

NATO announces further militarisation of Baltic Sea

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NATO announced Tuesday a major strengthening of its military presence in the Baltic Sea, seizing as a pretext recent damage to undersea cables allegedly caused by ships associated with Russia's "shadow fleet." The move marks yet another step in the systematic military encircling of Russia by the US-led military alliance, which continues to back the far-right Ukrainian regime in a war aimed at inflicting a strategic defeat on Russia and subjugating its territory to semi-colonial status.

The operation, labelled "Baltic Sentry," was unveiled following a NATO ministers meeting of member states with Baltic Sea coasts in the Finnish capital Helsinki. A statement issued after the summit underscored the aggressive character of the operation, which will involve ships, surveillance planes, air and undersea drones, and other intelligence gathering. The statement, signed by Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Sweden, declared,

We are determined to deter, detect and counter any attempts at sabotage. Any attack against our infrastructure will be met with a robust and determined response. We stand ready to attribute hostile actions committed by malign actors, as appropriate.

We welcome that NATO has launched the enhanced Vigilance Activity "Baltic Sentry" to improve situational awareness and deter hostile activities. We welcome the efforts of Allies to deploy additional assets at sea, in the air, on land and below the surface of the sea, to enhance vigilance and deterrence.

Although NATO officials indicated the operation would continue for an undisclosed period, German Chancellor

Olaf Scholz commented that the initial stage would last for three months. The recently established Commander Task Force Baltic command centre in Rostock, Germany, will play a key role in overseeing the increased military activity throughout the Baltic. Scholz stressed that Germany would participate with "everything available to us in maritime operational infrastructure."

Since Finland and Sweden joined NATO in 2023 and 2024 respectively, the Baltic Sea has effectively been turned into a NATO lake. Russia, which has used the Baltic for centuries as a key trading route and maintains a Baltic fleet, confronts hostile states on all sides of the Baltic, and can only access it from the port of St. Petersburg and the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad, located between Poland and Lithuania.

Following Russia's US-instigated invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Moscow has utilised a so-called "shadow fleet" of freighters to continue and in many cases expand the sale of oil and natural gas to Asia in spite of sanctions imposed by the US and European powers. The ships sail under the flags of other states and are usually registered to offshore firms. The bourgeois-nationalist Putin regime, which emerged out of capitalist restoration following the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union, is eager to cut a deal with the imperialists to remove the sanctions.

NATO's operation aims ultimately to restrict Russia's oil and gas trade, which is key to the Kremlin's revenue. Just days before Baltic Sentry was announced, the Biden administration slapped new sanctions on some 180 ships believed to be part of the "shadow fleet" in another bid to curb Russian trade and undermine Moscow's ability to fund the war in Ukraine.

The fact that the latest measures move the NATO powers ever closer to a position of outright war with Russia is acknowledged by the participants at Tuesday's meeting. Sweden's Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson recently declared that while his country is not at war, it is

no longer at peace. In November, the Swedish government sent an updated version of a pamphlet, “In case of crisis or war,” to all households with advice on how to survive a military conflict. The Norwegian government sent 2.2 million copies of a similar pamphlet to all households last summer.

Speaking after Tuesday’s meeting, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen said, “We can no longer think that we are in peacetime,” according to public broadcaster DR. She insisted that Denmark would contribute to “concrete military cooperation,” and insisted that 2 percent of GDP for defence spending is not enough.

NATO’s determination to wage war in pursuit of the interests of the American and European imperialist powers extends far beyond the Baltic Sea region, a fact underscored by comments made by Rutte to the European Parliament Monday. The NATO Secretary-General demanded the destruction of what remains of Europe’s social welfare programmes to pay for close to a doubling of military spending on top of the 2 percent of GDP for defence spending “floor” agreed among the NATO member states.

While Rutte insisted that these increases should be conducted in cooperation with Europe’s US ally, dominant sections of Europe’s ruling class view incoming President Donald Trump’s “America First” policies as a welcome opportunity to strengthen the European imperialist powers’ military capabilities so they can advance their interests more independently of and if necessary in opposition to Washington in the future.

“On average, European countries easily spend up to a quarter of their national income on pensions, health and social security systems, and we need only a small fraction of that to make defence much stronger,” declared Rutte, before stressing that the ultimate target for NATO spending could be as high as 3.6 or 3.7 percent of GDP. “I’m deeply concerned about the security situation in Europe,” he continued. “We are not at war, but we are not at peace either ... That means we need to invest more in defense and produce more capabilities. This cannot wait. We need to boost the resilience of our societies and critical infrastructure.”

At a two-day meeting of the chiefs of defence at NATO headquarters in Brussels, Rutte spoke even more bluntly, stating in his opening remarks Wednesday, “It is time to shift to a wartime mindset.”

Rutte’s assertion that Europe’s ruling class only needs “a fraction” of the funds spent on social services to fund its mad plans for world war is a flat-out lie. The reality is

that what is already underway is a massive restructuring of social relations involving the subordination of all of society’s resources to the waging of imperialist war and the enrichment of the financial oligarchy.

In Germany, the EU’s largest economy, the health budget has already been cut by over half in recent years to fund major increases in military spending. But this is only the beginning. In the ongoing campaign for the federal election set for February 23, Green Party Chancellor candidate Robert Habeck is calling for Berlin to spend 3.5 percent of its GDP on defence, virtually matching Rutte’s proposal to the EU Parliament. This sum would equate to Germany spending about €150 billion per year on its military, a sum seven times greater than the federal education budget and almost as much as the €175 billion Berlin currently spends annually on all social services.

Imposing the necessary attacks on working conditions and social programmes to fund these astronomical sums is incompatible with democratic forms of rule. This is why the ruling elites in every European country, following the example of their counterparts in the United States, are systematically promoting far-right and outright fascist political parties. The Alternative for Germany, Le Pen’s National Rally in France, and the Brothers of Italy under Mussolini-admirer Giorgia Meloni are being called upon by the European bourgeoisie to serve as a battering ram against the rights of the working class. Their tasks are to eliminate the remnants of the concessions made in the period after World War II by the ruling elites to the working class in the face of revolutionary struggles, and redirect these resources to the funding of war and the bank accounts of the super-rich.

Workers across the continent must reject being made to pay for imperialist wars in the interests of the NATO powers. Only the building of an international anti-war movement armed with a socialist and internationalist programme that links the major struggles by workers against social and economic devastation with the widespread opposition to militarism in the population can stop the ruling elite’s resort to social barbarism and war.



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