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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

By Alex Lantier
13.06.2020

Washington steps up strategic bomber flights threatening Russia, China

Even as the United States is devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic, Washington is stepping up flights of drones and nuclear-capable strategic bombers threatening Russia and China.

Reports emerged on Wednesday that the US Air Force is flying B-1 strategic bombers from the Pacific island of Guam and Global Hawk spy drones from Yokota Air Base in Japan to the South China Sea. Four B-1 bombers and 200 airmen have been deployed from Dyess Air Force Base in America to Andersen Air Base in Guam. The deployment of spy drones allows for continuous monitoring of Chinese ships along China's coastline.

On the same day, US F-22 fighter jets intercepted two flights of Russian TU-95 strategic bombers off the Alaskan coast, after Russian officials complained of provocative flights by US bombers near Russia's borders in Europe. These included May 29 flights by B-1 bombers in the Black and Baltic Seas, and a June 3 flight by a B-52 bomber over the Arctic Ocean.



A 9th Expeditionary Bomb Squadron B-1B Lancer flies over the East China Sea May 6, 2020. (U.S. Air Force/ River Bruce)

These events are a warning: imperialism never sleeps. Even as the world's attention was focused on Trump's demands that the US military deploy against the American people to crush mass protests against the May 25 police killing of George Floyd, Washington and its European allies were stepping up war plans. They are proceeding aggressively even though their principal targets are major powers with large nuclear arsenals.

Amid growing social anger over police brutality and the financial aristocracy's criminal negligence on the COVID-19 pandemic, the danger that the ruling elite will try to suppress class conflict by launching external wars is only mounting.

Last month, Washington announced it was sending several B-1s to the South China Sea. "When the commander in chief says he wants four B-1B Lancers in the Indo-Pacific, we say 'they'll be there' even in a pandemic," said US Air Force Colonel Jose Sumangil. "And that's what we did on very short notice. We were able to make this happen because of the effort as a whole from Team Dyess to minimize the risk of COVID-19 transmission while sustaining our mission capabilities."

The B-1B is a supersonic strategic heavy bomber capable of transporting a wide range of weapons including guided missiles and bombs, as well as B61 and B83 thermonuclear bombs. The B83 bomb has the power of 1.2 megatons of TNT—80 times more than the bomb Washington dropped on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945.

On May 29, as protests against the George Floyd's murder erupted across America, the Russian Defense Ministry reported: "Air defense forces of the West and South military districts detected US Air Force B-1B strategic bombers over neutral waters in the Black

and Baltic Seas. Russian fighters were deployed to escort them... Russian fighter crews approached the aerial targets while respecting security distances and identified them as B-1B bombers, and the US bombers then changed course, moving away from the Russian Federation's borders."

The bombers had departed Ellsworth Air Force Base in South Dakota for a nonstop flight to Europe. Escorted by Polish, Romanian and Ukrainian fighter jets and refueled by a Turkish tanker, the B-1s flying to the Black Sea also entered Ukrainian airspace. The Black Sea is home to major Russian naval bases including Sevastopol in the Crimea, a majority Russian-speaking region formerly in Ukraine that Russia annexed after the 2014 NATO-backed coup in that country.

Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Timothy Albrecht indicated that the flight was an exercise for plans to destroy the Russian Black Sea fleet with Long-Range Anti-Ship Missiles (LRASM). He said, "LRASM plays a critical role in ensuring US naval access to operate in both open-ocean and littoral environments due to its enhanced ability to discriminate between targets from long range."

On June 3, two days after Trump deployed troops to the American capital, a lone B-52 was escorted by Norwegian fighter jets in Scandinavia near Russian territory. "The flight involved missions over the Arctic Ocean and Laptev Sea and the aircraft conducted training with *Luftforsvaret* F-16s and F-35s," the NATO Allied Air Command announced on Facebook.

This underscores the complicity of Washington's European NATO allies in the escalating threats against Russia and China. NATO Secretary-General and former Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg told the BBC these deployments are "about the global approach of NATO, because China is coming closer to us. We see that in the Arctic, we see they are heavily investing in critical infrastructure in Europe, and we see of course China operating in cyberspace."

Yesterday, Beijing condemned as "provocative" the flight of a US C-40A military transport plane over Taiwan, criticizing it for placing into question Washington's commitment to the unity of China. A spokeswoman for Beijing's Taiwan Affairs Office said the flight "harms our sovereignty, security and development interests and violates basic principles of international law and international relations."

Already on June 5, the US guided missile destroyer USS Russell had transited the Taiwan Straits, leading Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang to ask Washington to “avoid damaging China-US relations and peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.”

Washington’s escalating resort to military-police repression against workers at home goes hand-in-hand with a longstanding policy of eliminating all restrictions on its aggression abroad.

It aims to scrap the last remaining treaty limit on its nuclear arsenal, to which the Obama administration allocated \$1 trillion in 2014-2024. After Washington repudiated the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty in 2001 to build “Star Wars” systems targeting enemy missiles, Trump scrapped the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty in 2018. Now Washington aims to repudiate the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), originally signed in 1991.

While Russia has offered to extend the treaty for five years, Trump has refused to negotiate unless China joins the talks and accept limits to its nuclear arsenal. However, Beijing has refused.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying said, “As is known to all, China's nuclear power is not on the same order of magnitude as that of the United States and Russia... Not participating in trilateral talks does not mean China will be absent in the global efforts on nuclear disarmament. It is the United States who has been obstructing these efforts and walking further down the wrong path of being a quitter.” Hua said Washington is trying to “shift responsibility to others” as it scraps arms control treaties.

Indeed, the various US conflicts with Russia and China are ever more bound up with moves by the Moscow and Beijing regimes to deter Washington from attacking them, including potentially with nuclear weapons. Thus, the French Institute for Foreign Relations (IFRI) points to the nuclear dimension of conflict over the South China Sea, where China has a key nuclear missile submarine base on Hainan Island. It compares China’s policy with the Soviet Union’s Cold War policy of hiding submarines in the inland Sea of Okhotsk, where they could threaten to launch a counterstrike on the United States if Washington attacked the USSR with nuclear weapons.

The IFRI writes, “Too vulnerable to allied anti-submarine warfare assets to conduct deterrent patrols outside protected waters, Soviet nuclear missile submarines were confined to the heavily-guarded Sea of Okhotsk, relying on the long range of their ballistic missiles to create an effective nuclear deterrent. Similarly, the construction of military

outposts and airfields on the various disputed islands of the South China Sea may be part of a larger effort to build a ring of protection for Chinese nuclear missile submarines to patrol safely.”

These mounting conflicts and threats of nuclear war constitute a warning to workers in America and internationally. The more opposition mounts in the working class against social inequality and police repression, the more aggressively the imperialist ruling classes turn towards war—even if it has the most catastrophic consequences for humanity.

World Socialist 12.06.2020