

NATO's "Spring Storm" Exercise: Threatens Russia

Another Step to Aggravate Tensions in Europe

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On April 20, the Russia-NATO Council meeting failed to produce results. The failure was followed by a host of decisions taken by NATO to intensify military activities in Europe and boost the Alliance's military presence in the proximity of Russia's borders.

NATO exercise *Spring Storm* was launched on May 2 to last till May 20. The large-scale drill involves around 6 thousand troops. 1500 servicemen have come to Estonia from 10 member states, including the US, the UK, Germany, the Netherlands, Latvia and Lithuania. Each of these states has sent a company-sized unit. The training events are conducted in Tartu, Võru and Põlva counties in Southeast Estonia. Canadian teams of specialists as well as Finnish staff officers are participating in the exercise as well.



The US is using V-22 Osprey tiltrotor aircraft and CH-47 Chinook twin-engine, tandem rotor heavy-lift helicopters to transport the troops. Polish Su-22 fighters and US F-15 fighter jets are providing air cover for ground forces. To make sure the force is multinational, NATO officials asked smaller allies to make contributions, such as logisticians, for supporting operational units.

The participation of a sizable German force demonstrates Berlin's emerging role as a bigger player in the Alliance.

The *Spring Storm* is taking place just two weeks after the two-day exercise called *Ramstein Alloy 1* was held in all three Baltic States to bring together the air forces of Belgium, Spain, and Poland, as well as non-NATO members Finland and Sweden.

The *Spring Storm* exercise is an element of broader process aimed at increasing NATO's military presence in the region.

The Estonian Prime Minister, Taavi Rõivas, [calls](#) for permanent presence of Alliance troops in «Estonia and neighboring countries».

He wants the decision to be made during the [NATO Summit in Warsaw](#) on July 6-9, 2016.

US DoD [requested](#) \$3.4 billion for fiscal year 2017 (up from \$789 million for the current budget year) to reinforce its military presence close to Russia's Western borders.

The funding will help the US to rotate more troops in the region, conduct more war games and reposition additional military hardware. The President Obama's European Reassurance Initiative includes greater US participation in training and exercises, deploying US military planners, and more persistent naval deployments on Russia's doorstep. It should be noted that the Pentagon's [proposed](#) boost to European defense for 2017 means that the US Air Force will be conducting exercises with Finnish forces. While modest, [the exercises](#) to occur about 100 miles from the Russian border, will be the [largest](#) training events to ever take place in Finland involving US aircraft - another step to get Finland nearer to NATO. If Finland joined the Alliance, it would lead to a serious crisis with neighboring Russia, a report commissioned by the Finnish government [said](#) on April 28.



Only 22 percent of Finns support joining NATO, while 55 percent oppose it, a recent poll by public broadcaster YLE [showed](#).

NATO allies are preparing to put four battalions - a force of about 4,000 troops - in Poland and the Baltic countries as part of an effort by the Alliance to reinforce its military presence near Russia. The US is likely to provide two battalions, while Germany and Britain would likely provide a battalion each. US Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work, visiting Brussels, [confirmed](#) the overall size of the force.

This announcement might come as news to many people in Germany. The move is considered highly controversial in the country. Anti-Russian rhetoric does not sit well with common people of NATO member-states. As a recent Pew Research Center [poll](#) revealed, majorities in such NATO states as Germany (56 percent), Italy (51 percent) and France (53 percent) oppose the idea of protecting the Baltic States from a «military threat» allegedly posed by Russia.

According to the poll, some 58 percent of Germans surveyed do not deem Russia a threat to their country, with 49 percent firmly against the idea of permanent deployment of NATO forces in Poland or any of the Baltic States.

NATO defense ministers in February [approved](#) in principle the [deployment of an Eastern European troop presence](#); though diplomats said the new contribution numbers aren't finalized.

In late April, delegations from Scandinavian, Baltic and Visegrád countries met in Jurmala, Latvia. It was [decided](#) that Visegrád's countries will send troops to the Baltics in 2017.

