

NATO summit begins as anti-Russian measures heighten war danger

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Wednesday began with an announcement of at least the outline of a “permanent ceasefire” between Ukraine and Russia, but ended in rhetoric just as warlike as any sounded in the days leading up to today’s NATO summit in Wales.

In the morning, Ukraine President Petro Poroshenko wrote on Twitter that a telephone conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin had ended in an agreement on a permanent ceasefire in the Donbass and a mutual understanding on steps to promote peace.

Within an hour, Putin’s spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said there was no agreement on a ceasefire because Russia was not a participant in the conflict in eastern Ukraine between the Kiev regime and pro-Russian separatists. Meanwhile, the wording of Poroshenko’s statement was changed from “permanent ceasefire” to “ceasefire regime.”

Putin later said a ceasefire was possible between Kiev and the opposition groups in the east by Friday, referencing negotiations that began in Belarus Monday. Peace would be achieved by urging insurgents to “stop advancing” in Donetsk and Luhansk and urging Ukraine to withdraw its troops from the east to a “distance that will make artillery and other strikes on populated areas impossible.”

Fighting continued, with at least 87 Ukrainian soldiers killed after being surrounded in the town of Ilovaysk, confirming a recent pattern of rebel advances that have seen Ukraine lose control of Luhansk airport and Novoazovsk on the Sea of Azov coast.

US President Barack Obama could scarcely conceal his hostility to anything that cut across preparations for the NATO summit to adopt a series of anti-Russian measures. “No realistic political settlement can be achieved if effectively Russia says we are going to continue to send tanks and troops and arms and advisors under the guise of separatists, who are not home grown, and the only possible settlement is if Ukraine cedes its territory or its sovereignty,” he said.

Obama was speaking at a press conference during his visit to the Estonian capital, Tallinn. His stated mission was to

reassure NATO members Estonia and Latvia and non-NATO states such as Ukraine of the alliance’s support against Russia. Turning reality on its head in order to legitimise NATO aggression against Russia, Obama declared that the vision of a Europe dedicated to peace and freedom was being “threatened by Russia’s aggression against Ukraine.”

“We will defend our NATO allies, and that means every ally,” he said—a formula that could be interpreted as sanctioning military action not restricted to NATO countries, as mandated by Article Five of NATO’s charter pledging mutual defence only to member states.

The same day, it was announced that four NATO warships would be entering the Black Sea before September 7: USS Ross, an Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer; French Commandant Birot; Canadian HMCS Toronto, a Halifax-class frigate; and Spanish frigate Almirante Juan de Borbon.

The US will also go ahead with the Rapid Trident military exercise set for September 16-26 near Ukraine’s border with Poland. Initially scheduled for July, Rapid Trident is the first significant deployment of US and other personnel to Ukraine since the eruption of civil war in the country’s east. The US is moving tanks and 600 troops to Poland and the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania for manoeuvres in October.

Bowing to intense pressure from Washington, the government of French President François Hollande announced Wednesday it was suspending delivery of a French Mistral-class warship to Russia in October as previously agreed, and would review the planned sale in November. US State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki praised the decision, saying Paris had listened “to pressure from the international community.”

The Wales summit will discuss two related military forces. NATO host Britain has said it expects to sign a letter of intent with six partner nations to form a joint expeditionary force of 10,000 working with the Baltic nations and the Netherlands, Norway and Denmark. It would operate in

parallel with a German initiative, with Berlin working with ten East European partner nations to boost their capabilities.

The force would be separate but complementary to an estimated 4,000-strong NATO high readiness force detailed Monday by Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen. Allies will provide several thousand troops by Christmas, with air, sea and special forces support deployed on a rotating basis and able to move on 48 hours' notice to any NATO member state. It will not formally be stationed in Eastern Europe, but will have equipment and logistics facilities pre-positioned there.

The force was described as a "spearhead" to the existing NATO rapid force that became operational in 2004. Making clear the target, Rasmussen said, "We must face the reality that Russia does not consider NATO a partner... We will adapt to that situation."

The caveats placed on the force's nominal location are designed, at least formally, to avoid breaking the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act. Drafted as NATO was planning to expand its membership eastwards, the agreement reassured Russia that "in the current and foreseeable security environment, the alliance will carry out its collective defense and other missions by ensuring the necessary interoperability, integration, and capability for reinforcement rather than by additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces."

NATO troop deployment in the east is being referred to as "persistent" rather than "permanent."

European political figures have been queuing up to declare that action must be taken targeting Russia. The US, in alliance with Britain, mainly in response to widely perceived reluctance on the part of the German government, is demanding military and not simply economic moves.

On Saturday, in a closed session European Union summit debate in Brussels, British Prime Minister David Cameron was reported by Italy's *La Repubblica* as citing the danger of repeating the appeasement by British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain of Hitler in Munich in 1938. "This time we cannot meet Putin's demands," he declared. "It is very important when Russians look at countries like Estonia or Latvia or Poland that they don't just see Estonian, Latvian and Polish soldiers—they see French, German, British soldiers too."

In Estonia Obama again insisted that NATO states increase their military spending to 2 percent of their gross domestic product—a figure presently met by only two significant military powers, the US and Britain, the others being Greece and Estonia.

The danger of full-scale war in Europe grows by the day. In telling remarks to *Spiegel Online*, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier gave a fairly accurate

depiction of the course of recent events. While blaming, as could be expected, "Ukraine and especially Russia" for the rising threat, he warned: "What we have seen in recent days in eastern Ukraine is not yet an open, not a declared war. But it is extremely dangerous when, as is the case now, the dynamics of military escalation increasingly determine political action and not vice versa.

"What threatens is slipping into a direct confrontation between Ukrainian and Russian military forces. It's about people living in eastern Ukraine, it is about the unity of Ukraine, it's about the peace in Europe, in short, it's about preventing a new Iron Curtain in Europe."

Russia's response to NATO aggression has been to repeatedly seek a negotiated settlement. But yesterday, it announced major exercises this month involving more than 4,000 soldiers in Altai in south-central Russia, involving MiG-31 fighter-interceptors and Su-24MR reconnaissance aircraft on an unprecedented scale.

Mikhail Popov, deputy head of Putin's Security Council, said that Russia's own military doctrine would be revised once again, having been first updated in 2010, to identify NATO enlargement as a national threat and reaffirm Russia's right to use nuclear weapons if its existence is endangered.

The "defining factor in relations with NATO remains the unacceptability for Russia of plans to move the military infrastructure of the alliance towards our borders, including via enlargement of the bloc," he said.

General Yuri Yakubov, a senior Defense Ministry official, implied that the new doctrine would have to clearly identify the US and NATO powers as Moscow's chief enemy, and spell out the conditions under which Russia would launch a pre-emptive nuclear strike. "First and foremost, the likely enemy of Russia should be clearly identified in this strategic document, something absent from the 2010 military doctrine," he said.



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