

NATO prepares “rapid reaction force” for confrontation with Russia

By Bill Van Auken
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The NATO foreign ministers meeting held in Brussels Tuesday ratcheted up tensions between the West and Russia, solidifying plans for a 5,000-member “rapid reaction force” that could be quickly deployed to the Russian border.

The annual end-of-the-year meeting was convened amid heated charges exchanged between Moscow on the one side and Washington and the major European powers on the other that military measures taken by the opposed side were dangerously destabilizing Europe.

Under the plans discussed in Brussels, an interim “spearhead” force is to be put in place early next year, with troops initially provided by Germany, Norway and the Netherlands, and with air, sea and other logistical support as well as Special Forces units supplied by the Pentagon. By 2016, a permanent full brigade-strength rapid reaction force is to be in place, with the capability of deploying to Russia’s doorstep within 48 hours to “deter and defend” in any crisis.

“We are protecting our allies and supporting our partners,” the Norwegian secretary general of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg, declared.

The new force was only one facet of what is emerging as a concerted campaign of US and NATO military pressure against Moscow. The Western military alliance has also vowed to conduct stepped-up patrols by warplanes over the Baltic Sea and to carry out a continuous rotation of US and Western European troops in and out of Poland and the former Soviet Baltic republics in a series of never-ending “exercises.”

Approval of the plans marked a concretization of decisions reached at the NATO summit meeting held in Wales in early September to launch a military buildup in Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia—NATO member states that share borders with either Russia or Belarus—as well as in Poland.

On the eve of the NATO meeting in Brussels, Lt. Gen. Frederick “Ben” Hodges, who took over last month as commander of US Army Europe, was in Vilnius, Lithuania on a visit aimed at securing facilities for prepositioning tanks, armored vehicles and other US military hardware.

In a further reversal of the post-Cold War drawdown of US military forces in Europe, General Hodges announced that the Pentagon is preparing to dispatch 100 Abrams battle tanks as well as Bradley Fighting Vehicles to Eastern Europe for what he called “contingency purposes.”

Hodges said the aim of the US buildup in the region was to provide “deterrence against Russian aggression.” US Army Europe presently has 31,000 troops deployed in the region, compared to 280,000 at the height of the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union. The last US tanks were pulled out of Germany in April 2013. Last January, a small number were shipped back into the country, and now Washington has embarked on a major redeployment of American armor.

Military tensions between NATO and Moscow have escalated steadily since the US- and German-orchestrated coup that toppled the government of Ukraine last February, plunging the country into a bloody civil war that has seen over 4,300 people killed, most of them civilians, in the predominantly Russian-speaking areas in eastern Ukraine. Washington and NATO have accused Russia of deploying troops in Ukraine to back anti-Kiev forces in the eastern industrial regions of Luhansk and Donetsk, charges Moscow has denied.

“We strongly condemn Russia’s continued and deliberate destabilization of eastern Ukraine in breach of international law,” the NATO ministers declared in a

statement Tuesday. The document added that NATO member states “do not and will not recognize” Moscow’s annexation of Crimea, the home of Russia’s Black Sea fleet. The action was overwhelmingly approved by the predominantly Russian population of the territory in a referendum held last March.

On the eve of the NATO summit, Moscow charged that Washington and NATO were responsible for the tensions in Europe. “They are trying to destabilize the most stable region in the world—northern Europe,” Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexei Meshkov told the Russian news agency Interfax. “The endless military exercises, transferring aircraft capable of carrying nuclear arms to the Baltic states. This reality is extremely negative.”

As part of the escalation against Russia, the NATO meeting also initiated five “trust funds” to bolster the military spending of the nearly bankrupt Ukrainian regime. Stoltenberg said that while NATO itself would not directly arm the Ukrainian military, member states were free to do so.

Washington has provided what it terms “nonlethal” aid to Kiev, including night-vision goggles, body armor, helmets, fuel pumps, diesel generators, radios, bomb disposal robots and other equipment. There is reportedly also discussion of shipping Humvees to the Ukrainian forces.

In a provocative statement to the media on the eve of the meeting in Brussels, Stoltenberg held out the prospect of NATO membership for Ukraine, a move that Moscow has vehemently opposed, viewing it as an existential threat to the security of Russia.

If Ukraine, or, for that matter, Georgia were to apply for NATO membership, “then we go into the normal process” of determining eligibility, Stoltenberg declared. “But this is a relationship between NATO and the country that applies,” he added. “And no third country can veto the enlargement of NATO.”

The statement seemed to cut across the position put forward Sunday by German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who told Germany’s ZDF television, “As far as I’m concerned, NATO membership for Ukraine is not on the agenda now. At least I do not see Ukraine on the way to joining NATO.” Steinmeier said he could understand the Ukrainian regime’s desire to join the alliance, but added, “...we have to stay realistic. We are in the center

of a dangerous conflict.”

While a formal ceasefire has been in effect since September between Kiev’s forces and militias loyal to the anti-Kiev regional governments set up in Donetsk and Luhansk, fighting has continued, with fully a quarter of the civil war’s casualties taking place in the last three months. A new ceasefire deal announced in Donetsk Monday appeared to have broken down, while a separate agreement was declared in Luhansk.

US Air Force Gen. Philip Breedlove, NATO’s supreme allied commander, visited Ukraine last week to discuss the military campaign in the east and increased US aid. Washington has consistently backed a military solution to the conflict in Ukraine, supporting pro-government forces that are based in large part on fascist and right-wing nationalist militias.

Following negotiations last week in Vienna on a draft resolution for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Ministerial Council, which is to convene in Switzerland later this week, Moscow charged Washington with deliberately obstructing any cooperation and any peaceful resolution of the conflict in Ukraine.

In response to the US position, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a blistering statement charging Washington with having “provoked, funded and supported” the coup in Ukraine and of “pushing Kiev to resolve by force the problems in relation with the southeast.”

It added that the attempt to whip up “anti-Russian hysteria” and enforce sanctions against Russia were “incompatible with the course of military confidence-building and reaching tangible military and political agreements.”

The statement concluded with the “hope” that “the point of no return in European affairs has not yet been passed.”

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