

US-Russian War Tensions Mount Over Eastern Europe and Syria

By [Bill Van Auken](#)

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NATO defense ministers convened a two-day meeting in Brussels Wednesday to thrash out final plans for the deployment of some 4,000 combat troops organized in four battle groups within striking distance of Russia's border.

These front-line forces are to be backed by a 40,000-strong rapid reaction force capable of going into battle within days.

The plan represents the largest military escalation in the region since the height of the Cold War between the US and the former Soviet Union and carries with it the heightened threat of an armed confrontation between Washington and Moscow, the world's two largest nuclear powers.

At the end of Wednesday's session, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg confirmed that the United States, Britain, Germany and Canada had agreed to provide the leading elements of the battle groups to be deployed respectively in Poland and the three former Soviet Baltic republics: Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia.

Stoltenberg added that other NATO member states would contribute soldiers and armaments to the buildup. Describing the deployment as "multinational," he stressed that it underscored that "[a]n attack on any ally will be considered an attack on us all."

US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter said that Washington would send a "battle-ready battalion task force" of approximately 900 soldiers into eastern Poland. The troops are to be drawn from the 2nd Stryker Cavalry Regiment, named for the Stryker armored fighting vehicle. The unit was sent repeatedly into the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In addition, the Pentagon is sending the 3rd Armored Brigade Combat Team of the 4th Infantry Division, replete with battle tanks and heavy artillery, which will be based in Poland, but operate in the general periphery of ex-Soviet republics and former Warsaw Pact nations on Russia's western flank. Also being sent is the 10th Combat Aviation Brigade, equipped with Black Hawk attack helicopters.

Washington has also announced it is dispatching 330 Marines to a base in Norway after the Norwegian government approved the deployment Monday. "We expect a sustained challenge from the East, from Russia, by way of its military activity," Douglas Lute, the US ambassador to NATO, said in explaining the move.

Britain, meanwhile, spelled out its plans to deploy 800 troops to Estonia, equipped with

battle tanks, armored infantry fighting vehicles and drones. It is to be joined by units from France and Denmark. British warplanes are also being sent to Romania.

Germany will deploy a battalion of between 400 and 600 troops to Lithuania, marking the first entry of the German military into the country since its occupation by the Nazis, who carried out the murder of close to a quarter of a million Jews there. The German deployment will be backed by units from Netherlands, Norway, Belgium, Croatia and Luxembourg.

Canada is reportedly sending 450 troops to Latvia, to be joined by 140 Italian military personnel.

Defending the deployments in an interview with the German broadcaster, Deutsche Welle, the outgoing American deputy secretary general of NATO, Alexander Vershbow, claimed the US-led alliance “had no choice.”

“Russia changed the whole paradigm in 2014 with its aggression against Ukraine, its illegal annexation of Crimea,” said Vershbow.

This is a barefaced lie. The crisis in Ukraine was triggered not by “aggression” on the part of the Kremlin oligarchy, but rather the conspiracy of Washington and Berlin to overthrow the elected government in Kiev through the mobilization of violent fascist and right-wing nationalist forces. The US openly associated itself with this coup, with Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland bragging that the US had spent \$5 billion to further Ukrainian regime change.

The reintegration of Crimea into Russia—it was only placed under Ukrainian administration in 1956, when both Russia and Ukraine were part of the Soviet Union—was overwhelmingly supported by the territory’s population in a popular referendum. From Moscow’s standpoint, this was a defensive measure taken to safeguard the historic base of Russia’s Black Sea fleet.

The coup in Ukraine was the culmination of the relentless military encirclement of Russia, which has seen NATO shift its borders 800 miles eastward. Now, the deployments announced Wednesday have turned into a dead letter the agreement negotiated between NATO and Moscow not to send “substantial” numbers of Western troops into these areas.

In the wake of the Ukrainian coup, US President Barack Obama flew to Estonia to declare Washington’s “eternal” commitment to defend it and the other two Baltic states with “American boots on the ground,” thereby committing the US to war in defense of three tiny territories ruled by right-wing and fanatically anti-Russian governments eager for confrontation.

Further justifying the current NATO buildup, Stoltenberg declared Wednesday, “Close to our borders, Russia continues its assertive military posturing.” Given that NATO has expanded its reach to Russia’s own borders, this effectively means that Russia is a threat because it maintains armed forces on its own soil.

Tensions with Russia, as well as within the NATO alliance itself, have been further ratcheted up over Moscow’s dispatch of an eight-vessel flotilla led by the aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov to the eastern Mediterranean to support Russian operations in support of the Syrian government.

After reports that this Russian flotilla would stop in Ceuta, the Spanish-ruled port city on the north coast of Africa, for refueling, the NATO powers exerted immense pressure on the Spanish government to refuse to allow the Russian warships to dock there.

British Defense Secretary Michel Fallon declared that his government “would be extremely concerned if a NATO member should consider assisting a Russian carrier group that might end up bombing Syria.”

Spain has reportedly allowed nearly 60 Russian warships to take on fuel and supplies in Ceuta since 2011. The practice led to denunciations in the US Congress and an amendment being attached last May to the US military spending bill requiring the Pentagon to report to Congress on countries hosting Russian vessels.

The Russian media reported Wednesday that Moscow rescinded its request to refuel at the port, while Russian government sources said the ships had adequate fuel and supplies to reach their destination.

The controversy reflects the widening divisions that have opened up within the NATO alliance under the pressure of the escalating confrontation with Russia. The countries of southern Europe, particularly Spain, Italy and Greece, have grown increasingly hostile to the regime of sanctions against Russia that has only deepened their own economic crises. Meanwhile, Germany and France have floated plans for turning the European Union into an independent military alliance, reflecting the growing conflict between US and European interests.

NATO officials have couched the issue of the Russian flotilla in alleged “humanitarian” concerns over the situation in Syria, with warnings that the fighter jets onboard the Kuznetsov will join in air strikes against eastern Aleppo and other areas controlled by the Al Qaeda-linked Islamist militias supported by Washington and its allies.

Undoubtedly a more fundamental concern is that the Russian naval buildup in the eastern Mediterranean, coupled with Russia’s deployment of fighter jets and advanced mobile S-400 and S-300 missile defense systems in Syria itself, is challenging the control of the area historically exercised by the US Sixth Fleet, which has been sorely depleted by the US “pivot” to Asia.

The Russian firepower in and around Syria has also effectively precluded the imposition of a “no-fly zone,” a policy promoted by Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and much of the US foreign policy establishment, outside of a direct military confrontation with Russia.

This was acknowledged Tuesday by US Director of National Intelligence James Clapper in remarks to the Council on Foreign Relations. “I wouldn’t put it past them to shoot down an American aircraft if they felt that was threatening to their forces on the ground,” Clapper said of the Russian military during a talk at the Council of Foreign Relations. “The system they have there is very advanced, very capable, and I don’t think they’d do it—deploy it—if they didn’t have some intention to use it.”

Whether the flashpoint emerges in Eastern Europe or in Syria, the drive by US imperialism to achieve global hegemony is steadily escalating the threat of world war.

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Articles by: [Bill Van Auken](#)

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