



Russia in Review: June 23 – July 6

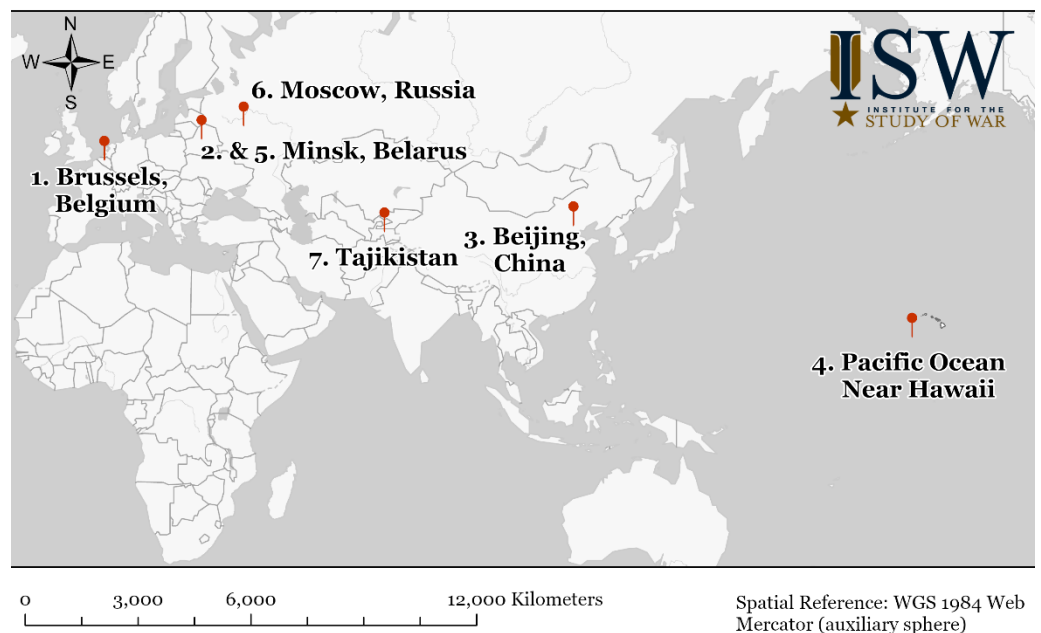
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ISW has revamped its Russia in Review product to provide more-complete snapshots of Russian activity around the globe.

Russian Navy Increases Number of Aggressive Actions to Counter NATO Exercises and Freedom of Maneuver Operations in the Black Sea

NATO is currently conducting its largest ever Black Sea naval exercises to strengthen maritime collective defense and resist Russian efforts to limit international access to the Black Sea.¹ Sea Breeze 2021 is the largest iteration yet of NATO's annual Sea Breeze exercises, held in the Black Sea since 1997 to strengthen interoperability between NATO and partner navies. The United States and Ukraine are cohosting the ongoing Sea Breeze 2021 exercise, which runs from June 28 to July 10, in

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the Black Sea.¹ NATO explicitly intends Sea Breeze 2021 to “demonstrate presence and assure allies of [NATO’s] maritime commitment to collective defense.” The exercises involve 32 states, 5,000 personnel, 32 ships, and 40 aircraft.² Participating warships and personnel will practice multiple types of operations,

including amphibious warfare, maritime interdiction, air defense, and anti-submarine warfare.³

The Kremlin decries Sea Breeze 2021 as a NATO provocation and violation of Russian waters and is conducting several naval exercises in response. Five Russian warships in Russia's Mediterranean Task force, including the missile cruiser and Black Sea Fleet flagship *Moskva*, the frigates *Admiral Essen* and *Admiral Makarov*, and two submarines began exercises in the Mediterranean Sea on June 25.⁴ The exercises practiced repelling simulated air attacks and defending Russia's naval base in Tartus, Syria. Russia's Black Sea Fleet, based in Crimea, began conducting air defense training checks on June 29 (the day after the start of Sea Breeze 2021) including several S-400 and Pantsir air defense systems and 20 aircraft.⁵ The *Moskva* and *Admiral Essen* redeployed from the Mediterranean to Crimea on June 5 to replenish supplies and join these ongoing Black Sea Fleet training checks.⁶ The Russian Black Sea Fleet and Mediterranean Task Force will likely continue to hold exercises parallel to Sea Breeze 2021 to demonstrate Russian capabilities and imply limits on NATO freedom of action in the Black Sea.

