

NATO summit ends cooperation with Russia and announces further troop build-up

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The United States and its NATO allies have pledged additional military forces to be stationed in states neighbouring Russia and agreed to take part in military manoeuvres in Ukraine, Poland and the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

The moves are the most aggressive yet taken against Russia since the Western-organised coup in Ukraine in February. Washington, Berlin, Paris and London have utilised Moscow's subsequent annexation of Crimea to legitimise pre-existing plans to encircle Russia militarily and destabilise its economy through sanctions.

Prior to a meeting in Brussels of the 28-member military alliance, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen told a press conference that NATO had seen no sign of a withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine's borders. This followed President Vladimir Putin's phone call to German Chancellor Angela Merkel in which he said a partial withdrawal was underway. NATO claims that some 35,000-40,000 Russian troops are massed near Ukraine's eastern border, but Russia cites a figure less than half that and insists the troops are taking part in planned military manoeuvres.

Yesterday's summit agreed to "suspend all practical civilian and military cooperation between NATO and Russia." Afterwards, Secretary of State John Kerry told a press conference that the US had pushed hard for NATO expansion and increased military spending in Europe to show that NATO is committed to "shared security."

The US has made clear for months its intention to do what it now declares as public policy. Back in November last year, NATO staged "Steadfast Jazz," its biggest military exercise in seven years in the Baltic countries and Poland. Involving 6,000 soldiers, it was based on a scenario in which troops from the imaginary state of Bothnia invade Estonia in a crisis sparked by competition for energy resources and economic collapse.

Since the whipping up of the crisis in Ukraine,

Washington has despatched 12 warplanes and hundreds of troops to Poland and sent the aircraft carrier USS George H.W. Bush and its naval group to the Mediterranean Sea. In addition, NATO and Ukraine are taking part in a joint military exercise in Bulgaria called "Sabre Guardian." The US has also sent 10 F-15 jets to help NATO boost its military presence in the Baltic states.

Britain and France have announced increases in the number of planes they contribute to NATO air patrols over the Baltics.

Yesterday, German military sources said they too were ready to offer support to some eastern European members of NATO "in response to Russia's seizure of Crimea," according to *Der Spiegel*. Up to six aircraft were being considered to patrol East European airspace. A Defence Ministry spokeswoman told Reuters that "the army could take part in flights to patrol airspace with AWACS machines over Romania and Poland, as well as training flights in the framework of a NATO air policing mission over Baltic States."

A seven-page draft NATO plan was leaked to *Der Spiegel* urging increased military cooperation with Armenia, Azerbaijan and Moldova, including joint exercises and training, greater "interoperability" of their militaries with NATO, and participation in "smart defence" operations. A NATO liaison office was proposed for Moldova, military training for Armenia, and projects in Azerbaijan aimed at securing its Caspian Sea oil and gas fields.

Romanian President Traian Basescu said the US has also asked to boost the number of American troops and aircraft stationed there. Washington is expected to send another 600 personnel to its Mihail Kogalniceanu airbase on the Black Sea coast.

Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski has asked for two heavy brigades, equivalent to 10,000 troops.

Most seriously, the US and Ukraine are to conduct joint

military exercises in Ukraine itself.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andriy Deshchytsia took part in an extraordinary session of the Ukraine-NATO Commission and will attend the meeting of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg on April 2-3. Hours before the meeting was due to start, Ukraine's parliament approved by a 235-0 vote a series of joint military exercises with NATO.

"Rapid Trident" will involve 1,800 international troops, while "Sea Breeze" will take place in the Black Sea port of Odessa.

The US has pressed hard for NATO membership and associate membership of the European Union to be extended eastwards to Russia's borders, with President Barack Obama stating that he was intent on "ensuring a regular NATO presence" in "vulnerable" countries.

Rasmussen, in an op-ed piece for *Welt am Sonntag*, called NATO's expansion in the region "one of the greatest success stories of our time," adding that the "task is not yet complete."

Though Ukraine was not an immediate candidate for membership, NATO's partnership with Ukraine has been getting "ever stronger," he added, and NATO will help to "reform" its armed forces.

The NATO meeting marks 15 years since Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic joined the alliance, 10 years since the accession of Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia, and five years since Albania and Croatia became members. More is planned. Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro and Georgia are actively seeking NATO membership, Rasmussen wrote.

The right of sovereign nations to choose their own course was one of the foundations of modern Europe, he declared, adding, "We must all stand by it today."

Berlin has formally distanced itself from calls for Ukraine to join NATO and from proposals to expand membership more generally.

"The federal government does not see the need at this stage for further expansion of NATO to the east. That is not on the list of necessities for us, although Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Macedonia seek to become members," said government spokesman Steffan Seibert.

Asked about possible Ukrainian membership, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said that while the German government hasn't formed a position, "I don't see a path to NATO membership."

On a practical basis, this is an attempt to keep

diplomatic channels open to Moscow. The Russian Foreign Ministry has warned Kiev against any attempts to join NATO, and such a move by Ukraine or Georgia would be extraordinarily inflammatory.

Georgia is on NATO's agenda today (Wednesday) as part of the preparations for NATO's September summit in Wales.

Germany's concerns are held by other NATO states, with Dutch Foreign Minister Frans Timmermans saying in response to the Polish proposal, "No, we don't need any NATO troops on the border with Russia."

Meanwhile, Germany continues to play an active role in NATO's encirclement plans while asserting its own interests independently of the US.

Steinmeier, Laurent Fabius of France and Poland's Radek Sikorski met in Berlin and the eastern German city of Weimar Monday and Tuesday. The "Weimar Triangle," first set up in 1991 to promote cooperation between the three countries, was revived in order to urge a "more flexible" range of cooperation options with the EU for east European states that did not involve the accession treaty offered to Ukraine. "We perhaps underestimated how Russia would react to such offers (the Association Agreement)," Steinmeier told reporters.

The preferred option was a "new dynamic of the European Neighborhood Policy," founded 10 years ago and covering 16 countries, including Ukraine and Georgia, and offering financial aid and integration into the EU single market. Steinmeier said he could also envision closer cooperation as part of the NATO-Ukraine Commission that was established in 1997.

The three made a point of insisting that NATO must "reassure the security of our allies" and urged Russia to withdraw troops from Ukraine's borders.



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