the army deployed against the east Ukrainian population by a third, to 250,000.

Moscow sharply criticised the West's actions. Reacting to constant threats from the US to supply lethal weapons to Ukraine, a Russian foreign minister spokesperson warned, "Russian-US relations will suffer severe damage if the people in the Donbass are killed by US weapons."

Russian Deputy Defence Minister Anatoly Antonov accused NATO members of using the Ukraine crisis as a pretext to move closer to Russia's borders.

In an interview with the *Welt am Sonntag* over the weekend, EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker called for the founding of a European army, capable of militarily standing up to Russia. According to Juncker, this would allow the EU to credibly respond to a threat to peace in a EU member state or neighbouring states.

"A European army does not exist to be deployed immediately," said Juncker. "But it would send a clear message to Russia that we are serious about the defence of European Union values."

Juncker's demand was based on a strategy paper recently published by the Centre for European Policy Studies think tank in cooperation with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. The main authors of the paper were former NATO Secretary Generals Javier Solana and Jaap de Hoop Schefer. As a pretext for a joint and autonomous European defence policy in alliance with NATO, the authors repeated the lie that Russia was guilty of aggression against Ukraine and that Moscow poses a threat to the whole of Europe.

The paper stated,

"Russia's infiltrations in Ukraine and provocations against member states' territorial, water, and air defences have, however, delivered a blow to Europe's post-Cold War security order and have revived awareness in the EU about the possibility of military attack and occupation in Europe."

According to Solana and de Hoop Schefer, the establishment of a joint European defence policy and military build-up presents "financial, technological and industrial challenges." All of the proposals in the paper, including the creation of permanent and special rapid response troops and armed forces for deployment "would entail, for most member states, a sharp rise in military spending, even beyond NATO's Wales Summit pledge of moving towards 2 percent of GDP by 2014."

For this reason alone, the combination of the national capacities of the member states' armies was required, the paper stated.

Juncker's proposal was welcomed above all by the German government. Through deputy spokeswoman Christiane Wirtz, German Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) called for "intensified military cooperation in Europe."

German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Social Democratic Party, SPD) and Defence Minister Ursula Von der Leyen (CDU) spoke out in favour of a European army. "For the SPD, the long-term goal of a European army is an important political issue and has been part of the party programme for many years," Steinmeier told the Berlin-based *Tagesspiegel*.

“Confronting the new dangers and threats to our peaceful European order” requires “a rapid adjustment and modernisation of the joint European security strategy,” said Steinmeier. “I am pushing for that. We have brought our ideas to Brussels on this.”

Even if the German government does not express this openly, Berlin sees Juncker’s proposal as an opportunity to achieve military dominance in Europe on top of its economic dominance, and to militarise Germany under the guise of a joint European defence force.

In an interview on *Deutschlandfunk*, Von der Leyen declared, “This integration of armies with the view one day to even have a European army is in my opinion the future.”

She made clear that German militarisation was intimately bound up with this agenda. She said it was

“important that we have a German army in the alliance that is in fact capable of undertaking the tasks that it has to do. That means not only sounding good on paper, but rather fulfills these in its core operations. And that’s why, if one seriously wants security, one has to seriously invest in it. And that’s why these discussions about [defence] budgets are really about the fact that the things that we want also have to be supported with substance.”

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