

Russia Threatens Response to US Military Buildup in Eastern Europe

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President Vladimir Putin told reporters Tuesday that his government would be compelled to direct its military forces at any country engaged in a military buildup against Russia. He was responding to the report last weekend of plans under consideration by the Obama administration to permanently position battle tanks and other heavy military equipment in Eastern Europe, enough to maintain a 5,000-strong force in the Baltic states and other Eastern European NATO members.

The Pentagon's plan, if approved by Defense Secretary Ashton Carter, would see the positioning of weapons and tanks in Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary. This would mark the first permanent deployment of US military equipment to NATO members that were once part of the Soviet Union.

The response of Putin and other Russian officials has made it clear that US plans for a significant military buildup in Eastern Europe have only pushed the two nuclear-armed powers even closer to the brink of war.

While US officials claim that the positioning of weapons is meant only to facilitate military training exercises, a logical interpretation of the deployment of arms to these countries is that the US and its NATO allies are preparing to launch a war against Russia. For its part, the Putin regime is responding accordingly, shoring up its military forces and making its own preparations for war by whipping up reactionary Russian nationalism.

There is nothing progressive about the response of the Putin administration to the aggression of the Western imperialists. Putin has combined saber-rattling and the buildup of Russia's military forces with repeated appeals for some sort of deal with the US and Europe. Such a policy, sowing illusions in the possibility of accommodation with the rapacious Western imperialists while escalating military tensions, can only lead to disaster for the working class, not just in Russia, but throughout the world.

Speaking at joint press conference on Tuesday with the President of Finland, Pauli Niinistö, Putin told reporters, "We will be forced to aim our armed forces ... at those territories from where the threat comes."

Responding to repeated claims of Russian aggression, Putin pointed out that it was NATO which had expanded up to Russia's borders. "It is NATO that is moving towards our border and we aren't moving anywhere," he stated. He also cited his opposition to longstanding NATO plans for the construction a missile defense system in Eastern Europe that would be directed at Russia.

In a speech earlier in the day Tuesday at the Army-2015 International Military-Technical Forum, Putin announced plans to expand Russia's nuclear arsenal by the end of the year. "This year we will supply more than 40 new intercontinental ballistic missiles to our nuclear force," he announced to those assembled at the newly inaugurated Patriot Park, an hour outside Moscow. He stated that the new ICBMs would "be capable of overcoming even the most technically advanced anti-missile defense systems."

Putin announced the planned expansion of Russia's nuclear arsenal a day after Russian military officials made clear they would respond with a military buildup along the country's western border if the US proceeded with its plans.

Russian army Gen. Yury Yakubov told Interfax on Monday that his government would have no choice but to respond in kind to US plans with a massive build-up of troops, heavy military equipment and missile systems on its western border.

Yakubov stated that the positioning of heavy weaponry, tanks and other military vehicles in the Baltics would be seen as "the most aggressive step since the Cold War." He made clear that any buildup of equipment or forces in Eastern Europe would result in a reinforcement of Russian troops all along the European border. "Russia won't have anything else to do but bolster its forces and resources on the western strategic theater of operations."

According to Yakubov, Russia would respond to US deployments by moving forward with plans to position a new Iskander tactical missile system in its Kaliningrad territory on the Baltic Sea, an enclave surrounded by Poland and Lithuania with no land connection to Russia. He also told reporters that Russia would move to bolster its military forces in Belarus, which borders Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Ukraine.

"Our hands are completely free to organize retaliatory steps to strengthen our western frontiers," Yakubov concluded.

Following Putin's remarks on Tuesday NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg, the former Prime Minister of Norway, denounced Russia for "nuclear saber-rattling." He told reporters that Russia's response to the plans to position military equipment in Eastern Europe was "destabilizing and it's dangerous."

Stoltenberg made clear that Russia's proposed counter-measures would do nothing to deter NATO's war plans.

"This is something which we are addressing, and it's also one of the reasons we are now increasing the readiness and preparedness of our forces. We are responding by making sure that NATO also in the future is an alliance which provides deterrence and protection for all allies against any threat."

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 NATO has been working to build a solid military bloc on Russia's western border. The Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland joined in 1999; the Baltic states, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Slovenia and Romania in 2004; and Albania and Croatia in 2009. The fascist-led coup in Ukraine last year, backed by the US and Germany, was aimed at pulling that country out of Russia's sphere of influence and towards the West. The far-right puppet government has dropped Ukraine's non-aligned status, adopted in 2010, and is moving towards NATO member status.

With the US in the lead, NATO is already engaging in provocative military exercises all along Russia's western border from the Arctic Ocean to the Black Sea. Numerous "near-miss" encounters between NATO naval vessels and aircraft and Russian aircraft have been reported in recent months. In February US armored personnel carriers were paraded in the Estonian city of Narva, just a few hundred yards from the Russian border.

With the growing buildup of US and NATO forces in Eastern Europe, one misstep by either side could spark a conflict between the two largest nuclear-armed powers on the planet, which would devastate the planet.

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