The Kremlin increased its aggressive responses to NATO and Ukrainian actions in international waters in June prior to Sea Breeze 2021. The Kremlin claimed its forces fired warning shots and dropped bombs near the Royal Navy's HMS *Defender* while it conducted a freedom of navigation operation off the shore of occupied Crimea on June 23.⁷ The United Kingdom denied Russian claims of bombing the HMS *Defender* and asserted the United Kingdom's freedom of navigation rights near Crimea.⁸ Russian aircraft have shadowed NATO warships in the Black Sea throughout June, and the Kremlin likely used electronic warfare to falsify the locations of several NATO warships in late June, making them appear to be violating Russia's claimed territorial waters.⁹

Expanded NATO exercises and freedom of maneuver missions are necessary to

support US partners in the Black Sea region and counter the Kremlin's illegal efforts to limit international access to the Black Sea. The Kremlin seeks to limit Ukraine and NATO's freedom of action in the Black Sea to cement Russian dominance over this region and pressure US allies including Ukraine, Georgia, and Turkey. The Russian Navy has expanded its aggressive actions in the Black Sea in 2021 and intends to normalize Russian dominance over international waters in violation of international law.

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1. **The European Union (EU) rejected a Franco-German proposal to hold a summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin.** France and Germany submitted a proposal to the European Council on June 23, 2021, without advance notice, calling for a summit between EU leadership and Putin to develop closer EU-Russia engagement.¹⁰ The European Council rejected this proposal during a private meeting on June 25, instead issuing a joint statement calling on Russia to "demonstrate a more constructive engagement" as a condition of further EU outreach.¹¹ Central and Eastern European states—particularly Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Romania—publicly decried France and Germany's call for closer relations with Russia as a dangerous concession in the absence of changes to Russia's malign actions in Europe.¹² French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel reiterated their intent to meet with Putin independently of the EU following the June 25 European Council summit.¹³ Macron directly called for a "structured dialogue" with Russia during a call with Putin on July 2.¹⁴ Direct engagement with the Kremlin by EU members without substantial changes in Russian malign behavior will undermine collective European policies and further embolden Putin to act without fear of repercussions.

2. **Belarus withdrew from the EU's Eastern Partnership cooperation initiative after the EU levied sectoral sanctions against Belarus.** The EU approved sectoral sanctions against the Belarusian economy on June 24 in response to Belarus' grounding of Ryanair flight 4978 on May 23.¹⁵ Belarus suspended its participation in the EU's Eastern Partnership Initiative—an EU framework to promote trade, travel agreements, and democracy between Western Europe and former Soviet states, including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine—in response on June 28.¹⁶ EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell stated the EU is ready to continue working with the “Belarusian people” despite the Belarusian government’s withdrawal from the Eastern Partnership, likely through communication with exiled Belarusian opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya.¹⁷ The Kremlin will likely take advantage of Belarus’ increasing isolation from non-Russian partners to further isolate Belarus and integrate it into Russian-controlled structures.¹⁸
3. **Russia and China signed a five-year extension to the Sino-Russian friendship treaty.** Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping announced a five-year extension of the Sino-Russian Treaty on Good-Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation (signed in 2001) on June 28.¹⁹ Putin praised the agreement for reaffirming mutual support for protecting “state unity and territorial integrity,” (referencing Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea) and the rejection of the first use of nuclear weapons. Putin claimed that joint Sino-Russian economic projects and Sino-Russian cooperation have a stabilizing role in world affairs, highlighting the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, BRICS, and Sino-Russian cooperation in the Korean Peninsula, Syria, Afghanistan, and Iran. President Xi Jinping praised Sino-Russian efforts to build a multipolar world order and said he appreciated that Russia and China support each other's interests on the

international stage. The Kremlin continues to be threatened by rising Chinese power but will increasingly seek to selectively leverage China against US efforts to counter Russia’s aggressive foreign policy.

