

# US and NATO Step Up Military Preparations Against Russia

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At their meeting this week in Wales, government heads of NATO member countries are expected to approve the creation of a special rapid response force of as many as 4,000 soldiers that could be deployed to any member state within two days. They are also expected to sanction the establishment of an ongoing troop presence in Poland and the Baltic states, as well as the buildup of equipment and arms stockpiles in Eastern Europe.

The NATO summit, to which Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko has been invited, will focus on the Western diplomatic, economic and military offensive against Russia that has been continually escalated since the US and Germany triggered the crisis in Ukraine last February by organizing a fascist-led putsch that overthrew the pro-Russian government of Viktor Yanukovich.

Russia announced Wednesday that it will alter its military policy in response to the aggressive expansion of NATO forces into Eastern Europe as well moves by the Kiev regime to integrate Ukraine into the US-dominated Western military alliance.

Mikhail Popov, deputy secretary of Russia's Security Council, said in an interview with RIA Novosti that "the issue of drawing of military infrastructure of NATO member-countries to the borders of our country, including via enlargement, will remain one of the external military threats for the Russian Federation."

Incoming European Union (EU) foreign policy chief Federica Mogheirini announced Tuesday that a new round of sanctions against Russia would be decided on by the end of the week.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, among the new measures being considered are restrictions on the ability of Russian state-owned companies to raise money on capital markets, the extension of restrictions on Russian state-owned banks and other firms from receiving new syndicated loans, and wider limits on the export of dual-use goods.

US President Barack Obama was in Tallinn, Estonia on the eve of the NATO summit to meet with the leaders of the three Baltic states—Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves, Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaite, and Latvian President Andris Berzins. Grybauskaite recently declared that "practically Russia is in a state of war against Europe."

The main purpose of Obama's trip to Estonia is to reaffirm the Baltic states' status under Article Five of the NATO Charter, which triggers collective defense when a member state is attacked by another country.

The right-wing leaders of the Baltic states have called for an increased US and NATO military presence in their countries, all of which share a border with Russia and have significant Russian minority populations. The Baltic states were incorporated into NATO and the European Union in 2004 and are the only former Soviet territories to have attained membership in both organizations.

The Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* leaked details from a closed session of Saturday's EU summit that have been seized upon by the media to demonize Russian President Vladimir Putin and condition public opinion for war with Russia.

In the session, European Council President Jose Manuel Barroso detailed a telephone conversation he had with Putin on Friday. According to *La Repubblica*, Putin responded to Barroso's accusations of Russia troops in Ukraine by saying, "The problem is not this, but that if I want I'll take Kiev in two weeks.

Yuri Ushakov, a Kremlin foreign policy adviser, denounced the leak of selected details from Putin and Barroso's conversation. "Whether these words were said or not, in my viewpoint, the quote given is taken out of context, and it had an absolutely different meaning," he stated.

In the face of NATO's aggressive posture, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov appealed for the US and its European allies to support a compromise in Ukraine between Kiev and pro-Russian separatists in the eastern part of the country. He called on the US to use its influence to rein in Kiev and encourage the regime to resolve the crisis through a political process rather than military operations.

Lavrov suggested that Ukrainian President Poroshenko's scheduled visit to the White House on September 18 would be "a good opportunity to dot the i's and cross the t's concerning US interest or non-interest" regarding political developments in the country.

Talks in Minsk between representatives from Moscow, Kiev and the separatist groups ended without any progress Monday and will resume on Friday. The Obama administration did not send a representative to the talks and is working to prevent any sort of political settlement between Kiev and the pro-Russian separatists.

In the last two weeks, the separatists have made significant gains against Kiev's armed forces. As many as 680 Ukrainian soldiers have been captured by the separatists in recent fighting, with many being taken around the city of Ilovaik, where rebels were able to surround hundreds of Ukrainian troops.

Ukrainian armed forces withdrew from the Luhansk airport on Tuesday after a night of intense fighting with rebels. Clashes were reported to be taking place around the Donetsk airport as well.

The rebels were also reported to be continuing their advance on the strategic port city of Mariupol. The separatists captured Olenivka, a key city on the road to Mariupol, opening a possible route from the north. They had already opened a route from the east when they captured the coastal city of Novoazovsk last week.

The ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine has claimed thousands of casualties and displaced as many as a million people. Hundreds of civilians have been killed as a result of indiscriminate artillery shelling of residential areas in the cities of Luhansk and Donetsk by

Ukrainian armed forces.

According to a report by Human Rights Watch, more than 300 civilians have been killed by explosive weapons since May in the city of Luhansk. On August 18, shells struck the city's central market, killing four civilians and setting off a fire that burnt down several shops. Shells were then fired at fire brigades as they sought to respond, keeping them from putting out the blaze.

The UN estimates that 260,000 people have been displaced inside Ukraine, more than doubling through the month of August. According to Russian authorities, more than 800,000 Ukrainians have entered Russia seeking either refugee/temporary asylum or other residence options.

UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres expressed his concern over the rapid rise in Ukrainian refugees. "If this crisis is not quickly stopped," he said, "it will have not only devastating humanitarian consequences, but it also has the potential to destabilize the whole region. After the lessons of the Balkans, it is hard to believe a conflict of these proportions could unfold in the European continent."

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