NATO steps up anti-Russian moves as ceasefire begins in Ukraine

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As a ceasefire took hold in Ukraine on Friday, NATO leaders, concluding their two-day summit in Wales, intensified pressure on Russia with more threats and new military plans.

The ceasefire came into force at 18:00 local time after agreement was reached between the Kiev regime and pro-Russian separatists at a meeting in Minsk. An exchange of prisoners was agreed as well as the provision of humanitarian aid to civilians in combat zones.

The agreement, which involves Ukrainian forces removing artillery from populated areas, was proposed by Russian President Vladimir Putin and is to be overseen by observers from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Talks on the status of the areas controlled by separatists in the east are to take place at an unspecified later date.

While "cautiously" welcoming the deal, NATO officials continued to denounce Russia. Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen warned that Moscow had a record of using such agreements as a "smokescreen." The White House formally welcomed the ceasefire and then proceeded to attack Russia for its "flagrant violation of Ukraine's sovereignty."

Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, speaking shortly before the ceasefire was finalised, urged the US and the European Union (EU) to act as guarantors of the pause in fighting, implying that a breakdown should result in direct military support for Kiev from the major powers.

As the ceasefire came in to force, three loud explosions were reported in Donetsk. Clashes also continued between separatists and government forces near the town of Mariupol, the target of a major advance by rebel forces.

Any pause in the fighting will be used by the US and other NATO powers to strengthen Ukraine's military capacities and their own presence in the region in preparation for future conflict with Russia. Ukrainian forces have suffered heavy losses over recent weeks, forcing them to retreat in several areas.

One of the items discussed at the Wales summit was a joint plan by Britain and Germany to assist with the modernisation of command and control structures within the Ukrainian armed forces. NATO advisers are also to be involved.

"We have agreed a comprehensive and tailored package of measures," Rasmussen said, "in order that Ukraine is better able to ensure its own security." The €15 million promised to Kiev by Rasmussen on Thursday is to be divided into four separate funds, according to Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko.

Plans were also finalised for NATO's rapid response capabilities. The "readiness action plan" included the formal approval of a force of 4,000 troops referred to as the "spearhead," capable of deployment within two days. A NATO press release noted that leaders had "agreed to maintain a continuous presence and activity in the air, on land, and at sea in the eastern part of the alliance, on a rotational basis."

Britain is to provide a major part of the troop contingent, with a plan unveiled for 1,000 of the 4,000 soldiers to come from the UK. A further 3,500 British troops will engage in exercises in Eastern Europe by 2015.

The rotation of troops is aimed at avoiding an overt breach of NATO's 1997 agreement with Russia foregoing the permanent stationing of NATO forces in the Baltic states or Poland. But there was no attempt at the summit to conceal that Moscow is the target of the moves, whose aggressive purpose was spelt out by Rasmussen. "This decision sends a clear message," he declared. "NATO protects all allies at all times. And it sends a clear message to any potential aggressor: should you even think of attacking one ally, you will be facing the whole alliance."

Rasmussen announced that to "facilitate

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reinforcements," significant logistical resources and military hardware would be redeployed to Eastern Europe. In addition, a commitment was made to "step up intelligence sharing, upgrade defence plans and hold more short-notice exercises."

Such measures dovetail with US President Barack Obama's declaration during a state visit to the Baltic region on Wednesday that the US would provide "eternal assistance" to the Baltic states. In a press conference at the conclusion of the summit on Friday, Obama denounced what he termed Russian aggression against Ukraine. He said the summit had shown that NATO has "the will, the resources and the capabilities" to counter it.

The man who has presided over imperialist wars and subversion in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria, as well as hundreds of drone assassinations in a number of countries, went on to say, "Big countries can't just stomp on little ones, or force them to change their policies or give up their sovereignty."

In line with the non-stop propaganda by the US, NATO and the Western media, Obama ignored the fact that the US and Germany precipitated the Ukraine crisis by engineering a coup, in league with ultra-nationalist and fascist forces, to overthrow the elected, pro-Russian government in Kiev and replace it with a rabidly anti-Russian, pro-Western regime.

Issuing a warning to Russian President Vladimir Putin, Obama demanded that Russia return to the group of nations that supposedly "respects international law." Otherwise, he continued, "We mean what we say when we talk about our article 5 commitments," referring to the collective defence clause of the NATO charter that requires all member nations to come to the defence of any one member country that is attacked.

Obama referred to the escalation of sanctions by the European Union and US against Russian state companies. The sanctions have been broadened to include energy and defence companies, having previously applied only to banks. According to the *Financial Times*, the sanctions would ban Russian gas firms from European capital markets. German Chancellor Angela Merkel had sought to push through the sanctions agreement prior to the NATO meeting, but smaller EU members, including Hungary, Slovakia and Cyprus, had resisted this.

Also on Friday, Germany, Poland and Denmark announced plans to double their contingent of soldiers in the Polish town of Stettin from 200 to over 400. The multi-national northeast corps would host NATO combat troops in the event of an attack on the alliance and is part of the package of measures agreed to strengthen the Ukrainian regime.

In addition, the Rapid Trident military exercise is set for September 16-26 near Ukraine's border with Poland, and the US is moving tanks and 600 troops to Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania for manoeuvres in October.

Demonstrating NATO's renewed focus on Eastern Europe, Poland announced it would host the next NATO summit, scheduled for 2016. Warsaw has taken the lead in pursuing a hard line with Moscow.

Assistance is to be provided to speed up Georgian membership, and a decision is due on whether to invite Montenegro to join next year. In his Friday press conference, Obama held out the prospect of NATO membership to Georgia and Moldova. Such a development would continue the encirclement of Russia systematically pursued by the imperialist powers through NATO expansion.

While NATO is still not officially supplying arms to Kiev, Poroshenko revealed in comments after a meeting at the summit that at least one NATO member was providing his government with high precision weapons.

Media reports noted that the ceasefire may take some time to implement, due to what was referred to as "complicated chains of command on both sides." Alongside regular army units, the Kiev regime has mobilised volunteer battalions composed overwhelmingly of members and supporters of the fascist Right Sector group, which played a central role in the coup in February. The reference to chains of command was a backhanded acknowledgement that Kiev does not exercise full control over these forces.

A leading role in the fighting around Mariupol has been played by the neo-Nazi Azov battalion. Speaking to the *Guardian*, the battalion's commander, Andriy Beletskiy, declared, "What talk can there be of a ceasefire when the enemy is on our land?"

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