4. **The Russian Pacific Fleet was highly active during June 2021.** The Russian Pacific Fleet conducted its largest naval exercises since the Cold War in the central Pacific Ocean and near Hawaii from June 14 to 30, practicing the simulated destruction of an enemy carrier strike group and strikes against shore facilities.²⁰ Approximately 20 warships participated, including the missile cruiser *Varyag* (the Pacific Fleet’s flagship), two destroyers, three corvettes, a missile-tracking ship, an unspecified number of submarines and support vessels, and at least 20 aircraft. A US Navy Indo-Pacific Command spokesperson said some of the Russian vessels operated 20 to 30 nautical miles off the coast of Hawaii.²¹ The US scrambled F-22 fighters in Hawaii on June 14, likely in response to this Russian activity.²² The Russian MoD additionally announced on June 29 that the Russian Pacific Fleet will expand the infrastructure at its Kamchatka submarine base by the end of 2021.²³ The Russian Navy is increasing its power projection capabilities in the Pacific to support the Kremlin’s campaign to expand its global military footprint.
5. **The Kremlin likely continued to pressure Belarus for additional concessions on Russo-Belarusian government integration.** Secretary of the Russian Security Council Nikita Patrushev—a senior Kremlin security official close to Vladimir Putin—and self-declared Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko discussed Russo-Belarusian security cooperation issues “not subject to public disclosure” in Minsk on June 29.²⁴ Lukashenko atypically declined to make any public statement on the meeting. The unusually sensitive nature of their conversation indicates they likely discussed Russo-Belarusian security and military integration. Senior Russian-Belarusian

meetings at this level have historically precipitated significant Belarusian security integration concessions and new deals for the Kremlin.²⁵ Russian President Vladimir Putin and Lukashenko held another call on July 1, discussing further security and economic cooperation.²⁶ The Kremlin is continuing to advance its campaign to establish a permanent military presence in Belarus postured against NATO and Ukraine.²⁷

6. Russian President Vladimir Putin approved an increasingly combative National Security Strategy (NSS) that removed all mention of cooperation with the West. Putin approved the new NSS on July 3, replacing the existing NSS written in 2015.²⁸ The new NSS paints an increasingly alarmed picture of perceived Western threats. The NSS increases formal emphasis on protecting Russia’s “cultural sovereignty” and traditional values against perceived Western pressure, policy changes the Kremlin has prioritized since 2015. The NSS removes all references to cooperation with the United States and NATO, as well as specific arms control and nuclear non-proliferation objectives previously included in the 2015 strategy. Much of the strategy remains the same from 2015, and the Kremlin has already enacted many of the policy changes and adaptations formalized in this document.²⁹ The Kremlin’s formalization of its defensive worldview and removal of all mentions of cooperation with the West indicate an increasingly combative mindset that is unlikely to respond to Western outreach or strategic dialogue in good faith.

7. Tajikistan will mobilize military reservists to the Afghan border with Kremlin promises of support. Tajik President Emomali Ramhmon ordered the mobilization of 20,000 reservists to support ongoing military deployments to Tajikistan’s border with Afghanistan on July 5 in response to Taliban advances in Afghanistan.³⁰ Putin promised his counterparts from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan support from the Russian military both bilaterally and through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) on July 6.³¹ The Russian Foreign Ministry further stated Russia’s 201st military base in Tajikistan— Russia’s only formal international military base—is equipped with “everything necessary” to support Tajikistan if required.³² The Kremlin will likely increase its military presence in Central Asia to counter the potential threat of a jihadist resurgence in Afghanistan. The Kremlin will also prioritize maintaining its dominant influence in Central Asia and advancing its unitary security interests; its deployments to the area are unlikely to effectively replace NATO security operations in Afghanistan.

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