Each member-country will send a contingent of 150 soldiers to the region in three-month shifts beginning in 2017.

The US deployed a number of F-22 Raptors to Europe in the end of April. On April 25, two F-22s were [deployed to a Romanian airbase](#) on the Black Sea coast. On April 26, two F-22s flew at [low altitude through the famous Mach Loop](#) training area in Wales. On April 27,

two [F-22s were deployed at Siauliai airbase](#), Lithuania, where NATO BAP (Baltic Air Patrol) jets are based. This was the first deployment to Europe of the advanced US fighters since Washington beefed up military support for NATO's Eastern European allies. The F-22s are almost impossible to detect on radar and so advanced that the US Congress has banned Lockheed Martin from selling them abroad. «The increased size of the 2016 deployment ... allows US Forces to assert their presence more widely across the eastern frontier», [said](#) US Air Force spokeswoman Major Sheryll Klinkel. «We want to be able to operate out of multiple locations. We want to be able to keep our adversary guessing on where we're going to go next».

The NATO plans also encompass the Black Sea region. Turkey, Bulgaria and Romania may expand the NATO maritime presence in the Black Sea as part of a broader strategy to contain Russia, [said](#) NATO Deputy Secretary General Alexander Vershbow on April 22.

Ukraine and Georgia [may join](#) the force, according to the concept of «allied fleet».

Boosting intelligence capability is also a part of the plans. The US has too few intelligence assets focused on the threat from Russia and should concentrate its technical capabilities on Moscow's growing military might, [said](#) Gen. Philip Breedlove, the top military commander of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

According to him, the US is now wrestling with whether to focus more reconnaissance satellites and other assets on Russian military moves. He said he advocates increased investment in such assets as well as devoting more to keeping watch on Russia. «What we need to look at now is do we need a refocusing or reallocation... of the technical capabilities», he said.

Russia has long considered the expansion of NATO toward its borders a threat. Earlier this year, Russian President Vladimir Putin [signed](#) a defense strategy document that declared the rising military presence by NATO countries in Eastern Europe and the Baltics a threat to Russia's national security.

Russia [has announced](#) its plans to create four new military divisions this year in an effort to reinforce its military forces amid increased exercises by NATO member states.

«NATO military infrastructure is inching closer and closer to Russia's borders. But when Russia takes action to ensure its security, we are told that Russia is engaging in dangerous maneuvers near NATO borders. In fact, NATO borders are getting closer to Russia, not the opposite», Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov [told](#) Sweden's Dagens Nyheter daily.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova [said](#) these moves «create grounds to implement military plans against Russia and take practical steps to push military infrastructure closer to Russia's borders».

According to the spokeswoman, the manner in which these initiatives are carried out is «aggressive». NATO uses a non-existent threat from Russia as a pretext. Russia will respond with «fitting political, diplomatic and military» measures to Washington and NATO's «unfriendly» attempts «to exert pressure» on Moscow, she noted.

Russia has long called on NATO to refrain from expanding into Eastern Europe, saying that

such moves have the potential to destabilize the security situation in the region. Nonetheless, NATO has accepted 12 eastern European countries since 1999 and now wants to take in one more - Montenegro. Now it has greatly intensified its military activities in Europe. It took great effort to create the system of European security - a unique phenomenon in the world history to serve as an example for other continents. Now it is on the verge of becoming a thing of the past. Step by step the US-led NATO restores its aggressive posture to make all the achievements related to European security go down the drain. The goal of creating «Greater Europe» stretching from Lisbon to Vladivostok seemed to be achievable just a few years ago. Now it has become a far-fetched dream. As a result of NATO's growing military presence and intensified military activities a spark may start a big fire in Europe. We've seen that before. The dangerous situation creep can be stopped. If there is a will, there is a way. The time is ripe to stop the vicious circle. Russia is ready to make its contribution. But the Alliance responds with sabre rattling.

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